



COTTON CREEK

BOOK 21

GUNNER'S WAR



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Gunner's War

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Dedication:

For my honeyman – you are still the one.

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PART ONE - PROLOGUE

IT ALL STARTED WITH A WEDDING

It was one of those rare evenings in Texas. Gunner had no clue what that meant, but he'd heard it a half dozen times. Maybe it was the weather. Autumn was good here, in his opinion. The air was cool, but not enough to demand a jacket. Stars shone overhead, brilliant even with the competing light of the blue moon that marked the date.

The last of the season's fireflies danced in the air, almost as if keeping time with the music. Once more, Heritage Ranch was decorated for a celebration—the wedding of Russell Walker to Naomie Taylor and Riggs Walker to Georgie Williams.

Gunner stood to one side of Riggs, honored to stand as best man, although less than keen on the collar that chafed his neck. It took months for him to grow accustomed to wearing jeans, and he still preferred fatigues and a t-shirt. Lucky for him, the Walkers didn't care what he wore for work or on his time off. But this wasn't either of those times.

This was special. He never thought he'd be standing beside Riggs, listening, and watching as Riggs promised himself to a woman. Till death do them part. That was big. And Riggs did it.

Gunner didn't blame him. Georgie was an amazing woman. She'd overcome things that would have broken most people, and through it all, she held onto her humanity and compassion. It took a strong person to achieve that.

She was devoted to Riggs and the baby, Robby, Riggs had saved and adopted. In fact, she was smiling as much at Robby as Riggs right now. Riggs held him on his lap, fending off little hands that tried to snag each bite Riggs attempted to eat.

They made a nice family, and to his surprise, it caused Gunner to wonder what it would be like to have that kind of life. He shoved the thought aside. It brought no benefit to give it roost in his mind. He reminded himself that he'd accepted his fate. He didn't deserve to have a life like that.

He failed when it mattered the most, and it cost him everything. There was little left but duty and now work. Being a ranch hand was hard work, but he'd always welcomed physical challenges and liked the job. Riggs swore he was born to be a cowboy.

Gunner didn't know if that was true, but gave it a hundred percent of his effort. In his mind it didn't make sense to do a half-ass job. Which meant, he ended up with little time for anything else. Most nights he was asleep by nine, which sounded early until he was faced with getting up at four am.

Life on the ranch started early. Gunner learned the routine and didn't fight it. He'd learned a lot about cows and bulls, horses and even chickens. He now knew how to rope and brand, castrate, and help birth a breech calf.

And he'd discovered the best barbecue he'd ever tasted. The Honky Tonk Bar and Grill was where everyone in the county gathered to eat, have a few beers, visit with friends, listen to music or dance.

To his surprise, Gun received a lot of attention from the single women at the Honky Tonk Bar and Grille when he frequented it on the weekends for a few beers with the guys and a plate of barbecue.

That was one he couldn't figure out. He sure didn't look like a movie star, but that didn't seem to matter. Everyone in Cotton Creek was friendly, ready to meet or make a friend. It was a very unusual place. At least to him. But he was trying to fit in.

Cheers went up when the DJ presented the brides and their grooms to the assembly, and the party moved

into full swing. Gunner hurriedly removed his tie and crammed it in the pocket of his jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt as he headed for the buffet. A few minutes later, armed with a plate of food and a beer, he sat at one of the tables, and watched the people on the dance floor as he ate.

“Mind if we sit with you, Gun?”

Gunner recognized the voice and looked behind him to see Grady Judd, a fellow SEAL who owned a nearby ranch, with his wife Charli. Gunner mentally applauded Grady. Charli was a hell of a woman. An ex special forces officer, she now wore the suit of a deputy for local law enforcement, and damn if she didn't make that uniform look good.

Charli was as decent and personable as she was beautiful and bad ass. Gunner liked her the first time they met. Tonight, she wore a form fitting dark blue dress that clung to her like a second skin. He wondered how Grady felt about the number of men who looked at Charli with more than a little lust.

With them was another woman, one that made Gunner's lust-o-meter ping. Every bit as fit as Charli, and pretty much the same size, she was one smoking hot brunette. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a braid that brushed the middle of her back. Eyes the color of a Caribbean Sea sat in a face that could only be described as exotic. She reminded him a bit of Naomie, and he wondered what blend of ethnicities had produced such beauty. This night was definitely looking up.

“Pull up a chair,” he responded. Her eyes locked and stayed with his as he rose to pull out a seat for her.

“Well damn, Gun, you got manners since I last saw you,” Grady quipped, breaking the eye lock, but not the interest.

“Hell, he doesn't need them,” the hot brunette quipped, with her gaze on Gunner. “You're Gunner

Hale, and I'm Oakley Rising Wolf.”

“Yes, I am, and not sure how you know that. What do I call you?”

“That’s yet to be decided,” she said as she sat. She looked up at him as he moved to his chair. “It’s not every day a gal meets a real-life hero.”

“You’re not talking about me.” Gunner liked the attention and the way she looked at him, but wasn’t about to take credit if it wasn’t due.

“No?” She gave him a look that anyone in service would read simply as “liar” once you strip away the colorful expletives .

“You don’t hold the record of most doors kicked down by a SEAL in the last decade?”

Gunner cut a look at Grady before answering. Of course. Grady was a genuinely decent man, and one of honor. Not to mention a hell of a fun guy. He probably thought he was giving Gunner good press. Nevertheless, he wasn’t fond of people trying to fix him up with women, using the “bad ass SEAL” thing.

The Navy. That’s what he said when asked what branch of the military he belonged to. What he did in service to his country was between him, his Commander, the United States Navy, and whatever held the universe together. He didn’t need advertising. He was well aware of who he was. And what. It wasn’t a secret, after all. He was big.

A tank.

A gorilla.

A truck.

A bus.

He’d been called all those and more. Most people thought they were being complementary in a funny way. Whatever. It didn’t change anything. He was who he was. That was it. Now, he felt like he needed to be

the label Grady provided. The beast who beats down doors.

Nice.

“Who told you that?” he shoved annoyance to the background. You can’t go through life carrying all that shit. That was the way he saw it. You get what has meaning from the days of your life, and you learn from the mistakes and hope you live long enough to take that final course in life and learn how to be genuinely happy.

He figured he had a long way to go on that path if he was ever going to even be granted the right to walk it. But that was in the “What if” file, and he didn’t spend a lot of time there. Gunner believed in seeing reality for what it is, and dealing with it as it came. Don’t borrow trouble, instigate or provoke.

But never, and that’s in all caps. NEVER back down, never surrender, if you know your cause is right and true.

That was the cornerstone of Gunner’s beliefs. He was, by nature, a non-confrontational man, who discovered he was particularly skilled at violence. His size made him formidable for more than ninety percent of the male population.

But his training and his mind made him dangerous. Most people were unaware that Gunner was more than just a strong man. He had a near photographic memory and a mind that operated at super speed, which was definitely a benefit in a combat situation and evaluating the options and chances of success.

Not that he complained. People who served with him knew his abilities. Those who didn’t need to know as far as he was concerned. He turned his attention to the beautiful woman looking up at him as she replied. “You mean you didn’t pay Grady to say that?”

Everyone laughed, and Gunner felt the tension ease. He sure didn't expect that response, but it definitely spiked his interest. He rarely met a woman who looked like Oakley and had a sense of humor. "Well color me shy, ma'am. How do you know Charli and Grady?"

"Charli and I worked together."

He should have been surprised, but he wasn't. "Where're you stationed?"

"Previously the 75th Ranger Regiment. Currently assigned to the 341st Training Squadron at Lackland."

"K9 unit?"

"Yep."

"You're a handler?"

"Sort of."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning she's in charge," Charli answered, and when Gunner looked at her, she added. "Major Oakley Rising Wolf."

What an intriguing name. He turned back to Oakley. "Major." He nodded in respect. "Impressive. Do you still train?"

"Every day if possible."

"And you left the Rangers for that?" He found that surprising. Walking away from that kind of life isn't easy. Just look at his buddy, Riggs. He'd adapted to civilian life better than anyone Gunner had known, but having a prosthetic limb where he used to have a foot might have helped ease the way into a new mindset.

"Absolutely." Her eyes never wavered from their lock with his.

"Can I ask why?"

“Let’s just say I like training powerful beasts.” Her smile let him know the comment was only part jest. “But enough about me. Are you still active?”

“Not at present. I’m trying out civilian life to see if it fits.”

“And?”

“It has its moments.”

Her smile was genuine and carried with it something that gave him the feeling they’d already found common ground. Soldier to soldier, it was an unspoken thing, an understanding civilians lacked because they’d never served.

Gunner’s interest meter clicked a couple more notches. “Don’t you miss the rush?” she asked. “The danger and adrenaline?”

“Every day,” he admitted.

This time her smile held that lure that had undone men since the beginning of time. It lit a fire he hadn’t felt in a long time. “Well, we’ll just have to find something to get your blood pumping, won’t we, big guy?”

Gunner wasn’t a fool. He heard the unspoken invitation in her words. “It depends. How long until you report back?”

“Three weeks. I’m staying with Charli and Grady.”

“You think you’ll get it done in three weeks? I’ve been tortured, you know, so I hold out for a long time.”

“I’d put money on getting it done in under three weeks. Are you ready to get started?”

“You tell me, Major.”

“Okay, let me finish this plate of food, and we’ll get out on that dance floor and see if we can get something stirring. Sound like a plan? Oh, and it’s Oakley to my friends.”

“Is that what I am?”

“I reckon we’ll just have to find out, won’t we?”

“Yes ma’am,” he agreed and was rewarded with a smile.

And just like that, he knew life was about to change. For how long was anyone’s guess, and right now, that didn’t matter, because it’d been a long time since Gunner had his sights on something he wanted.

Like Major Oakley Rising Wolf.

Chapter One

Grady watched from the porch and saw the two riders come into view. Oakley had been staying with them for several weeks while on leave. During that time, she and Charli had rekindled their friendship, and Grady had gotten to know her better.

She was pretty amazing. In fact, she'd so impressed him, he'd made an offhand remark to his partner, Mason James, that they should go into the K9 business with her when she retired.

Now, as he watched her and Charli ride toward the barn, talking as they rode, he thought back to a conversation he had with his partner, more than a week ago.

Grady rose from his seat on the porch and walked over to the rail. "So, are you interested?" Mason, his partner and co-owner of Sanctuary, vacated his seat and joined Grady at the railing.

"Interested, yes. It's a damn good idea, but I don't have it right now. I've already sunk all I felt I could afford to lose into the place. I won't risk this place. It's all Charli and I have, and now that we're married, I'm not about to put her home at risk. She deserves better."

"I agree, and I didn't mean to suggest we fund it. I think we need to attract investors, people who share a common vision."

"Like?"

Mason shrugged. "I haven't put out feelers yet, so who knows. But you can rest assured every potential investor will be vetted. They'll think a congressional investigation is a piece of cake compared to our background check."

"I like the sounds of that," Grady looked out and almost immediately moved his chin up in a type of gesture. "They'll be headed for the barn."

“Meaning it’s time to table this, or time to agree to throw a line in the water and see what bites?”

Grady shrugged. “What can it hurt to see if there’s interest considering our terms? And we will have rigid terms, right?”

“We will always own Sanctuary. This investment can pay back the investors. We can train for military, medical, police and personal protection. We can even train handlers. I ran some rough numbers and will put it on paper for you, but the bottom line is, I believe we can not only make it affordable for people who need service animals to get one, but also, we can make this part of the venture self-funding.”

“You make it sound appealing, but there’s nearly always something that will get tossed into the works, grinding it to a halt. So what’s our monkey wrench? Aside from money, what do we need we might not get?”

“Someone to run it.”

“I figured you already had someone in mind.”

Mason snorted. “Like you didn’t have the same idea. The question is, do you think we can get her onboard?”

Grady reckoned they’d soon enough know that answer. He’d brought Charli in, and chances were, she’d already discussed the deal with Oakley. What Grady didn’t yet know was whether Oakley was interested.

Considering the amount of money investors were willing to invest, he hoped she would. It would not just put Sanctuary on the map, it would set the people who worked so hard to make it successful up for life, and the tax dollars to the community would be a boon to the whole county.

If they could get Oakley on board.

Grady wondered how big an if that would turn out to be.

Charlie reined in her horse and slowed to a walk. Oakley, who'd kept pace with her during the run, did the same. "I'd almost forgotten how much I love to ride," she said.

"Gunner mentioned the ride you took last weekend. Good thing I knew you were going camping, or I'd have called out a search party."

"Because you didn't think I could survive in all this wilderness," Oakley gestured around with both arms wide. "Girl, please. You can see trouble for miles in this place."

"True. But since you didn't mention it, I was curious. Didn't you enjoy it?"

"I wish that was the case."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'm almost out of leave and almost out of patience, waiting on the big guy to make a move."

"Who says you have to wait on him?"

"Me."

"Well, that's a first."

Oakley shrugged. "Maybe, but – never mind. He'll either step up or he won't. And maybe he's just not into me."

"I doubt that's the case. Gunner doesn't push his weight around, as you've probably noticed."

"He could push a little," Oakley commented, halted her horse, and reached out to open the paddock gate. "Want to walk them a while?"

"Sure." Charlie rode into the paddock and dismounted.

When Oakley did the same, they fell into step, leading the horses around the perimeter of the paddock. “I take it you like him?” Charli asked.

“I do.” The quickness of her response said a lot. Oakley rarely formed relationships, and used men the way many men use women. Simply for sex. Liking someone was a big deal for her.

“Yeah?” Charli prompted.

“Yeah. He’s good inside,” she tapped her chest. “Kind. To people and animals. One day we made a run into town to stock up on stuff for his cottage. We saw two old ladies walking along the sidewalk just before the crosswalk – you know, the one at the edge of town that has the button for pedestrians? Anyway, they were just making the turn when the cart between them toppled right over.”

She glanced at Charli. “Gunner pulled over to the side of the road, had his emergency flashers on, and was out of the truck before I could ask what he was doing.”

“Which was?”

“Helping. I hurried to follow and reached him after he’d righted the cart and picked up the spilled groceries.

“Charli you should have seen those women. They looked like they were caught between being upset about the broken or ruined items and being in awe of Gunner. Honestly, they couldn’t have been much over five feet tall, so he must have looked like a giant to them.

“Anyway, they thanked him and tried to pay him, but he refused and pushed that cart to the other side of the road and then up the sidewalk. He took it straight to their front door. You could tell from the way they fluttered around him; they were grateful and maybe even had a little hero worship.

“Anyway, when he returned to the truck, I expected to head home, but instead he pulled a U-turn, returned to the store, and bought every item in their cart that was broken or damaged. I don’t know how he remembered it all, but he did.

“You should have seen those women when they came to the door and saw him standing there. One of them cried. It was something.”

“And obviously impressed you.” Charli gestured toward the barn, and they turned to lead the horse inside.

“You’re damn skippy. There aren’t many men like Gunner, you know.”

“I agree. And if you lived around here, you’d get to spend more time with him.”

“Not now, okay?” She followed Charli into the barn.

Once they had the horses clipped in, Oakley pulled the saddle from her mount. “That was good,” she said around a grin as she turned toward Charli, wanting to focus on something other than how she felt about Gunner, or the job offer.

“You say that every time.”

“And I mean it every time.”

“Well, you know, you could have it anytime you want if you took that job offer.” Charli fell in step with Oakley as they made their way to the tack room.

It was clear from her expression that Oakley didn’t want to talk about the offer. “Look, I know you—”

“No. Nope,” Charli wagged a finger in Oakley’s direction. “None of that, I know you meant well stuff. You know this is a perfect fit, and you know that if you’re honest with yourself, you’d love to say yes.”

Oakley pointedly ignored those words. “I appreciate you putting in a good word for me, but I

don't... no, wait. It's not that I'm disinterested, I'm just happy where I am."

"Wanna say that again?" Charli cut her a look that matched the sarcasm in her tone.

Oakley blew out a short puff from the left side of her mouth, an affectation Charli recognized. Oakley hated being called out when she was covering, hiding, or outright lying. It wasn't often she was guilty of any of those offensives. Not unless a mission demanded it.

Charli knew that all too well from the time they spent serving in special ops missions together. It was on one of those missions they met, and before they parted ways, they formed a bond that would last a lifetime. Charli had no doubt of that. She and Oakley were warriors, swords forged in fire and blood, tested on the battlefield, and hardened until they were unbreakable.

At least that's how Charli saw it. Oakley's next words confirmed her belief still rang true. "Okay, you got me. At least partly. But I love what I do. And it's a guaranteed thing with the military. What you're talking about is speculation. What if Grady and Mason did this thing? What if they got the various branches of the military to sign on using it as an adjunct treatment and training center? What if they added training canines for use in combat and for medical needs? That's a lot of ifs, sister and you know me. I don't gamble on long shots unless I believe through and through, I'm on the right track."

"And you're not willing to bet on us? Is that what you're saying?" Charli tried not to feel offended, but heard annoyance in her own voice.

"Yes. And don't get your thong in a twist. You'd do the same. Where I am now, I've got job security, still a lot of chance for advancement, and that means a nicer retirement. And one, I don't have to wait to be so old that I can't enjoy my retirement years.

“What you propose has appeal, but right now that’s all it has, and be mad if you want. But this is my life, Charli and I only have me, so until you come to me with something concrete, something I’ll be willing to gamble my retirement on, the answer is no.”

Charli couldn’t argue. She’d do the same in Oakley’s place. “What it is about those dogs that get to you so strongly?”

Oakley frowned briefly. “Training them is—” she paused, and the way her eyes searched the air before her for a second, Charli knew Oakley was searching for words.

Action came naturally to Oakley. In an ironic twist, so did stillness. But only the stillness of a watcher, a protector or guardian. The soldier who walks the perimeter, the dog who waits in silent alert. That was Oakley, and it was what made her almost legendary in the canine training world.

Oakley’s voice yanked Charli’s focus to the moment at hand. “The dogs get me. I can talk to them without a lot of words. They don’t need all the words we use. A look or gesture, one word or three. When you break it down, you’re just communicating on a level that isn’t dependent on vocabulary or grammar.

“Dogs can smell your intent. Did you know that?”

Charli was surprised. “No, I didn’t, but I’m curious. How?”

Oakley heaved her saddle onto the rack and moved aside for Charli. “Let’s see—okay. We, and I mean humans, depend primarily on our vision. Tell me if you agree with that.”

“Primarily, yes. But don’t dogs, as well?” Charli placed her saddle on the rack.

“Yes and no. Dogs use both sight and smell to access and understand their surroundings, and also to communicate.

“We spend more time interpreting our visual data than our olfactory. Do you agree with that?”

“I do.” Charli motioned for Oakley to accompany her, and they headed back to where they’d left the horses, waiting to be brushed and cooled. “So, continue. This is interesting.”

“Okay. Now dogs are the complete opposite. They spend a lot of their brain power interpreting smells.”

“Interpreting. That’s an interesting concept.”

“It’s elegant in design,” Oakley agreed, and Charli could see the passion in her eyes. This wasn’t just an interesting fact for Oakley. It held meaning.

“Did you know that dogs have more than 100 million receptor sites in their nasal cavity?”

“And people have...?” Charli asked.

“Six million.”

“Six? Six to one hundred million?”

“Yes, and what’s fascinating is that the area of the canine brain dedicated to analyzing odors is about forty times larger than the comparable part of the human brain,” she paused as they exited the barn. “Which way?”

“Let’s walk,” Charli wasn’t ready for the conversation to end, and didn’t want any intrusions.

“Sure.”

“Keep going,” Charli prodded.

“When it comes to smell, it’s been estimated that dogs smell anywhere from one thousand to ten thousand times better than human.”

Charli stopped and turned to face Oakley. “That’s fascinating, and it sure makes me see them differently, but it has to be more than a fascination to make this job so fulfilling. What is it about dogs?”

It stunned her when Oakley blinked back tears before facing her. “They’ll never betray you, never leave you, and until they have no life left, they *will* be there for you. Show me a human half as good.”

And there it was. A crack in the wall. Charli and Oakley had been friends for more than a decade. Charli knew Oakley’s backstory, the life she had before she found a home in the military. And because she did, she now understood why Oakley was so addicted to working with the canines.

They’d love her unconditionally as she would them. And maybe with enough of that, Oakley would one day be able to let go of what turned her heart against people. Her pain ran deep, and she bore it in silence.

It benefited the military, that pain. Oakley was the only woman to beat the record for number of pushups and pull-ups in one minute in the Army’s history. At six feet tall and a hundred and seventy-five pounds of muscle, she was physically someone to be reckoned with.

And when it came to the hard task, pulling the trigger on someone who’d use a child or their wife as a shield? Oakley could put a bullet between someone’s eyes faster than you can blink. That ability earned her the moniker, Annie Oakley.

She didn’t like or dislike it. It didn’t matter. Oakley did the job, followed orders, and battled her demons.

“I get it,” Charli finally said.

“Do you?”

“I do,” Charli put her hand on Oakley’s shoulder. “Sister.”

Oakley smiled, reminding Charli of the dramatic difference in appearance when warrior Oakley eased into Oakley, the woman struggling to keep from being

obliterated in that silent war she carried inside. One hard as stone and the other one of the walking wounded.

Charli had long hoped Oakley would find someone to connect with that would bring a little joy into her life. Looks like joy came in all kinds of ways. Oakley hadn't found *the one* so far, but she'd found a whole lot of connections with dogs who would remember her until their final breath. Those were her children, the only ones she would ever have.

And like any good mother, she protected and provided and nurtured every one. Charlie witnessed the heartbreak Oakley suffered when one of her warriors fell in battle. She'd stood over what she called "too many coffins", saying goodbye and thanking her ward for their love and service.

Charli found it a little confusing. Oakley ran from connections with people, playing the role of the good time, love'em and leave'em soldier girl. She let no one inside that impenetrable barrier. It'd taken them facing hell together for her to open to Charli.

So, if she was so determined to keep everyone out, to cut off her emotions, why work with the dogs? Oakley had to know that each puppy she trained, watched grow and sent off to do what he or she had been trained to do, might not make it home.

How could she put herself through that gut-wrenching grief, over and over? It made no sense.

And then, after a decade of wondering, it hit her.

That was Oakley's penance.

Chapter Two

“Hold up,” Riggs called out as he slowed his horse to a walk.

Gunner followed suit and circled back to where Riggs had stopped. Riggs had his phone to his ear, and after a moment responded to the caller. “That’s impossible. The last one was spotted in the 70s, at least I think that’s what my dad said.”

Riggs cut a glance at Gunner, then spoke again. “Okay, tell you what. I know someone, but it’ll take me a couple of hours to get to you. Can you hold them? All right. I’ll let you know when we’re in route.”

He ended the call, but kept the phone in his hand. “Isn’t Oakley still staying with Charli and Grady?”

“Yep.”

“For how long?”

“Until Monday, I think.”

“You have her number?”

“Yep.”

“Good. That was Marvin Dewalt. He swears they found two wolf pups when they were rounding up strays.”

“And?”

“And there haven’t been wolves in Texas since at least the 1980’s, maybe even in the 70’s.”

“Maybe they’re making a comeback.”

“Not without help. Anyway, would you consider calling Oakley and asking if she’d go with us to take a look? She works with dogs, and I think she’s a vet, so maybe she can tell if Marvin is out in right field on this. I’d ask Naomie, but she and dad headed up to DC to celebrate Uncle Richard’s anniversary. They won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Gunner didn’t see the harm in asking. He pulled out his phone and made the call.

“Must be my lucky day. What’s up Gun?”

“Hey. You got a second?”

“For you, I have several,” she responded. “What’s up?”

“Someone called Riggs just now, swearing he found wolf pups while rounding strays, and Riggs says there aren’t any wolves in Texas, but he promised the man we’d try to convince you to take a look and see if you can tell.”

Gunner looked at Riggs while he listened. “You *do* remember I’m a trainer, right?” she asked.

“And a vet,” he remembered what Grady and Charli told him about her.

“Got me. Okay, big guy, when and where?”

“Hold on,” he then spoke to Riggs. “How long before we can be there?”

“Let me call Ben, our pilot.”

“He’s checking with the pilot.” Gunner spoke into the phone.

“Okay. Are we still on for beer and barbecue, tonight?”

“I hope.”

“Well, I’m in. Oh, and Grady invited us to take on the obstacle course and the tower at Sanctuary tomorrow. I want to see if there’s anything there I might be able to use in the training we do at Lackland. I was going to ask if you and Riggs want to have some fun. Grady, Jasper and Mattias are jumping in.”

“Sounds good to me, I’ll run it by Riggs. What time?”

“Afternoon, around two.”

“Okay,” he saw Riggs end his call and added, “hold on.”

“Wings up in twenty, be at Grady’s in fifteen, so let’s run these guys back and make it half an hour.”

“Hooyah,” Gunner turned his attention back to Oakley. “Half an hour. We’ll set down in the closest pasture to the house, unless Grady calls and directs otherwise.”

“Works for me. See you then.”

Gunner pocketed his phone. “After you, boss.”

Riggs grinned, turned his horse, and took off. Gunner grinned, but his was due more to gratitude. He’d never let Riggs know how heavy it’d weighed on him while Riggs was going through the amputation and getting a prosthetic foot. He’d asked himself a thousand times if there was something he could have done to prevent what happened to Riggs.

Was it his fault? Had he not moved fast enough? Should he have refused to follow Riggs, defy not just a friend, but a superior? Gunner wasn’t accustomed to second guessing himself. He didn’t have cause to. He knew his job, did it well, and followed orders. A unit couldn’t succeed unless every member lived by that. To do otherwise, got people killed.

Had he somehow faltered in his duty? That thought ate at him for a long time, more than six months. Then, one evening, after all the dust settled and Riggs was married and relearning the life of a rancher, he and Gunner sat out by the fire pit behind the cottage and broke open an expensive bottle of whiskey.

Halfway through the bottle, they were pleasantly buzzed, and thanks to the fire, the sound of crickets and buzz of insects, relaxed, as well.

“Hey, Gun,” Riggs spoke softly, staring into the fire.

“Yeah?”

“You and me—we’re okay, yeah?”

“Yeah. What makes you ask.”

Riggs turned his head to look at Gunner. “’Cuz, you haven’t been yourself since the mission.”

Gunner frowned. He often hated how perceptive Riggs could be. “It was a time, you know.”

“Indeed, I do. And I think it’s way past time I said something to you.”

“What?”

“Thank you, Gun. Thank you for saving my life.”

Gunner didn’t expect that. Riggs had lost a limb. “How can you thank me? I deserve a fuck you, Gunner, for not being faster, stronger, or smarter. A half second and both those feet would be the ones you were born with.”

“Are you kidding?” Riggs’ voice raised in volume dramatically.

“Do I ever?”

Riggs shook his head. “Let me tell you something, brother. I talked to the people who survived and witnessed what happened. Every one of them called me, and every one of them said the same thing. You saved my life. If you’d been a second slower, that APC would have landed square on me, either crushed me to death or cut me in half. And Gunner, you listen to me, there is no coming back from that.

“This?” He lifted his leg. “Shit, I can do anything I could do before. I didn’t believe that was possible, but it is. And I wouldn’t be able to. Hell, I wouldn’t have breath if you hadn’t saved me. So, I want you to know that I am and always will be grateful. You’ll always have a home here. And a brother.”

Gunner was seized by an uncommon moment of emotion by Riggs' words, and the hand Riggs extended. Gunner clasped it, and they held on for a long moment. "Brothers." Riggs said.

"To the end."

As men are won't to do, the emotional moment was immediately dismissed, and they polished off the rest of the bottle. But Gunner would not forget one moment of that evening, because that was the night Riggs saved him from himself. Riggs' believe in him took away the guilt and second guessing.

If only everything in life were so easy.

Now, he watched his friend and brother racing across the pasture, making it look damn easy to flow with the horse as one unit. Gunner had come to admire that and was working on getting there himself.

It surprised him how pleasant life was on Heritage, the family's ranch. Workdays could be grueling or long, but he liked being physical, so that suited him just fine. The people who worked and lived there were kind, friendly, and made you feel at home.

He hadn't quite mastered that 'at home' thing, and maybe he never would. But he was content for the moment, and he didn't ask more of life.

Besides, he had a date tonight with a gorgeous, kick ass woman who could match him beer for beer, annihilate him at darts, and make him anticipate the moment he got her naked. He could definitely live with that.

Chapter Three

“Wolf pups?” Grady asked as he stepped out onto the patio. “Did I hear that right?”

“According to someone who called Riggs,” Oakley responded. “But Charli says wolves haven’t been in Texas for a long time.”

“That’s true.” He walked over to the railing to stand beside Charli. “But someone could have bred a dog with a wolf and brought the pups here. How old are they?”

“No one said.”

“Ever wonder about training a wolf dog?” Charli asked.

“Most of my life, but wondering is as far as I’ve gotten.”

“Why?” Grady asked.

“I doubt it’d go over well with the brass.”

“Again, why?”

“Wolves don’t always take to other animals, and that can disrupt training.”

“What if you had a place to do it and it wouldn’t interfere?”

Oakley cut Charli a look and noticed how Charli appeared not to notice as she asked innocently.

“Interfere with what?”

“The other dogs.”

“Someone would be hard pressed to accomplish that with as many as 900 dogs in various phases of training,” Oakley replied. “But, between you and me, if you could train one and it was more than eight percent wolf, it would be amazing.”

“So, would you like to do it?” Grady asked.

“Of course, but it’s just not practical.” She was starting to feel this conversation was a set-up. Had Charli already told Grady that she’d turned down the preliminary offer when Charli approached her?

“You mean as long as you’re in service.”

“Yes.” She saw no need to repeat what she’d told Charli. He’d already have that information.

“But what about when you retire? Sorry, but I have to ask. You’re clearly career, so how long do you plan on staying in?”

“Until I make General or find something more interesting.”

“Which would be what?”

Oakley had no problem being honest. “I don’t know. Working with dogs, for sure, but maybe not for combat.”

“Does that get old?” he asked.

“No, just sad.” She responded and then pointed. “There they come.”

Oakley turned and gave Charli a fist bump. “Thanks for the ride. It was good.”

“You’re welcome any time.”

“I appreciate that.” She then looked at Grady. “I’ll be out of your hair on Sunday.”

“So, you’re sticking around for the fun tomorrow?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it. Charli and I will kick all your fine asses.”

“Amen, sistah,” Charli grinned.

“I’ll look forward to it.” Grady grinned. “See you later. Oh, you want to do dinner tonight?”

“Doing it with Gunner.”

“Then it’s just the two of us tonight, hot stuff,” he said, and wrapped an arm around Charli’s waist. “Have any preferences?”

“Oh, I always have preferences, baby.”

He grinned, and Oakley shook her head with a smile. “Ok, I’m outta here. See ya.”

“Later.” Charli gave her a smile, and Oakley ran down the steps and to the waiting helicopter.

Oakley wasn’t prone to fantasy, but she was a woman with a healthy libido. When the helicopter door opened to reveal Gunner Hale standing there, she welcomed the rush of lust the sight provided.

Gunner wasn’t a man you’d describe as cute, attractive, or handsome. Every one of those adjectives contained within its code, a measure, however small, of softness. The handsomest men in the world were men with a flush of softness, be it in expression, suppleness of skin or tenderness of heart.

There was no softness in Gunner. He was a mythic giant of old, at six inches over six feet and two hundred and eighty pounds of muscle. The man was rock hard. Even his face was all hard angles, sharp eyes, tight jaw, and thick neck. Hard.

Gunner was always the first one through the door, and the last one out. He was a warrior, the barbarian at the gate who hacked or kicked it down. It showed in his gaze, the way his eyes constantly surveilled the landscape. He’d spot the danger, if danger existed, and then God help the soul of who he found, because they weren’t long for this world. His duty to protect and defend was so ingrained, it was as if it were part of his genetic code. It hadn’t taken her long to figure that out.

But there *was* a softness he revealed during one or two of their times together. His softness wasn’t really soft at all, not if strength is measured in such terms. He’d probably see it as a weakness, and perhaps it was

in battle, if survival was your goal. But off the battlefield and on, Gunner was loyal, and when he gave his word, there was no changing it. He would fulfill his promise, no matter the cost to himself.

Now, as she thought about the man, she ran to the hatch, and he offered her a hand. She accepted, and when she took it, he pulled her inside. Oakley purely loved the surge of hunger she felt. There weren't many men who could hoist a one-hundred-seventy-five-pound-woman around. Gunner handled it like she was a lightweight.

Since the day she met the man, she'd wondered what else he could handle, and she fully intended to find out before her leave was over. She wasn't looking for Mr. Forever-After, just Mr. Right Now, and Gunner was the first one of those she'd encountered in a long time.

She'd battled her natural inclination to leap before looking, and hadn't invited him to her bed. Yet. To her surprise, she'd been rewarded for that decision, and discovered that not only did she have a case of the hots for the man, but she also liked him.

Gunner, like his friend Riggs, was the real deal, a genuine American hero, and a true man of honor. You don't meet people like him often, and she felt lucky to get to know him. Already, it seemed like they were friends, at ease with one another. That was definitely rare, except between people who lived in their world.

Civilians were different. They saw things through which she thought of as a lens of innocence. If you stuck with your own kind, just like in a pack, it made life easier because you both spoke the same language.

"Hey, Shorty," he grinned down at her as he held her with one arm. "Thanks for the help."

She smiled at the *shorty* appellation. There weren't many guys who could get away with calling her that.

Gunner could. She actually felt short standing face to face with him. Well, face to neck, in this instance.

That was kind of a turn-on, too. Damn, she really had a case of it for him. “No problem, big guy.” She smiled and pressed against him, forcing him to step back. Oakley gave him credit when he managed to maneuver them into a position that placed his right leg between hers.

Ah ha, there you are. She’d seen glimpses of this part of Gunner, but this was maybe the fourth time. He kept himself locked down. Or was that locked up? One or the other. She understood that, so when an unplanned, instinctive, and playful moment appeared, she took full advantage.

His eyes widened fractionally when she rode his leg twice, then placed both hands on his chest and pressed. “You make a better door than you do a window, hoss.” Before she finished her sentence, he was grinning.

“So, tell me about these pups.” She turned to the reason she was there as he backed out of her way.

“Ask him,” Gunner handed her a headset and gestured toward Riggs, who sat in the co-pilot’s seat.

“Any info, boss?” she asked as soon as she had the headset in place.

“Nope. Just a rancher who found two pups and thinks they’re wolf hybrids.”

“What do you think the odds of that are?”

“That there are wolves here?” He looked at the pilot, who shook his head. “I’m with Ben,” Riggs continued. “My family’s been here for a few generations. At one time there were wolves, but according to my dad, they were all but gone when he was a kid in the 70s. As far back as I can remember, there hasn’t been a wolf sighting.”

“Curious,” she commented, wondering if someone had purposely bred a wolf with a dog? If so, why dump the pups? Did they get scared when the pups were born, afraid of legal repercussions, so they dumped them? If that was the case, where was the mother? Wolf or dog, a mother doesn’t abandon her young.

Oakley sat back, curiosity mixing with anger. Someone had to have either taken the pups from the mother or killed her. She had no information on how old they were, but there was a fair to average chance that they’d require bottle feeding if the mother couldn’t be found.

She knew Gunner watched. That didn’t bother her. He knew the value of silence, and the necessity. This wasn’t a mission, but an event, and for her, one she never dreamed would happen. It’d long been her dream to train a pair of wolf pups. If there was a chance these pups reached the genetic threshold to earn the wolf label, then this would literally be the opportunity she’d wished for.

What were the odds? It was a remarkable coincidence that right after being asked about the possibility of leaving the military to work at Sanctuary, wolf pups appeared in her life. Or was it a coincidence?

No, Grady wasn’t that kind of man. He’d never use deception. It was simply a coincidence. And boy was it a tempting one. She found herself suddenly considering the offer, which brought herself back to reality.

She had several months before she hit her twenty-year mark. She couldn’t afford to give up her full pension. Despite being a Major, in the civilian world she was qualified to do two things. Fight and train canines. That’s what the Army wanted of her, and what she’d give until her tour was finished.

She was pretty sure there weren’t many job openings for people with her particular qualifications. Trainers in the private sector were, by far, ex-military

trainers, or operators who worked exclusively with dogs. She'd be competing with people she may have trained, and that didn't appeal to her.

But, if she could successfully raise and train a pair of wolves, document everything and discover if it was not just possible to train wolves for all the tasks dogs were trained for, but if they would be superior at the tasks because of their nature. Right now, the consensus among those above her pay grade was that even if possible, the canines in the field would always have the advantage over a wolf.

After all, a trained wolf is still a wolf. An apex predator.

Which equates to a more unpredictable nature. Still, something inside told Oakley that there was more to wolves than people understood. She almost smiled at the thought. It wasn't something she'd say aloud, at least not anymore. In the past, when she spoke of the superiority of wolves and their intelligence, people scoffed.

Well, everyone save one. Mattias Grey Horse. Oakley met him on a joint mission before she left the Rangers. Talk about a deep well. He was that. Maybe that was part of the indigenous spirit, that ability to be part of the silence, to observe more than merely what floated on the surface.

He got it. Meeting him was one of the moments to remember. She paid attention to him, learned from him, and because of that, she saw how others treated and respected him. His native heritage wasn't an obstacle or hindrance, it was an enhancement.

It was Mattias who helped her fully embrace her own native heritage. By some fluke of genetics, she was blessed with her great-grandfather's eyes. He came to this country from the highlands of Scotland, a fair-skinned, black haired, hazel eyed giant who fell in love with a statuesque native woman.

They had one son, who had four sons and two daughters, and the family grew. Thus far, her great-grandmother was the only white blood in their line. Oakley wondered if she looked anything like the matriarch of their bloodline.

Oakley snapped out of that line of thinking, wondering why her mind pulled on that particular thread. Now wasn't the time for such reflection. Or was it more than reflection? Her people had always held the wolf in high regard. They and the wolves learned to inhabit the same land and learn about one another, even if it was from a distance.

What had always fascinated Oakley was the pack. They form what humans call families, and their families or packs work well as a single efficient unit. They follow the lead of the oldest wolf, normally the male, which probably inspired the concept of the alpha male. There have also been instances when the pack followed the alpha female.

The point important to Oakley was that wolves were naturally inclined toward pack life and being an efficient and important element within the unit. They knew how to follow their leader. It was the perfect mindset. If she could teach them to be a unit and work for a common goal, they would be magnificent.

And if they proved to be another benefit to the country, perhaps they'd be more protected. And ultimately, that was her goal, the one she kept private.

"Here we are," Riggs' voice in the headset yanked Oakley out of her wolf dreams, and she started preparing what she'd say to the rancher about the animals, that the chance of them being marked as a wolf was slim. The best thing he could do for them was take them to a shelter and hope they'd find a home.

As much as she hated that speech, she'd give it. She'd already mentally rehearsed it, and by the time

she, Gunner and Riggs were escorted into one of the small barns, she had it down pat.

Until she saw the pups. That changed everything.

Chapter Four

Oakley sat on the ground in the kennel, in what some would call Indian style, and others a meditation pose. Her hands rested on her knees, palms up and fingers loose. She remained still as the pups sniffed and circled her without interruption. While she sat, she spoke with the men watching from outside the caged enclosure. “So, how long have they been here?”

Marvin Dewalt, the man who found the pups, rocked back on his heels. “Well, that’s a tale all its own. We found them three days ago, at the edge of the west pasture, not too far from the stream that separates my land from Claude Herbert’s. We brung ‘em here and put ‘em in the smaller kennel over yonder, left ‘em food and water, and I’ll be danged if they didn’t dig their way out. We come out here the next morning and the pups were gone.”

He cleared his throat before continuing. “This morning, one of the men was riding fence lines and spotted them near the stream, so he brung ‘em in.”

“And there’s been no sign of the mother?” Oakley asked, remaining still as one of the pups licked at the fingers of her left hand and then smelled her palm.

“Nope. Durn strange, finding wolf pups. Ain’t been no wolves hereabouts in nigh onto fifty years.”

“That is more than strange,” she agreed. “In fact, it makes no sense that they’re here. Particularly without a mother. No mother would abandon her pups. There can be only two reasons they’re here alone. The mother was killed, or the pups were taken from her and for whatever reason released here.”

“You think them’s real wolves?” Mr. Dewalt asked.

“I don’t know.” She wished she could find out, but couldn’t come up with an excuse she could use to convince her commanding officer to allow her to keep the pups on base and test them.”

“How can you find out?” Gunner asked. He paid attention to the pups and to Oakley. She looked at them with more than curiosity. He suspected she was trying to figure out how to keep them. She had that look every time one of the pups would yip or lick her.

“If I had access, I could take blood samples and have them tested for genetic markers to determine if they’re hybrids, or full bloods.”

“If you had to guess, what would your guess be?” Riggs asked.

“I don’t like to speculate and...” she stopped talking as one of the pups climbed onto her leg and then down into the triangle of space between her legs, resting its head on her leg. When she extended her fingers toward it, it rubbed its head and snoot against her palm.

The look that came on her face told a story. One that Gunner saw. When Riggs looked at him, Gunner realized Riggs spotted it as well. Oakley was already hooked on the pups. By the time he looked back at her, the other pup was curled in her lap, happily sucking, and gnawing on one of her fingers.

“Looks like they’ve taken a shine to you,” Mr. Dewalt commented. “So, you want ‘em? I can’t keep ‘em. They’d spook the stock and the horses, and sure as shit, somebody’d come along and shoot ‘em.”

“I do want them,” she replied without turning her gaze from the pups. “But I report back for duty on Monday, and there’s no way I can keep them at the base.”

“Then keep them at Sanctuary,” Riggs said.

“Sanctuary?” She looked up at him. “The rehab center?”

“And adjunct training facility,” Riggs added. “I was talking with Mason and Grady, and they’re looking to expand what they have to offer. Georgie and I want to throw in with them. She’s a renowned therapist and top of the line in working with amputees. I reckon I could be a decent trainer and help soldiers get back in shape. Anyway, I plan on putting in most of my inheritance on it, and Naomie is donating a mountain of money.”

“And how do the pups factor in?”

“Right now, they’re just an enticement.”

“Excuse me?” She gave him a curious look. “For what?”

Gunner almost grinned. Riggs knew how to maneuver, that was for sure. He was steering her right toward something she appeared to want. Those pups and a way to have them. He was curious of the “how” in Riggs’ plan.

“In getting you to agree to come on board and start your own training program. Not just combat animals, but protection and emotional support. There’s a big need, and from what I hear, you’re the best.”

“I’ve been through this already with Grady and Charlie. I can’t.”

“Why not?” Riggs asked. “Mason and Grady are as eager as I to get the program started, and if we can choose someone to head it up, we’d choose you.”

“But I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because my twenty isn’t up for another two months and I can’t afford to retire early. Also, what would be the point, since you haven’t even broken

ground? Not to mention there are a lot of world-class trainers you could get.”

“Well, what if we could convince the brass to loan you to us until your time is up?”

“Good luck on that,” Oakley chuckled, and lifted one of the pups in both hands. She held it in front of her face, letting it sniff her. When it tried to lick her in the mouth, she smiled and lowered it to her neck, where it happily lapped and wiggled. “It’ll take more than a polite ask.”

“Like being the hero nephew of the President, and having the backing of men and women who’ve earned the respect of the military and the nation?” Gunner asked, and when she looked at him, he continued. “Sanctuary has already earned a name for itself and has the support of the brass in every branch of service. You might be surprised what they and Riggs’ family can accomplish.”

“Seriously?” she directed her question to Riggs.

“Seriously. If I can make it happen, will you do it?”

“Probably.”

“Then we better get back,” he responded and looked at Mr. Dewalt. “For now, we can take them to the ranch.”

“Works for me. I appreciate you taking care of it.”

“Glad to help,” Riggs shook Mr. Dewalt’s hand, then turned to Oakley. “Does that work for you?”

“Well, I don’t know. Do you have a place for them? And who will care for them?”

“We’ll have a kennel erected before sundown.”

“Where?”

Riggs cut a look at Gunner. “Behind your cottage?”

“Works for me.”

“Does it work for you?” Riggs asked Oakley.

“I have no clue.” She lifted the second pup trying to climb her torso, and cuddled both of them under the chin.” I mean, it’s Friday and I have to report for duty bright and early Monday morning. Someone has to be available to feed and tend them, to start getting them socialized and—”

“And with luck, that person will be you,” Riggs interrupted. “Will you give me a chance to make it happen?”

Oakley looked from him, to Gunner, and then the pups. Was she crazy? She wanted to say yes. This would literally be a dream come true. She wanted it and was scared to accept, for fear it wouldn’t come to pass. Already she felt a connection with the pups. They trusted her. She could feel it.

But what happened if Riggs couldn’t get the military to agree? What would happen to them? And how would she feel then? She’d never imagined how difficult it would be to have a dream offered to you.

She looked at Gunner. Despite only having known him for a short time, she trusted him. “What do you think I should do?”

“Well, I don’t know the ins and outs of it, but it seems that the people in charge of Sanctuary intend to incorporate canine treatment and need to have dogs specially trained. You’re the military’s top trainer and they want the best.

“Now, I heard Riggs say it’s for the soldiers who come through the place and those who might never have to if they work with a dog you’ve trained, but let’s look at it from another angle. This kind of program puts Sanctuary a step above every other rehab and adjunct training facility in the country. “

“Is that true?” she asked Riggs.

“It is. Grady and Mason want it to be the best in the world, so they keep coming up with new ways to help their country’s warriors who have suffered to defend that which they swore to defend and protect.”

“But I don’t see how they can convince the military to let me finish out my time here.”

“Sometimes you just have to trust,” Riggs smiled. “Or at least give us a chance to try. Can you do that?”

“I—” she wanted to. More than anything. “I...” she felt the relaxed bodies of the pups against her, their bellies against her chest. Could she walk away from the chance of a dream coming true?

“I can do that, but first we need to test these guys to determine how much wolf they have in them.”

“I think we have the person to make sure that happens fast,” Riggs replied.

“Oh?”

“My dad’s wife, Naomie. Have you met her?”

“Yes. She’s amazing. But can she make it happen before Monday?”

Riggs laughed. “Girl, you don’t know Naomie. Nor have you seen her lab.”

“Okay, but even if they have the necessary percentage of wolf genetics, someone needs to start working with them right away.”

“Like I said, let us try. Deal?”

Oakley took a deep breath and nodded. “Deal.”

And with that one word, she took a step toward something she’d wanted for most of her adult life.

Chapter Five

Two hours later, Oakley watched as Walker Ranch hands finished constructing the kennel. She was impressed with their speed and attention to detail. The kennel was twenty feet square, chain link on all four sides, and a covered pitch roof to keep it dry. There was a house with a built-up floor, padded with clean horse blankets, washed per her instructions to eliminate horse or chemical smells.

She sat in the back yard with the pups. Thanks to the ranch being stocked on darn near everything, she was able to fashion harnesses from leather and had leads attached to the harnesses so she could keep the pups from wandering off.

The pups alerted her to the arrival of someone new. Even at their young age, they were remarkably aware of their surroundings. Oakley turned her head and saw Naomie Taylor-Walker headed towards them. Surprisingly, the pups didn't bark, they just sat, ears up and watching curiously.

"Well, look what we have here," Naomie said as she stopped beside Oakley. "Mind if I sit?"

"Not at all," Oakley replied.

"And who are these fine fellows?"

Oakley regarded the pups before answering. "They haven't been named yet. I'm waiting for them to tell me their names."

The smile that came on Naomie's face surprised Oakley. "I think maybe you and I may be cut from similar cloth," Naomie responded. "Riggs mentioned you wanted to test the pups to get a genetic reading on whether they're wolf hybrids, or wolves."

"Yes, but I have no lab and can't take them to the base so..." she left the sentence unfinished.

“Lucky for you, I do.”

“Riggs mentioned something about that. Is it nearby?”

“Down at the stables. Want to take them down and run the tests?”

“You’re a vet, as well as a million other amazing things?” The question was out before Oakley could stop it.

Naomie just chuckled. “Call me a person with endless curiosity.”

“Or amazing,” Oakley added. “And I’d love to get the testing done.”

“Then let’s do it.”

Oakley stood and looked at the pups. “Come on, guys.”

To her surprise, they trotted along with her, sniffed, and explored as far as their leads would allow. When they reached Naomie’s lab, she unlocked it and held the door for Oakley.

“Holy smokes,” Oakley stopped just inside the door and looked around. “This is some setup.”

Naomie smiled. “I’m a bit of a lab snob. Besides, it’s vital to our breeding program.”

“Which is?”

“Performance horses.”

“Oh, I went to a show in Stockton last year with a friend. Those animals are amazing.”

“As are the canines you train.”

“You’ve seen military dogs perform?”

Naomie shot her another smile. “Let’s just say I have a lot of friends in interesting positions. Which brings me to something I wanted to talk to you about.” She gestured across the room. “Let’s get some blood

drawn, and then the pups can sniff around while we work.”

For the next half an hour, their attention was on getting blood drawn from the pups and preparing the samples. “What type of testing can you do here?” Oakley asked.

“Are you familiar with the VGL wolf-hybrid test?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. We test with the Y-chromosome markers, obviously, because the pups are male to determine the haplotype inherited from a single parent, along with wolf-specific DNA markers and population analysis of DNA markers.”

“Got it. And how long before we can expect results?”

“If we had to send them off, a couple of weeks. But we can do it here in under forty-eight hours.”

“So, I’d know before I leave on Monday morning?”

“That’s the plan,” Naomie talked as she worked. “I’ll prepare a set of slides, and you do the same. I always opt for redundant results to make sure I haven’t screwed up.”

“Same here,” Oakley cut a look at the pups to see them playing together, then got to work. “You said you wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yes. Have you ever heard of Blackstone Security?”

Oakley looked up, trying to remember where she’d heard the name. Then it came to her. “Yes. General Michael Wilson signed on with them when he retired. I attended his send off and his speech stuck with me ever since. That man is a real American hero.”

“Yes, he is. And it took a special organization to tempt him to work for them. They employ veterans and

attract people who have not yet considered retirement. The organization is impressive. But for us, what is important is that the owner Clayton Blackstone is interested in partnering with Sanctuary in their training program.”

“Clayton was excited to hear about the possible canine training center and made Grady and Mason an offer. He’ll buy the necessary land, fund the build and start-up costs, and in exchange, Blackstone personnel go through training at Sanctuary, including learning to work with canines.”

Oakley paused in what she was doing, stunned by the news. “You people are serious about this, aren’t you?”

“We are.”

“Why?”

“Pardon?”

“Why? Why is it so important?”

“Because Riggs is important to this family, and giving back to a nation he feels gave to him is important to him. He and Georgie have already committed to Sanctuary. She’s working with the people who come for rehab, and thanks to some generous donors, we’re building a new wing, specifically for amputees. The people with Bio Now in Massachusetts are committing people to the team, as well.”

“But why canines? Military trained dogs are combat ready soldiers, and the military already has a top-notch training facility.”

“But they don’t have the funding we do. And here we can train more than combat canines. We can train for protection and also for support. There are many vets who need that. Animals trained to detect seizures and things of that nature. Think of the good we can do, Oakley.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. But the cost of training an animal is enormous. What vet can afford without military funding?”

“The ones who come here.” Naomi paused to face Oakley. “I don’t tell this to many people, but I have a lot of money.”

“Define a lot.”

“Let’s just say I’ve hit the Forbes list every year since I was thirty. I couldn’t spend what I have now in many lifetimes. And my patents make me millions each year. So, I can fund it without hesitation, and I will. Russ and Riggs and the President are investing, along with Clayton Blackstone and some others who I am not at liberty to name. But the point is, we can make it happen, we can make it the premier facility in the country.”

“And you’re telling me because...?”

“Because we want you. I’ve learned all I can about you, and one thing I keep hearing over and over is that you have the ability to communicate with the dogs in a way no one else can, that you have a special affinity with them.”

Naomie returned to her task. “I think I may know why, but I’m not ready to commit to my hunch just yet.”

“And you will be when?”

“Right after you answer this question. Why do you want to train wolves?”

Oakley hadn’t anticipated that question, but something about Naomi inspired honesty, so she answered truthfully. “I’m guessing it’s obvious that I’m not white. I mean, there is Caucasian blood in my genetics, but primarily I’m Native. I grew up on a reservation in Wyoming.

“What I suspect you already know is that one of the first things my people, the people of the First

Nations, learned from wolves was how to work as a single efficient unit. Many species of animals don't have a lasting bond with their mates or offspring. That's not the case with wolves.

"Typically we hear things about the desirable qualities wolves possess. Courage, honor, and resilience. But they're far more than that. More than merely a symbol. Many of their behavioral traits have proven to be of scientific interest, most prominently and probably most recognizable, in how they work as a tight-knit and efficient group."

"Ah, yes, the wolf-pack," Naomie interjected.

"Exactly. Researchers have spent decades studying wolves and discovered that the average wolf pack bears a strong resemblance to human extended families. There are many species of animals who lead solitary lives, apart from mating. But once a wolf forms a bond, that bond only breaks with death. And just like humans, adult wolves bring up wolf pups. Sometimes wolves even take care of their grandpups, if you will.

"But to cut it short, since I can get long-winded on the topic, the pack has amazing cohesion, and each member has a set responsibility and place in the pack. And everything they do is for the pack.

"Because of that natural pack instinct and due to their amazing strength, stamina, agility, and intelligence, it's my belief that a pack could be trained to be one of the strongest teams imaginable for combat, incursions, rescues, or protection. And if that proved true, it would provide wolves something they'd sorely lacked for way too long."

"What?"

"Value and protection. If they're proven valuable, perhaps our kind will stop killing them to extinction."

"Ah ha," Naomie turned to her with a smile. "And there it is."

“What?”

“The reason. You have an affinity, not just for dogs, but also for wolves. I suspect that is genetic and remarkable. But I agree. It’s a worthy effort, and if successful, we might just save a noble and worthy species from extinction.

“The only question that remains is will you join us in this quest? We’re going to move forward with the plan, but we want you, Oakley. Your skills as a trainer and your affinity with the animals. We need someone who places value on them. Not just their training, but someone who loves and honors them, someone who will safe guard them and make their lives matter.

“So, the question again is, will you join us? I promise you, on my honor and my life, that you won’t regret it. We’ll pay you more than you’d earn in a lifetime, so that if you want to retire, you can live in whatever manner you choose. And we’ll respect your expertise and your bond with the animals and never second guess you and your training. This program will be designed by you. You’ll call the shots. All you have to do is say yes.”

Oakley opened her mouth, then closed it. This was like something out of a book. Naomie was either the fairy-godmother or the Jinn, offering the fulfillment of a dream Oakley never dared to hope could become real.

She was being offered everything she’d ever wanted. No, wait, there was one more thing. Did she dare ask for it? And if she was granted that request, would it even work out? There was only one way to find out.

“I will say yes if I can make one more thing happen.”

“Name it and it’s yours.”

Oakley smiled. “It’s not yours to give.”

“Then whose?”

“Gunner. I want to ask Gunner to be my partner.”

“Because you have a thing for him?”

“No. Because he’s a genuine hero, a man who never backs down, who doesn’t give up. And because there’s something about him. A quietness and strength that canines identify with and respect.”

“Because he’s an Alpha,” Naomie added.

“Yes.”

“As are you. And wolves follow the Alpha pair, don’t they?”

“I think all canines do, some of them just don’t know it because they’re so domesticated. But they all share that trait.”

“And you want your canines to have that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well then, Major Rising Wolf, I guess you better talk with Gunner about that.”

“I will.”

“And if he says yes?”

“Then I reckon I will, too.”

And just like that, it hit her. She wasn’t walking away from something, she was walking toward something better, toward a chance to do more for and with the canines, and for the good of people who needed them.

That sounded like a cause she could champion.

Chapter Six

It was near dusk when Oakley stepped outside Naomie's lab, stretched, and looked around. Men were returning on horseback. She had no clue where they'd been, but since there were cattle dogs with them, she'd guess they were moving cows from one place to another.

One rider rose a foot higher than the others. That might be partially due to the size of the horse he rode, but most of it was due to the size of the rider. Oakley grinned as Gunner looked her way. Damn if that SEAL didn't sit a horse well. That added another pellet of fuel to the lust-o-meter.

He walked his horse over and stopped in front of her. "Did you get your answer?"

"Soon, which is amazing. If I had to send the samples to a lab, it would have taken two weeks."

"Naomie makes things happen."

"No kidding. I figured it would be later, so was about to ask for the loan of a truck or a ride. I need to go over and get my things from Charli's. I was hoping you'd let me get cleaned up at your place."

"You're gonna leave the pups alone?"

"It depends."

"Really? Whether they're full blooded makes the difference in the care you give them?"

His question made her feel ashamed. Not because that was her intent, but because he would reach that conclusion. What had given him the impression she would do that. "No. But it makes a difference whether I get to eat barbecue and dance with you at the Honky Tonk. I can't do both."

"Why not?"

“I doubt they allow animals, and if I can’t leave them...”

“Then we bring the food and the music to you.”

“We do?”

“Sure, why not? How long before the results are in?”

“A couple of hours at least.

“Then let me take care of my horse, and I’ll run you over to Grady’s. We can call in an order from the Honky Tonk and pick it up on the way back.”

“That’d be awesome,” she agreed, thinking how often he displayed kindness to the people around him. Gunner was often quiet and could appear standoffish, but she’d learned that he was actually very personable, and only quiet because he didn’t see the need for idle chatter. “Can the pups ride with us?”

“Don’t see why not. Give me twenty minutes.”

“Meet me here?”

“Yep.”

“Thanks, Gunner.”

He smiled and turned his horse, heading for the stable. Oakley watched him leave, then headed back into the lab.

A quick check told her that wishing the results were done wasn’t going to speed things up. Naomi estimated three hours when she left an hour ago. Oakley could be a patient woman, but this wait was driving her up a wall.

Cool your jets, she scolded herself. If anyone knew the value of patience, it was a trainer. Her success depended upon it. Training took time, patience, repetition, and focus, among other things. But patience was high on the list.

A couple more hours of wait could seem like an eternity if she were just sitting and waiting. Getting to ride with Gunner to pick up her things and dinner provided a break and gave her a chance to spend time with him, which definitely held appeal.

Twenty-five minutes later, she and the dogs were in the front seat of a double cab Heritage Ranch truck, headed for Grady's. The pups surprised her. Not with their curiosity. She'd expected that. But with the way they and Gunner interacted.

The pups loved him, and he was kind towards them. But when they got too rowdy, or wanted to get into the floorboard under his feet, he ordered them to behave. They apparently responded to his alpha vibe and followed orders.

"You know, you'd make a good trainer – or barring that, a good handler. Did your unit have a canine member?"

"We did. A Malinois. Man, that dog could literally climb walls. He saved our asses more than once."

"What was his name?"

"Don't laugh."

"Okay, tell me."

"Magic Mike."

"You got Magic Mike?" She grinned. "I trained him from a puppy. What a spectacular dog. I hated when he was assigned. The handler—" she paused, searching for the name. "Oh, yeah, Tom Hinson, a guy from the Appalachians. He's top notch."

"Yes, he is."

"And Magic? Are he and Tom still a team?"

"They are. Do you get notified when they have to be reassigned?"

“That only happens when the dog loses its handler. Then typically, the dogs will be brought back in, paired with a new handler, and they’ll spend a week or two on base, getting familiar with one another.”

“And when one falls in combat?”

That was a question that brought tears to her eyes, and she hurried to turn her head away, stared out of the window and cleared her throat before responding.

“They bring my soldiers home, and I get to say goodbye and help carry their caskets.”

That was all she could manage. Oakley didn’t want Gunner to know her weakness. She could go toe-to-toe with anyone in armed or unarmed combat, face death or injury, but seeing one of the dogs she’d raised, trained, and loved be brought home in a box crushed her heart in a way she couldn’t explain to anyone. Nor had she ever tried. She just kept her emotions zipped tight, and when that zipper threatened to burst, found the privacy she needed to grieve.

Gunner watched Oakley. He heard the hitch in her voice and saw the shudder in the deep breath she sucked in. He knew those signs. He’d felt them too many times when one of his teammates fell, when one of their unit was lost. It was a pain unlike any other, and one that stayed with you.

He noticed how the pups immediately hurried to crawl into her lap. One stood on its hind legs to lick the side of her neck, and the other busied itself, licking her hand. Obviously, they’d already formed an attachment to her, which was impressive. Naomie might be right. She said Oakley had more affinity with canines. He asked what that meant, and Naomie responded that it was up to him to find out.

That was fair, and he didn’t mind the learning process. What he knew so far was that Major Oakley Rising Wolf was more than a talented trainer and handler of the highest rating. The animals she trained

took a piece of her heart with them. Or so it seemed to him, after witnessing her reaction to the question. That should have surprised him, but it didn't. He'd seen the expression on her face when she talked about the dogs, heard the pride in her voice when she praised them, and the heartbreak when she spoke of one who'd fallen.

Oakley presented herself as a straight-up, balls-to-the-wall special forces operative, a woman capable of taking on assignments that some men couldn't handle. He and Riggs had looked her up, and her list of commendations was impressive. Particularly for a woman, and that wasn't him being sexist. There weren't many special forces females, but those who made the cut were as lethal as their male counterparts. Maybe more so, as they faced the challenge of proving themselves as competent as the men in their units.

This was the one topic, or area where something softer appeared. She cared. No, she loved those animals, and from what he and Riggs had discovered, would take it to the mat to save one if it meant leading a rescue mission herself.

He wondered if there were more hidden facets to the woman seated beside him, and if she'd trust him enough to allow him to see those parts of her.

"There's something you should know," she finally spoke again and turned her head to look at him.

"I'm listening."

"You know about the job I've been offered at Sanctuary?"

"Yep."

"What do you think about it?"

He almost said it was none of his business, but that wouldn't be fair to the friendship they were building. Sure, it started with lust, and that still played a big part, but he'd realized he liked Oakley. She was a straight-forward, no-bullshit gal, who would look you in the

eye and speak her truth, even if she knew you weren't going to like what she had to say.

She was also a woman who'd take someone else speaking their truth with respect, whether she agreed or not. He enjoyed being around her, and yeah, still hoped to take whatever they had to a more intimate level, but to his surprise, was content to let the wanting period linger.

It was easy enough to find a "woman for the moment", even if you didn't look like a movie star, or have a fat bank account. Something about the words Navy SEAL turned women into lusty creatures. Maybe it was all those romance books written about military heroes. He wasn't sure what the men in those tales were like, but he'd be willing to bet that no SEAL he knew would see themselves in any of them.

Fiction was fantasy, and he reckoned women needed a little of that in their lives. Life could be hard, complicated, and often boring for some. Dreams and secret fantasies were an escape from that. At least that's what Oakley had to say about it and joked that there weren't many romances written about female operatives.

Gunner had laughed and told her that was because women liked to fantasize about being slung over a man's shoulder and carried off to be ravaged. Not slinging a man over theirs.

That made her laugh and ask where he stood on that. "Hot stuff, if you can sling me over your shoulder and carry me, then you can do whatever the hell you want to me."

He thought maybe that was the day they realized they were on the same page. Hot for one another, but enjoying the journey to get there.

"Hey, earth to Gunner," her voice pulled him back from thought.

“Sorry. Seems to me what matters is what you think.”

“But do you think they can make this happen and build a new training facility that the military will recognize for trained canines?”

“I do.”

“Why?”

He looked straight at her. “Because Riggs, his father, Grady and Naomie all said so. And if they said it, you can take it to the bank.”

“As simple as that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She was quiet for a few moments, petting the pups. “Okay, then here’s my deal. I want this. For many reasons, but mostly because if these are wolves, I need to work with them, and the offer would make that possible.

“So, if they are, then I’ll jump at the chance, if I get one more thing.”

“What?”

“You.”

Gunner blinked, frowned, and cut her a look. “Me? For what?”

“To teach. You’re a natural Gunner. I’ve watched you with animals, like the ranch’s cattle dogs. I thought they were impressive the first time I saw them work and said something to Riggs. He said they were always good dogs, but you’d turned them into a unit, and now they worked without having to be spoken to. They just looked to you for signals.”

“It just makes sense,” he explained. “There’s a lot of noise with cows, horses and hands.”

“But you trained them, Gun. In just a week, you taught them how to be a unit and what you wanted

from them. I want your talent. I want to teach you and learn from you, and I want us to train these pups and see if my theory is sound.”

“What theory?”

“That a unit of wolves would be amazing, a force truly to be reckoned with.”

That shocked him. “Why would you want that? Seems wolves already have it hard enough. There aren’t as many as there used to be, you know.”

“I know, and this helps stop that. If they prove beneficial to our defense, as soldiers deployed just like the rest of the men, women, and canines, then we can lobby for their protection and get it. And do you have any idea what benefit there is to having wolves in our national forests and tribal lands?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, then sometime when you have a chance, and if you’re interested, do a little online search on Yellowstone and what they’ve done to improve the ecosystem.”

“Wanna give me a hint?”

“Not much into Googling?”

“Not unless necessary.”

“Okay, well maybe this will entice you. Close to thirty years ago, we actually changed the path of the river in Yellowstone National Park, as well as the park itself. And for the better. Our action changed the soil and growth of grasses and plants, it changed the diversity and populations of wildlife throughout the park, and even changed the way the rivers flow. And do you know what we did to achieve that?”

“I can’t even imagine what all that would take.”

“Only one thing.”

He cut her a look that mirrored his words, “Yeah, right. One thing. And that was?”

“We brought back the wolves.”

“No,” he was stunned.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Look it up and read for yourself. And yet, even that isn’t enough to protect them. But this might have a chance of making them the heroes of the tale, rather than the villain.”

“Interesting and I will look it up. But if you tell anyone I may have to... well you know.”

She chuckled, and that lightened the mood. “Sorry, I get... you know.”

“Passionate? Baby, I am totally into that. But I’m curious. Why does it mean so much to you? The wolves?”

Oakley looked away, and when she spoke again, her voice was softer and seemed to carry a hint of sadness. “Maybe one day I’ll tell you, but not today.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Let’s just say that discovering one another should be a process, like discovering who each of these pups are. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Where are they vulnerable, and how do we help them develop skills to minimize whatever vulnerability they possess?”

He thought about her response for a bit, actually until they reached the turn off to Grady’s ranch, and then he asked. “So, you’re going to show me your vulnerability, Major Rising Wolf?”

“No,” she faced him. “You’re going to figure it out.”

“You reckon I can?”

“I reckon we’ll see, won’t we big guy?”

Maybe it was her words, the inflection in them, her tone, or the look in her eyes. Whatever the case, that response lit something inside Gunner. It provided him with a tantalizing challenge, and as most people knew, Gunner was always up for a challenge.

Especially, this one, because he’d already decided that he was going to make Oakley his.

Chapter Seven

Oakley couldn't believe her good luck, but was completely befuddled. The pups were full-blooded grey wolves. How was that possible? Grey wolves inhabit places like Michigan, northern Wisconsin and Idaho, western Montana, and the Yellowstone area of Wyoming. Not Texas. So how did two grey wolf pups end up in Texas? This was beyond coincidence. Someone had to have brought these pups here. But who?

That was a question she didn't know she'd find the answer. A small voice inside, one she kept as silent as possible, spoke up. *Is that what's really important? You've dreamed of this most of your adult life, and all you want to do is fret over how the pups ended up here? Call it a dream come true, a cosmic joke, a gift from God or whatever you want, but don't turn away from something you've dreamed of because you can't figure out how the moment came into being.*

Maybe that inner voice was right. She had her wolf pups and an offer too good to be true. Rather than worry about how it manifested, she should turn her mind to what she was going to do with the offer.

Oakley didn't have much experience at life, just handing her a dream. She'd worked for every commendation and rank she'd achieved, and thus far had been gifted very little. No, that wasn't true. She cut a look at Gunner, seated beside her on an old Adirondack chair close to the fire pit behind his cottage.

Life had gifted her something rare, and in her book, marvelous, when she met Gunner. He was the most genuine person she'd ever met, and she grew fonder of, and more attracted to him, every day.

She knew the attraction was mutual, they'd acknowledged the night they met. And the kisses

they'd shared promised of things she was eager to experience. But neither of them had made the move, and she wondered which one of them finally would.

Right now, she was content. Her belly was full, the pups explored the yard and played, Gunner was sitting beside her, sipping beer, and enjoying the fire, and all was right with the world.

“So, are you going to say yes?” Gunner’s voice was pitched low, almost a whisper.

She glanced over at him. “That depends. Are you?”

He shook his head, mumbled “I don’t know,” and looked away for so long she thought he’d decided not to respond.

“Look, I’m not trying to force—”

“I didn’t think you were,” he interrupted. “But here’s the deal. Riggs and I are partners, and I made a promise to him that if he retired and became a rancher, I’d go inactive and learn to cowboy. I can’t break that promise.”

“Nor would I ask you to,” she quickly pointed out. “I’ve been thinking about it all day, and I may do the same. Transfer to reserves.”

“How long will that take?”

“Hopefully as long as the leave time I have built up. I’ll report in on Monday and meet with the brass to see what I can make happen.”

“And if you can’t make it happen now, what about them?” he indicated the pups.

She shrugged. “I don’t want to have to mentally cross that bridge right now. Besides, the only problem I have is being able to get started with the pups. So, if I take all my leave now and start the training, maybe I can work something out if the transfer doesn’t happen before my leave is up. I don’t know what else to do.”

“It sounds like a plan to me.”

“Except for me having no place to stay and work with the pups, Sanctuary hasn’t even come up with plans, so it’s out and I’m sure the Walkers don’t want wolves on their ranch.”

“Wolf pups,” he corrected. “And you can always ask.”

She nodded and was silent for a few moments. After looking into the fire for a minute, she faced him. “This is happening so fast. Is it too fast? Am I about to take a leap without checking to make sure there’s water in the pool? I don’t want to screw up my commission or my life, but...”

Oakley shook her head and then lowered it to stare at the fire again. “Why am I afraid? I don’t do fear, and yet here I am, damn near terrified. What the hell, Gun? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing.” He reached over and took her hand. “You’re being offered what you want, and you’re scared it’s not real.”

She turned her head so abruptly, it shocked him. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s how I would feel, and I think maybe you’re like me. You’ve had some hard knocks, made some mistakes, and done some losing. The military saved you and gave you purpose. It gave you back love, and don’t give me that eat shit and die, look. It has no power here. And it tells me I’m right. The military is home for you, and the dogs are your family, your children. You love them, without reservation. If you walk away, what happens to them? What happens to you? Will it be a mistake?”

When she looked at him, blinking back tears, it touched something inside him. “How can you know so much about me when we’ve only known one another a few weeks?”

“Because we’re cut from similar cloths, I think. We’re scared to trust that life might steer good things our way.”

She nodded. “I’m not sure I deserve it.”

“Why?” he asked.

“You first.”

Gunner shook his head. “I’m not ready to dig up that grave.”

“Nor am I,” she admitted. “But at least I don’t feel like I’m the only one fighting this demon.”

“Nope, there’re a lot of folks fighting that war.”

“You think we can win?”

“I think we can try.”

Oakley gave him a quick smile. “Maybe. It’d be nice. And I’ll definitely think about it. But for now, I think I just want to put these boys to bed and get clean.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Gunner, I’m sorry. I’ve monopolized your time ever since you finished today. Why don’t you head in and I’ll clean up things here and get the pups settled for the night.”

“I’ve been dirty before. I can help. Besides, I’m enjoying the company.”

“Thanks,” she gave him a smile as she stood and offered him a hand. “So am I.”

He took it, and she gripped tight and tugged. Gunner smiled and let her pull him to his feet. Once standing, he then stepped in close, looking down at her. There was an expression on her face he’d seen before, one that struck a chord inside him. “Don’t give a man that look if you don’t mean it, hot stuff.”

“Oh, I mean it,” she responded and released his hand to put both of hers on his abdomen and begin a slow trek up his body. “The question is are we going to stop dancing around this attraction and do something about it?”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“How about right now?”

Oakley made a small sound of surprise when he wrapped his arms around her and walked her backwards. “Come on, boys,” he said as he headed for the back door of the cottage with his gaze locked on hers.

He didn’t expect them to obey, but they did. Gunner reached the door, and keeping his arms around Oakley, freed one hand to twist the doorknob. He walked her inside, and the pups followed. Once he closed the door behind them, he turned and backed Oakley up against it.

Gunner took her hands and stretched them up over her head. His body pressed against hers, and she wiggled one leg free, raised it high enough to wrap around his hip and pull him tighter.

“You might be playing with fire, hot stuff.” He rocked his pelvis against her.

“Well, you do have a shower, don’t you?” She nibbled his chin and wound her other leg around his waist.

“I do.”

“Then I reckon we’re safe.”

“Not even close.”

Oakley laughed. “Big promises there ,Gun. You think you can deliver?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Then bring it, big guy.”

“You got it.” He released her hands, put his under her rear, and carried her into the bathroom.

Undressing was a battle of hands, both fighting to get the other naked the quickest. Once their clothing lay in a puddle at their feet, Oakley took a step back. “I think I just died and went to Valhalla.”

“Valhalla?”

“Yep,” she smiled and reached up to place both hands on his wide pecs. She watched her hands as she slowly trailed them down his body. “You had to have been a Viking in another life.”

“I could say the same about you, hot stuff.”

She smiled, and there was enough power in her smile to have him forgetting about being flirtatious, slow, or gentle. Hers wasn't the smile of a woman trying to tease a man, it was of a siren about to lure him into a fate of her choosing.

That was fine with him. All that mattered was she was naked, and he was about to put his hands all over her, along with his mouth. And when he finished with that, he was going to sink into her heat and see if he survived the fire.

And if he didn't, then all he had to say is, what a way to go.

Chapter Eight

Oakley couldn't remember a nicer morning. Waking up wrapped in Gunner's arms after a night of mind-blowing sex was an experience she hoped to repeat. Many times. She did have to chuckle at his bed, however. Thanks to his height, he didn't fit well on a standard bed. Something was going to hang off.

So, he eliminated that issue by building a frame that held a king-size mattress and at its foot an extra-long twin turned horizontally. Both had clean sheets, and there was a sheet and blanket on the bed, but you couldn't ever call it a "made bed". Not that she cared.

She'd slept like that proverbial log. Sex with Gunner was a life-altering experience. She'd halfway expected him to be a barbarian, and he could definitely fill that bill upon request. He was a very intuitive, skilled lover and a man who lost no masculinity by letting a woman be dominant.

That was an incredible turn-on. Most men were a little intimidated by her demanding sexual nature. Not Gunner, he just grinned and gave her the lead. She couldn't remember ever being with a man like him. Ever. He was one of a kind.

Which made it too easy to fall for him. Oakley worried about that for five minutes, then let it go. She wasn't the fall in love kind and didn't expect anything more from him than this. Funny, but if she had to give up sex or friendship, she'd be hard-pressed to make a choice. Oakley didn't have many friends; she didn't let many people in.

Gunner was different. He'd walked in without asking permission and without force. He just was. There was something about it. She was intrigued and enjoyed being with him, in and out of bed. Time would tell if it was meant to be more. For now, she'd enjoy

her time with him. In less than forty-eight hours, she had to report in for duty.

Caught up in thought, she paid no attention to the fact that her hand was drifting slowly over his abdomen. She felt the way the hair running from his navel to his groin thickened the lower her hand moved.

Until it met a part of him already at attention. “Looking for trouble, hot stuff?” His voice was raspy, the sound of a man in need of water.

“Always. Want some water?”

“I’d kill for it.”

“Don’t move.”

She threw back the sheet and got off the bed. If memory served, there was a gallon jug of water in the refrigerator. Oakley padded to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. Sure, enough there was it.

Not bothering to find a glass, she unscrewed the top, turned the bottle up to her mouth as she drank, bumped the door with her hip to close it, and retraced her steps back to the bedroom.

Early morning light filtered in through the thin curtain over the window, the fabric lifting and falling in the slight breeze that wafter in. Light fell across the bed, causing her to stop and look.

Gunner didn’t think of himself as an appealing man, even though she knew from talking with Grady and Riggs that he was never without female companionship. That didn’t surprise her. He wasn’t conceited and never put on airs of being tough or mean or anything. He was genuine, and humble.

And sexy as homemade sin.

She’d seen few men who could compare when it came to physique. He wasn’t a fat guy with muscle, or a gym rat with muscle. He was the human equivalent of a war horse, all muscle and heart.

He made her heartbeat faster, and her thoughts turn to all the ways he delivered pleasure. Even now, she could feel the ghost of sensation on her skin of his callused hands, the soft scrape as he explored her body, teasing and arousing.

“Looking for trouble?” he asked.

“Always.” She sat beside him and offered him the jug of water.

He accepted, turned it up and downed almost a third of it before setting it on the nightstand. “Well, you know, my grandmama always did call me trouble so...”

The squeak that came out of her mouth shocked her when he grabbed her, pulled her down, and then over onto her back in one move. “God, you’re beautiful,” he said as he leaned on one arm and looked down at her.

“You had me at hello, big guy.”

“I mean it,” there was no jest in his voice. “You’re beautiful, like God decided to take the best traits from two different races and combine them into one person.”

No one had ever complemented her like that, and she wasn’t sure how to react. “You’re so full of surprises, Gunner. Why the hell are you walking around single?”

“I could ask you the same.”

She nodded and raised one hand to trace along the side of his face. “But why ruin a perfectly good morning? I can think of a lot of better ways to spend our time than hearing about all my personality defects.”

“Defects?”

She nodded in mock seriousness, eager to get beyond this moment. Oakley didn’t know that she’d ever feel comfortable speaking her truth to anyone. She couldn’t imagine that life would bless her enough to deliver her someone who would listen and not

condemn her. She sure couldn't feel that way, so if she condemned herself, why would anyone else feel different?

"I'm a terrible cook, I hate housework, can't sew or knit, don't know the first thing about gardening and despise shopping."

"Dear God, you really are defective," he quipped, then added, "or perfect."

She would have protested that last compliment, but he rolled over on her, holding himself on his forearms. "I'll go with perfect," he said just before he kissed her.

Oakley didn't have the mental power to think of anything other than this moment. His lips were soft but demanding, and she gladly responded. Before the kiss ended, her legs were wound around his waist.

She started to reach between them to guide him inside her, but he took hold of her hands, pulled them up over her head, and held her pinned to the bed. "Not this time, hot stuff. This time it's my turn to take."

Something about the way he said it flipped a switch, making her instantly wet. "Then do it."

There was no need for further encouragement. She took and delighted in what he gave, but felt a stir of unease. Something tugged at her, something she wanted to ignore. She was close to losing control, he was steering her where he wanted her to go, and she felt the strength to resist wane. She couldn't let that happen. Surrendering wasn't in her nature.

"Let go, baby." His whisper seemed in answer to her fear. "Let me have you."

Damn. His low croon obliterated all her control, and without conscious decision, the last of her walls fell. It was terrifying and exhilarating.

"Yeah, that's it," he growled. "Gimme all."

"Take it," she replied and gave herself over to him.

Time became fluid, boundless, and Oakley flowed with it, exulting in every sensation. Somewhere along the way, she became dominant, riding him, pushing for more. He gave her control, until it threatened to make him lose his own. Then he took charge, pushed her to the edge and pulled her back, over and over again until she screamed with need.

Then he gave her what she needed to take that long dive. Oakley groaned and wrapped her legs around him like a vice, feeling his pulse inside her. When they finally rolled away from one another, chest heaving, skin slick with sweat, she noticed how pliant her body was, how totally sated she felt, how comfortable and safe it felt to be here.

How much this man beside her felt like her match.

And that's when it hit her. Somehow Gunner had taken her heart without appearing to try. She was falling for him.

And that scared the daylights out of her.

Chapter Nine

By the time they finished the obstacle course and gathered at the outdoor barbecue area on the ranch portion of the property, they were a bunch of dirty, happy folks. Gunner looked around at the men and women gathered around the beer keg, sitting on the wooden Adirondack chairs, or sprawled on the grass. There was a smile on every face.

That was no surprise. They might need this kind of practice to keep fit and combat ready, but today it was all about blowing off steam and having fun.

Charli and Oakley were the main attraction, but you wouldn't know it from watching them. They put every bit as much into it as the men, maybe more, and they both put a lot of the men to shame.

Gunner stole a look at Oakley, sitting on the grass beside Charli. They were smiling and talking, teasing Grady, and laughing. It was good to see Oakley relaxed. Something happened this morning when they were in bed. He felt it, felt her softening. It was the only way he could describe it. She softened, let go of all that control she wore like armor.

And it apparently scared her, because as soon as they were out of the bed, she was as buttoned up as ever. What happened?

He wandered over and lowered himself to the ground beside her, and she leaned back, rested her head on his thigh, and smiled at him. "I want a rematch."

"Anytime, anywhere, hot stuff."

The smile she delivered made him wonder if he'd misread things this morning. Just as he had the thought, his phone buzzed. Almost simultaneously, others rang. Gunner looked up and saw Riggs staring at him. He nodded and answered the call. "Hale here." As he listened, he watched the others to see who else received

the call. It appeared to be him, Riggs, Oakley, and Grady.

As he listened to what the speaker had to say, Oakley sat up with her phone against her ear. “Yes, sir.” Gunner acknowledged the caller. “Thank you, sir.”

When he stuck the phone in his pocket, he looked at Riggs, who was just ending his call. Riggs cocked a thumb toward the parking area. Gunner nodded and leaned over toward Oakley. “Time to go.”

She nodded and looked at Grady, who was speaking softly to Charli. He looked her way, but didn’t acknowledge the call, which made her wonder if she’d gotten a completely different message.

Whatever the case, she had to leave. “Gotta bolt,” she said, and looked around at everyone. “Thanks for letting me join the party.”

“With luck soon, it will be permanent,” Grady commented.

“With luck,” she said and addressed Charli. “I’m going to swing by your place and grab my gear. I need to report back tonight.”

“What’s up?”

“Duty calls,” Oakley didn’t feel like getting into it. At the moment, she’d prefer to find a dark room where she could be alone and get beyond the gut clenching grief she felt at the news. Instead, she forced a smile and fist-bumped Charli. “Thanks for the hospitality, sis. See you soon.”

Gunner jerked his chin up at Grady, a move that obvious meant something since Grady nodded and rose. He and Gunner fell in step with Oakley. Riggs was already standing at his truck. No one spoke until they reached it. “Jesus, Gun.” Riggs kept his voice low. “Two. They lost two.:

“Three,” Gunner corrected.

“Thre—? Oh shit.” Riggs looked at Oakley.
“Birdman was one of yours?”

“He was.”

“Damn, I’m sorry. Is that why you were notified?”

“Yes, I’ll be catching a flight in a couple of hours to go to California. After the service there, I’ll take possession of Birdman’s body and bring him home.”

“You’re on the same flight as us,” Riggs announced, and almost the same moment Gunner asked.

“They hold funerals for the dogs?”

“Just like any other –” She glanced at her beeping phone. “Hold on.” She answered the call. “Yes, sir?”

Oakley cut her eyes at the men as she listened.
“Yes, sir. Thank you, Sir.”

She tucked the phone in her pocket. “You’re welcome to return to Lackland for the service.”

“I’d like to attend,” Gunner replied.

“Same here,” Riggs agreed.

“Count me and Charli in, if that’s permitted,” Grady added.

“It is.”

Oakley didn’t know if their interest was in honoring Birdman because he was part of a SEAL team, or they were supporting her. Maybe she just wasn’t thinking clearly at the moment. It was hard to hold it together when she had to attend a funeral. Having people around who knew her in her personal life made her feel a bit self-conscious.

She nodded. “I have a ride coming,” she directed her comment to Grady. “Can it set down on your land?”

“Helicopter?”

“Yep.”

“Sure, anywhere there’s no cattle or horses.”

“I’ll make sure of it.” She looked at Gunner. “Give me a ride to Grady’s?”

“Yep.”

“You can ride back with me and Charli,” Grady offered.

“I want to check on the pups and talk to Naomie about keeping an eye on them while I’m away.”

“Okay, ready to ride?”

“Yep.” She looked at the others. “Thanks. See you soon.”

Both men nodded, and she turned away with Gunner by her side. They were a good five miles down the road before Gunner ended the silence. “Tell me about a K9 funeral.”

“Pretty much the same as any other fallen soldier, except that all trained dogs on base attend.”

“How many is all?”

“It could be between fifty and several hundred. We have nearly nine hundred in various stages of training.”

“I’m guessing they each have a handler.”

“Until they’re seated at attention, the handlers assume a position behind all the dogs.”

“That must be something to see.”

“It is,” she agreed, wondering if the ceremony would affect him and if so, what would have the most impact on him.

“This is hard on you, isn’t it?”

“Because I’m a woman?” she turned and pinned him with a sharp gaze.

“Because you love them.”

His answer shamed her. “I’m sorry, Gun. Truly. That was out of line. I’m just – this is just a bad moment.”

“Because you love them,” he repeated.

“Yes.”

“Loving isn’t a weakness, Oakley. It’s a strength.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yep.”

She nodded and turned her head to stare out of the window. This day was chock full of surprises, and most of them had delivered an emotional wallop. She hoped there were no more to come. She wasn’t accustomed to an over-abundance of emotion, and right now her plate was overflowing.

And her emotional state of being wasn’t what deserved attention right now. Oakley dismissed thoughts about herself and turned her mind toward what did matter. Honoring a fallen friend.

Chapter Ten

It'd been a while since Gunner put on his dress uniform. Since the last funeral he attended. It almost made him hate putting it on, but then he reminded himself that every soldier knows death is looking for him or her, waiting to claim another soul. They accept that any moment can be their last.

And when that happens, the military pays its respects and reminds everyone that each life matters.

Now, as he placed the hat on his head, he wondered if Oakley felt the same. Her job today would be tough. He'd spoken with people at the service for his and Riggs' former teammates, and all of them spoke with respect and admiration for Birdman. He saved the ones who survived by literally scaling a wall and killing the man poised on the roof with the assault rifle.

The Chaplin spoke of the bravery of the men, and of the dog who saved the rest of them. Gunner saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes as Oakley listened, but she quickly blinked them away.

He'd hoped to fly to Texas with her, but she'd elected to take the flight home with Birdman's body. She said it was the last thing she could do for him.

Gunner didn't argue. She probably needed some time alone. He, Grady, and Riggs took an Airforce flight already scheduled, and were picked up at the airfield and driven to the hangar where the service would be held.

Everyone entered from the rear. The front hangar doors were open, giving a view of the plane with its cargo door open. Gunner assumed the dog's body was in the plane, along with Oakley.

To his surprise, he, Riggs, and Grady were given preferred positions with the base commander and

senior officers. There was no seating. Everyone stood. They waited as the hangar began to fill, every soldier present in their dress uniforms. Once everyone was assembled, handlers arrived with the K9's.

Gunner was stunned. Soldiers stood at attention, on the tarmac, row after row, column after column, and it was an impressive sight. But what was eerie was the hundreds of dogs who filed in behind a handler, took a position, and lay with legs crossed in front of them.

When attention was called, everyone snapped to, every dog sat heads up and alert, every set of eyes on the people exiting the plane. Oakley and three other officers carried a casket from the plane. They placed it at the head of the crowd. They carefully removed the flag, folded it, and Oakley tucked it under her arm as they raised the lid of the coffin.

Gunner saw the way Oakley's back straightened as she turned toward the coffin. Just as he saw her shudder, as she placed her hand on the still form in the coffin. She stayed that way for a moment, then turned to face the officers. They saluted her, and once she returned the salute, they turned and assumed a position behind her. Oakley came to attention and saluted the crowd.

Gunner had seen many military events, but he'd never seen anything like hundreds of dogs raise their right paw in a responding salute. It was almost disconcerting. Or maybe it was the way every set of canine eyes was on Oakley.

"Birdman came to us at only six weeks, not ever weaned due to the untimely death of his mother. He was small. So small," she paused, swallowed, and then continued. "All the other vets said he wouldn't make it. He'd be too weak, too little."

She looked around, and when her gaze fell in one direction, Gunner looked that way as well. Three men and two women nodded. "We proved them wrong. We

knew he had what it takes, even if they didn't believe. They said he was too rebellious, too reckless, and that he'd rather skateboard than train."

There was a chuckle from the assembly. "That part was true, in a fashion, and his love of skateboarding earned him the name Birdman, the nickname given to the famous skateboarder, Tony Hawk."

She smiled at the small group of handlers. "We used his talent for what it was. A gift. No one had the balance of Birdman. With a hand-up assist, he could scale a wall or climb a tree. I always believed if he had wings, he could have flown.

"I suppose now he has, and today we honor him, his service and devotion. Birdman, you will be forever missed, but never forgotten. You died a hero and deserve a hero's welcome in whatever life awaits you. I will always remember and love you, my brave boy. That I promise."

Gunner saw the tears that streamed down Oakley's face, despite her stoic expression and even the slight tremor of emotion when the first sounds of taps stilled all other sound.

When silence fell, she stepped forward and addressed the K9 unit.

"Hopper," she singled out the dog at the far-right end of the front row, using signing with her words. "To me."

The dog rose and trotted to her. As it did, she addressed the others. "Stand."

Every dog did as ordered, and when they were standing, she gave another command. "In line. To me."

Gunner noticed the motions of her hands that accompanied her verbal commands, and wondered which set of commands the dogs followed. They sure watched her unblinking and rapt.

Oakley stood at the foot of the casket. As each dog passed, it looked up at her. She put her hand on the side of its face, then gestured to the coffin. The dog immediately stepped over close enough to sniff the body. When Oakley said “return”, it stopped and returned to its place in line.

Gunner marveled at the obedience of the animals, and the look each of them gave Oakley. It was like the queen’s guard, being honored by the touch of their queen as they said goodbye to a fallen comrade.

When the final dog reassumed its place, Oakley looked out over their ranks, made a sign with one hand, and looked upward. A shiver shot down Gunner’s spine when every dog lifted its head and howled.

This was like something from ages past. Man, and beast, all united, all howling their loss to the heavens, all sharing that moment of grief. The air was thick with it, that bond that united the men, women and dogs who protected and served their country. They were all kin and kin grieve for every member they lose.

Gunner raised his head, closed his eyes, and let the sound become part of him. It was a surreal moment in many ways. He wasn’t a fanciful man, and most importantly dealt in what he could see, hear, or touch.

But there were moments when some ancient genetic switch got flipped inside him, and the energy of the world around him told a story voice could not. He felt it all and the most powerful energy there was devotion, courage, and loyalty. And most of all, an all-encompassing love.

Every animal with its head tilted skyward sang. Their voices blended, and to him it felt like standing on sanctified ground.

The return of silence was almost deafening. Gunner didn’t pay much attention to anything after that, but Oakley and the way she watched the dogs.

He'd be willing to bet that if asked, she could give you every dog's name and age.

She loved them. That was clear. And this death was no small thing for her. It hit her with as much force as he and Riggs losing a man they'd partnered with and depended on for years.

They'd all lost someone who mattered. She'd lost someone she raised and trained, an animal who was more than a weapon. Oakley genuinely loved the dogs. How she ended up with no family, but them was unknown, but that's the way it was for her.

He just hadn't realized until now how hard her job was. No, how hard her life was, because this was more than a job for her. These dogs were more. They were somehow an integral part of her life and owned a big piece of her heart. He didn't understand it, but then he didn't have all the pieces to the puzzle that was Oakley Rising Wolf.

At least not yet. But he would. In time.

Oakley waited until the hangar was empty aside from herself, Gunner, Riggs, and Grady. They walked over to where she stood, looking down at Birdman's body. Her hand stroked down his face, between his eyes and to his nose.

"He was an amazing being," she said as they stopped behind her.

"He was a hero," Gunner said, and when she glanced at him, added. "DJ wouldn't have survived had it not been for Birdman. Nor would Digger. He sacrificed himself to save them."

She nodded and swiped at her eyes. "Not making much of an impression here, am I?"

"Actually, I think you are," Riggs answered the question. "One thing Georgie's taught me is that it's okay to be me – whether it's being a soldier, a rancher,

a father, friend or lover, and it's okay to embrace all the emotions that go along with all the facets of myself.

“You feel deeply for all the dogs who fall under your command. That's what makes you a good leader, Oakey. You have heart.”

“And you're a kind man, Riggs. Now, I guess it's time for me to face the music and speak with the brass to see if I can use the rest of my leave now. That will leave me with only a few days once I return to base and officially end my career.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Gunner asked at the same time Grady said “I promise you won't regret—”

And before the sentence was out of his mouth, his, Riggs' and Gunner's phones all rang. It didn't take a psychic to figure out why. There was only one reason all of them would receive a call at the same time.

Something big had happened. Something bad. Bad enough, they were being recalled for active duty.

Riggs and Grady stepped away to answer. Gunner stood his ground, looked directed at her, and spoke into the phone. “Hale.”

His eyes narrowed fractionally before he spoke again. “Yes, sir.”

She waited until he pocketed his phone. “Do you know where they're sending you?”

“I do.”

“And you can't share that, I assume.”

“Correct.”

“Do you have to leave now?”

“I do.”

Oakley moved closer, put one hand on his chest, and looked up at him. “I want to see you again, Gun.”

“You will.”

“I mean in this life, big guy.”

“So do I,”

She nodded and reached up with her free hand, placed it behind his neck, and pulled him in for a kiss that lingered. Oakley wondered if it was her imagination or if this kiss felt like some kind of promise.

Gunner answered that question when the kiss ended. “Will you be here when I return?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. There are still things up in the air.”

“Don’t change your phone number, hot stuff.”

“Don’t forget it,” she countered.

“That won’t happen,” he cupped her face with both hands. “We have unfinished business; Major Rising Wolf, and I don’t like leaving things undone.”

“Nor do I.”

“Then I’ll be seeing you.”

“Is that a promise?”

“A guarantee,” his voice lost its teasing tone and became serious.

She nodded, suddenly not sure of her voice. It’d been only weeks they’d known one another. Was that long enough to fall in love with someone? And could she truly say she was in love with him if she was still afraid to speak her truth to him?

Oakley had no answer to those questions, but asking them provided clarity she desperately needed. She knew now what she would do, and it wasn’t what anyone would have guessed.

Not even herself.

PART TWO: CHAPTER ELEVEN

AND JUST LIKE THAT IT ALL CHANGED

“I hate this place,” Riggs grouched and readjusted his position.

“You hate why you’re here.” Gunner moved slightly to his right at a glimpse of motion in his periphery. “You hate being away from Georgie and Robby and the ranch. That’s a first, bruh. Missing someone the way you miss them. It changes everything.”

The silence that followed lasted a good five minutes. Gunner didn’t mind silence. He’d known Riggs too long not to be able to read what was going on with him. Right now, he was trying not to let his emotions get in the way of what he needed to do, or where his attention needed to be.

Not having your head fully in the game was one of the easiest ways to get yourself killed. Or someone else. They couldn’t afford that. Not from anyone. So far, Riggs had successfully pushed emotions aside when necessary. But nights like this one when you’re stuck on a roof, keeping watch and everything’s quiet, that’s when emotions and memories creep in, catching you unaware.

Gunner understood, after a fashion. He’d done a lot of thinking himself. About working for the Walker ranch and about Oakley. Mostly about Oakley. When they last spoke, she sounded different. He couldn’t pinpoint what the difference was, but he heard it in her voice.

It wasn’t until a few days ago that it came to him. She was on hold. The deal with Sanctuary had gone cold. He’d returned to his former life and answered the call of duty. Oakley understood that. She’d have done the same.

Destiny seemed to have other plans for her. It sure wasn't planned. But right after the SEAL's were called for duty, Mason came to see her at the Walker's ranch where she'd been offered space.

They had someone interested in funding the entire operation. She asked for a name, and he was reluctant to release that information. She said there was no deal without the info and thanked him for coming.

Oakley heard nothing for a week, then she got a call from Charlie. Thinking about it still made her angry with Mason, but also very confused.

She had just come in from the morning training session when her phone rang. Equipped with her ever present Air Pods in her ears, she answered as she went about the midday feeding ritual.

There was no way Oakley would feed her wolves dry dog food. She'd argued for two years over the food fed to the K9s in the program. Canines need meat. Sure, they benefit from the nutrients in some vegetables and fruit, but they were genetically designed to be carnivores.

Her phone rang and announced the caller. She answered, hoping it wasn't a call to deliver bad news. If something had happened to Grady, Charli would be the first to be contacted. Praying it wasn't that, she answered. "Hey, what's up?"

"I had a discussion with Mason the other day and got a chance to speak with Grady last night, so wanted to touch base with you if you have time."

"Always." She pointed to a spot on the kitchen floor where the wolves liked to lay and look out of the screen door. They plopped down and watched as she hacked up big chunks of beef, chicken, and organ meat.

"Mason said he has an investor, someone who wants to foot the entire bill."

“That’s what he told me.”

“And did he tell you who it is?”

“No. Did he tell you?”

“That’s why I’m calling,” Charli’s voice suddenly carried a note of something that made the hair on the back of Oakley’s neck stand on end.

“Tell me.”

“Remember the operation in Baghdad when—”

“Samir Abdul Amir.” Oakley didn’t bother to tamp down the scorn in her voice. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Hey, I get your bitterness, and like I’ve said a dozen times, had it been me, I’d have been pissed to the gills to have to give up special forces. But you know it was the right thing to do.”

Oakley knew that. Samir, if that was his real name, was not simply a terrorist, but a man who knew how to move weapons and money around the globe. Oakley and Charli had been part of an operation to stop the flow of weapons to Al-Qaida.

They were the second team sent in. The first disappeared. Oakley and Charli found one of the women, Claudia, still alive. Alive, but changed. She now belonged to Samir and was his to do with as he saw fit.

She blew the whistle on Oakley. If she’d ever met Charli, it would have also put a bullseye on Charli’s forehead as well. The first attempt to assassinate Samir failed. On the second try, he used Claudia, whom he’d taken as a wife, as a human shield.

As long as she lived, Oakley would never forget that moment. Samir had one arm wrapped around Claudia, his hand tight on her throat. In his free hand was a handgun, pointed at Claudia’s head.

He demanded Oakley surrender. She refused. He swore to kill Claudia. The way Oakley saw it, Claudia

was dead either way. Oakley couldn't let Samir escape and had no doubt he'd kill Claudia if it helped him get away.

She wouldn't let that happen. So, she took the shot. She did manage to wound Samir, but with the arrival of some of his followers, she had just enough time for another shot before she was forced to abandon the fight and escape.

Samir vowed he'd find and kill her. Oakley did what she thought was the honorable thing. She transferred out of the Ranger Division and took an appointment with the K9 division. No more special ops for her. She was now a liability.

But she never forgot the promise Samir made to her when he tried to kill her. "Is it Samir?"

"We don't know. I'd err on the side of caution and do whatever I could to find out before I offered the man a seat at the table."

"Same here. But if it is Samir..." she didn't need to finish the sentence. Charli knew as well as she that if Samir knew she was involved, his interest would be anything but magnanimous. It was a cover. A way to get close and fulfill his promise.

"Look, the truth is, I was thinking about going home for a while," she said to Charli.

"Home as in back to the reservation?"

"Yep."

"But I thought you hated it there?"

Oakley dismissed that question. It was irrelevant. What mattered was finding the safest place for the wolves. "It's home. I know the terrain. He doesn't. So, if it is Samir and he tries to come for me, I'll make sure he and whoever he brings with him learn how easy it is to get lost in the Wyoming wilderness."

She thought about her decision and added. “Listen, I know it’s a big ask, but I need you to keep this low key. Tell Grady. I’ll tell Gunner, for sure. But we don’t want Mason to know. We need to find out first, if he knows who Samir is and if he’s being duped.”

“I’ll talk to Grady about it then next time we speak. But when will you be leaving?”

“Today.”

“Today? Just like that?”

“Just like it. I need to say goodbye and thank the people here, and then I’ll load up my rig and hit the road.”

And just like that, life changed again. She left Texas that day and headed back to the place she was born. A reservation in Wyoming. Her family still owned land there, and she had inherited the place, so she had somewhere to live and somewhere to raise and train the wolves.

Oakley didn’t mention what made her leave Texas when she spoke with Gunner. His plate was full enough. He didn’t need to fret over her or the wolves’ safety, so she stuck to the positive, which actually helped her see it clearer.

“You can hear your own thoughts here, Gun. When you get out away from everyone, all the noise vanishes, and it’s like relearning to hear. Heck, sometimes I think the pups hear my thoughts. We’ll all be lying on the ground, watching the night sky, and suddenly we’re all compelled to look at one another. I wish I could describe the feelings it evokes. It’s—never mind, I get caught up.”

“I like hearing you get caught up,” he responded in a low, almost sleepy voice. “Keep talking. I need a dose of something good.”

“It is good. At least most of it. I wish you could be here, Gun. It’s not all pretty, but it’s not all ugly either.

It's mainly just sad, and damn I hate sad most of all, but there's always sad in life. So I am learning to accept the sad truth that if my people can't work together for the good of all, then they've lost the way. That's not the way of our people. We're a tribe. Or at least we were."

"Then what are you now?"

"Now? Now I don't know what we are. Or maybe I have it backwards, and this place is what it has always been. I just didn't have clarity of vision back then. Now I see all of it in clear detail, and I understand my original comment was just petty. I feel like I want to punish someone for the portion of this population that just doesn't give a damn.

"How do people degrade to that, Gun? How do we just stop caring or stop trying? How do we not fight for those who can't fight for themselves? Am I crazy, or isn't that what it's supposed to be? Everyone working together for the welfare of all?"

"Careful Major," he teased, to ease the energy. "You might start to sound like someone who misses active duty."

She laughed and agreed, but he wondered if that wasn't just her way of closing a door, she now felt she shouldn't have opened?

Damn, he hoped not. Oakley fascinated him. Not because she was smokin' hot, but because he'd never known anyone whose mind worked like hers. She had a unique way of seeing things, and sometimes it was frightening in its simplistic strategy.

He'd search for analogies, of ways to put into words what it felt like. A week ago, the team K9, Slick, gave him the answer. In the field, Slick obeyed commands, but he also had to possess the knowledge of how to operate independently, for the sake of the mission. Gunner paid attention to Slick's reactions, his expressions and body language.

That was it. He almost scoffed at the idea, but in his gut, he knew he was right. There were times when he watched Oakley scan the landscape. Her eyes took in the environment, moving ever so slowly as her gaze panned across the land. Inevitably, at some point her head would lift slightly and she'd smell the air. She behaved like her ancestors. Ancestors who held an affinity with the wolves, who based their society on their furred co-inhabitants.

She behaved like a canine. No, she behaved like wolf.

“Gun?”

Riggs voice alerted him to his lapse in focus, and he grunted, completely pissed at himself. Here he thought Riggs needed to put thoughts of home behind him until they could escape this hellhole, and he was just as guilty.

For the first time in his life, he had something he wanted to go home to. The problem was, he wasn't sure he could. So far, he always managed to screw things up with any woman he hooked up with, and he didn't do roommate with benefits. Color him odd, but he preferred to be *the* man in someone's life, not *one* of the men. That was way too much competition for a woman who hadn't chosen you as her man to begin with.

Riggs once told him, “It must be scary to have been born with your brain, because damn, Gun, that's some sad-ass shit, brother. I mean sad.”

The awful part about the whole thing was, Riggs was right. It was sad, and sad was the worst hell of all.

Oakley opened her eyes. Once her vision acclimated to the low light, she looked toward the window. It wouldn't be long before dawn. She loved

this time of the morning, watching the night give birth to a new day.

She climbed out of the bed, grabbed her jeans from the chair beside the window, and stepped into them as she looked out on the pre-dawn sky. The sun would be up in an hour. That gave her plenty of time to feed and water her horse, feed the wolf pups, and have a cup of coffee.

Two sets of bright eyes watched from the bed when she turned, and the sight brought a smile to her face. She never dreamed they'd end up here, where her journey in life began. Life on the reservation was hard when she was a child. As far as she could tell, it still was. Sure, a few had succeeded in leaving, building careers and lives elsewhere, but those who stayed were, by and large, no better off than they'd been when she was a child.

Some people who worked for the casino did okay, worked hard, saved, and created a better life for their families—better housing, food, clothing and medical care. Others used the sudden increase in income on drug, alcohol, sex, and gambling, and ended up worse off than when they started.

That wasn't something unique to a reservation. It was the same everywhere. Some people took advantage of opportunities to improve their lives and families. Others wasted and squandered, pandering to addictions.

Life is what you make of it. She remembered as clear as if it were yesterday that her grandmother told her that. For a long time, she argued against it, and refused to accept any validity of the statement.

The last conversation she had with her grandmother was about that sentence. At the time, she was with the Rangers and had seen things she'd just as soon forget. When people speak of the horrors of war, they label it correctly. Oakley was sickened by the brutality of humanity. Sure, she was guilty of being

brutal. When it came to a fight, she intended to survive and did what it took to ensure that.

Ending a life wasn't an act of honor. It was either a means of survival, or an act of war, and war was not always honorable. It was do or die. The only honor available came from the way you treated your victims. If you took pleasure in it, you were not someone with honor.

And without honor, you are nothing.

“So, sweet Oakley, what have you made of life?”

Oakley didn't have an answer. Her world was small in a sense, comprised of duty, dedication, and training. She had few civilian friends, spent most of her time around men, being treated like one and trained like one, and thus far, love was something reserved for family.

There was a time when she knew what it meant to love a man. Then she screwed up and wrecked both their lives. He walked out on her, and she never saw him again. That was okay. Seeing him would have just been a reminder of how badly she'd screwed up and what it had cost her.

She said as much to her grandmother, because Huttsi was the only person she could trust with that truth. Huttsi smiled and patted Oakley's hand. “And yet you've made a life for yourself. Is there something of value in that life?”

“A lot,” Oakley responded without having to consider. “I'm proud to serve, to help people who are being suppressed, enslaved or exterminated.”

“There is always a need for wolves, my child.”

“Wolves?”

“You, Oakley. Our family followed the wolves, molded our society in harmony with theirs, and learned from their ways. Some came to be friends with the wolves. Like your ancestors. There have been women

in every generation of our family who had the heart, strength, power, and intelligence of the wolves. These women could walk with the wolves, communicate with and understand.

“They are a breed of their own and are often called upon to save the tribe. You save tribes that are not your own, but one day you will be called upon to protect your tribe. When that day comes, I hope you not only answer the call, but allow that calling to bring something to your life that makes you know that the life you’ve made has worth and honor.”

“I hope you’re right, Huttsi.”

“When am I not?”

Oakley smiled as she remembered. She felt good about herself when she was with the Rangers, or as good as possible with her history. Then fate intervened, and she transferred to the K9 division. She had never regretted making the change.

This last change was unplanned, to say the least. She wasn’t sorry she decided to train the wolves, but would admit to being lonely. It had been so long since she was part of life here on the reservation that she almost felt like an outsider.

It would be different if Gunner was here.

Oakley didn’t know why thoughts like that kept popping into her mind. She and Gunner barely knew one another. No, that wasn’t true. She knew him in a way that defied language. When she looked into his eyes, she knew him, knew his heart.

And right or wrong, she had fallen for him.

She didn’t know if that love would ever be returned or acted upon and right now wasn’t the time to worry about it. No amount of worry would change whatever was to come.

Right now, she needed to focus on the reason she was here. The wolves. So far, things had gone

smoothly, so she couldn't complain, and yet at least once a day she experienced the resurgence of old grievances.

Living here seemed to remind her how much her people were devalued, how much was taken from them, and how they'd remained on the fringes of American culture, rather than being accepted as an integral part of the country and its citizenry.

Perhaps it would always be that way. The government would continue to take back native lands, labeling native beliefs as evil. Pagans, some people called them. Oakley snorted in disgust. Natives were deeply spiritual people, and their beliefs came with a lot less bloody history than white man.

Yet still, the natives were labeled something less than whites, non-essential members of society.

It disgusted her now as it had then, but she tried not to dwell on what she couldn't change. After all, according to the people she knew when she left the reservation with her father, she turned her back on her people and their ways.

Oakley understood how they could see it that way. It didn't matter what people thought. It seemed to her that everyone today was far more interested in pointing out differences and hating people for them than trying to find common ground.

She was done trying to fit in with the Natives or the whites. Oakley found a home with the military and felt she had a family. Today, she pushed back at that small doubt that maybe it'd been a mistake to retire.

Thanks to a ramped up military presence in the Middle East, the SEALs she knew in Cotton Creek, Gunner, Riggs, and Grady, had been gone from home for almost six months. Once a month, she received a phone call from Gunner, and each time, hearing his voice made her miss him more.

He couldn't talk about his assignment or even where he was. But he could tell her that Riggs was as sound as ever, and the foot prostheses didn't hamper him at all. She bet Riggs' family would be happy to hear that, but didn't feel it was her role to share the information.

There were things happening behind the scenes that made her uncomfortable. The K9 program at Sanctuary was on indefinite hold. Not until Grady returned for good would they pick it back up.

She'd spoken with Mason again about it last week, and he admitted to having misgivings about Samir. For his money, Samir wanted to be allowed to clone Oakley's wolves. That's it. Six hundred million dollars for the right to create an as yet undetermined clone of Ba'Cho and Nashoba.

Oakley was dead set against it.

"Besides, why would someone want to do that?" Mason had asked.

To create an army. That's what she believed, and once she'd spoken the words, it took root in Mason's mind. The thought caused both unease. Cloning was possible, but creating an army of clones was unlikely.

Wasn't it? She should ask Naomie about that. For herself, she would never agree to it. The wolves were listed as hers, had received all necessary vaccinations and inoculations, and were her responsibility.

She wouldn't allow them to be used as some experiment that might harm them or their future offspring.

Oakley refused the condition. Mason wasn't keen on it, but asked if they could negotiate some sort of middle ground. He asked her to think about it.

She had, and the answer was the same. Which probably meant the deal with Sanctuary was a dead duck. That disappointed her, but thanks to her pension,

she could afford to live in the old house she inherited from her father.

The place was in worse shape than she remembered. It needed a lot of work, but she couldn't justify spending her valuable funds on that when she needed fencing for the pups. If one of them got loose, there would be people gunning for it. Native and white. People sure seemed to love killing wolves.

It didn't surprise her that the whites felt that way, but it disappointed her that her own people were as eager to destroy them. The Natives in this country might like to preach their pride in the old ways and beliefs, but their actions rarely backed up their words.

That made her feel ashamed. Why had she assumed her people were better? More caring or noble? She didn't see much evidence of that, but fairness demanded she acknowledge their hardship. When life is hard, people become despondent and without hope. Maybe that's what she saw here.

Whatever the case, she wished she had somewhere else to go, somewhere that the pups would be safe, and she could train them without having to deal with other people.

The wolf pups yipped for her attention, and when she looked at them, two tails began to thump on the bed, and the faces directed her way wore expressions of happiness. She'd learned to read them in the time they'd been here, and they'd learned to read her. What a blessing they didn't realize the hatred directed toward them by the people here.

It was the pups who kept her feeling she'd made the right decision, retiring, and moving here. They were incredibly smart and easy to train, although both possessed a stubborn streak. She understood. They were, after all, born to run wild, and unaccustomed to being confined or forced to learn new behaviors.

It was the new behaviors that would keep them from becoming targets. Despite owning the deed to this land and house, there were people on the reservation who'd like nothing better than to see her leave. She was no longer one of them. She served the military complex of the whites.

Oakley dismissed those thoughts. Being upset about what other people thought proved no benefit to her life. She couldn't control or change the way they believed, and wouldn't waste her energy trying.

Yesterday she received a surprise call from her Aunt Grace. Today, she and the pups were headed to Blackstone Ranch, where Grace lived with her husband Clayton Blackstone.

Clayton's company, Blackstone Security, was interested in possibly funding her work with wolves. From what she knew of him, he was an honorable man, and probably the better bet when it came to partnering with someone. He just lacked something she wanted.

Gunner.

Damn, the man had taken up residence in her brain. How crazy was it that even after six months she was pining after a man she'd known for three weeks? Yet here she was, praying every night he was safe, and thinking about him every morning when she greeted the new day, wondering what sights he saw and if he was safe.

She'd never had this kind of feeling, this need for someone. No, that was a lie. She had it once. Until it was taken from her, and everyone she loved turned their backs on her. Everyone but Grace and her son Micah.

The saddest part was that she pretty much sided with the people who condemned her and declared her unfit to be here. Maybe they were right. It wasn't for her to say. All she knew was that when she was with Gunner and the wolf pups, she felt like she belonged.

Now she wondered if she was hanging onto a pipe dream. Gunner might not make it home alive, and even if he did, there was no guarantee he would want her. Separation dulls the emotions and dims the passions. Time changes everything.

The insistent yip pulled her back from those thoughts and turned her attention to the pups on the bed. “Okay, boys, who needs to go?”

There were eight paws on the floor before the words were out of her mouth. Oakley grinned and led the way to the door. No matter what the rest of the day brought, she had right now, and the moments she spent with her wolves were the best parts of her day.

With a smile, she grabbed her shoes, and within minutes, she and the pups were racing across the yard, headed for the wilderness beyond the confines of the small, fenced yard

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oakley fought back tears as she saw her aunt Grace standing on the front steps of the big lodge. Beside her stood a man Oakley assumed was Clayton Blackstone. He was an attractive man of indeterminate age. He might be in his fifties or sixties, she couldn't tell.

What she could tell was the love between he and Grace when they looked at one another. Clayton's arm went around her for a one-armed hug, and she leaned into it for a moment. Then she turned her attention to Oakley as her SUV came to a stop.

Oakley hadn't spent that much time around her aunt Grace. Her father was career Army, and once her mother died, she lived all over the world, wherever he was based. Oakley considered her childhood an excellent education in preparing her to deal with people of different cultures and beliefs, as well as teaching her how to stand on her own and be self-reliant.

She'd never admitted to Grace that she hated the time she spent on the reservation. Her mother was never happy, when her dad was home, all he and her mom did was argue, and the school never had books on topics that interested her. Heck, most of the kids could barely read.

As shamed as she was to admit it, when her dad had to take her with him, she had the best childhood ever, moving from one place to another with him, seeing more than just the United States. She lived in places all over the world. Each place taught her something new, and with each new experience, she became more self-reliant and more convinced about the decision she made when she was ten.

When she was old enough, she would join the Army like her dad. When she told him, he put his foot

down and said she would attend college. Once she had a degree, if she wanted to enlist, he'd wish her well.

Oakley argued she could go to college later. It wasn't until she was older, she realized that entering with a degree puts you on officer track. If she was like her dad and made it a career, that track would pay her more retirement.

It made sense, so that's what she did. Being something of an overachiever, she finished high school at age fifteen, and before she was twenty, she had a degree in veterinary medicine. When asked why she chose that field, she said she liked animals better than people.

In many ways, she still did.

Grace hurried to her, and Oakley took note of how beautiful she still was. Her hair was as dark and shiny as a raven, her skin unblemished, unwrinkled, and glowing. And her eyes, those warm pools of warm chocolate that saw everything, yet shone with love. Enough to bring tears to Oakley's eyes.

"Girl, you're a sight for sore eyes," Grace said as she hugged Oakley.

That embrace was the first feel of homecoming she'd experienced since she arrived, and she held on tight for a few moments. "I'm so glad to see you, Grace. You have no idea how much I need to feel the company of family."

"Then you're in the right place," Grace pulled back and swiped at her eyes, then gestured to Clayton.

He walked over and she made the introduction. "Clay, this is Oakley, my only niece, and decorated Major in the United States Army. Honored Army Ranger and head of the Army K9 training division."

"Retired," Oakley added, "and it's an honor to meet you, Mr. Blackstone. A lot of folks in Cotton

Creek sing your praises, most prominently, Russell Walker and his brother the President.”

“The Walkers are good folks,” he replied. “And it’s my honor to meet you, Oakley. Thank you for your service. I hear you left the military to pursue your own business?”

“Well, initially, I agreed to head up a K9 training program at Sanctuary in Cotton Creek. But with one of the owners, and others deployed to the Middle East, that’s been put on hold.”

“Couldn’t you have waited to retire?” Grace asked. “You could have stayed where you were, couldn’t you?”

“I could, except for one thing,” Oakley walked around to the back of the SUV and opened the back hatch. “I needed to take care of these guys.”

“Wolf pups?” Clayton asked.

“Gray wolves,” Oakley confirmed, noticing that the pups weren’t concerned or triggered by Clayton and Grace. “Come say hello, guys.”

Both pups edged cautiously to the opening, sniffed offered hands, and then wiggled their rears and yipped. At only six months, they had to keep their heads lowered to keep from bumping the ceiling of the vehicle.

Grace smiled as one of them got closer and let the pup sniff her face. When it licked her across the face, she giggled. “They’re adorable. But Oakley, do you know the danger of—”

“I do. They’re wolves, and wolves are apex predators, and people are scared of them. But you know they’re much more. Just look what they did for Yellowstone when they were reintroduced.”

“She’s right,” Clayton agreed. “And I’m interested in hearing your plans for these two. Why don’t we go to the house? Do you allow them inside?”

“I do. They’re well behaved.”

“Then let’s go in.”

“Sure.” She turned to the pups. “Ba’Cho, Nashoba. To me.” She signed their names and instruction to jump down.

Both pups hopped out of the vehicle, sat, and looked at her expectantly.

“What sign language is that?” Clayton asked.

“It was named the American Indian sign language in the 1930’s and made up of gestures similar in many tribes, then added to over the years.”

“How did you learn it?” Grace asked.

“Dad. It’s how we talked when we wanted privacy.”

“I wasn’t aware.”

Oakley shrugged. “I guess we kept it between us.”

“How did he learn?”

“He said he learned as a boy. Apparently, he tried to teach my mother, but she wasn’t interested. When she died, he got so quiet and always seemed so angry. I was scared of him for a while and didn’t know how to talk to him. So, I asked him to teach me.

“That’s what brought us back together. He taught the men who served beneath him, and later I used it with my Ranger team. Then later, I used it with the K9s. But these guys? They pick up so fast. It’s incredible how fast their minds work.”

“Well, let’s invite them in,” Clayton suggested.

“With me,” Oakley signed to them as she spoke.

They rose in perfect unison and fell into step, one on either side of her. Oakley followed Clayton and Grace to the house. Once inside, they led her to the kitchen and then onto the back porch.

Beyond was a vast stretch of lawn that terminated at a fence. “That pasture’s empty if you want to run them after that drive.”

“Thank you.” His consideration touched Oakley. “Come on, guys. Let’s go dance.”

She led the way, and as soon as they cleared the steps, she broke into a run. Both wolves did the same, but being much faster, they circled her, jumping, and yipping happily. Oakley opened the gate when they reached the fence, gestured them through, then entered and closed the gate.

Clayton and Grace moved to sit on the steps, watching as Oakley and the dogs entered the pasture. “Oh, Clay, look,” Grace raised one hand to her lips. “That looks just like—”

“Sadie and Belle,” he interrupted.

“Yes. Would you look at that?”

Sadie was Grace’s oldest friend. They grew up together. Sadie’s Grandmother accepted Grace as her own and taught her the ways of the wise women of their tribe, as she taught Sadie. She taught them their true nature, and how to recognize the nature of others.

Sadie could talk to animals. It appeared Oakley could as well. Clayton took Grace’s hand and gave it a squeeze, and they watched as Oakley spun, danced, leapt, and ran, with two wolves spinning, leaping, and circling her around the pasture. “You don’t think...”

Grace looked at him. She knew what he wondered. So did she. Was Oakley like Sadie? “She and Sadie aren’t related by birth. Oakley’s mother was my sister, Odette. She married a Cheyenne man from Montana, Oakley Rising Wolf.”

“And they gave their daughter his name?”

“Oakley is unisex, I guess. It means meadow of oaks, which I assume is where his people first called

home or recognized as familiar lands. And it fits. She's much more of his bloodline than her mother's."

"You mean because of that?" he gestured toward Oakley, dancing and playing with the wolves.

"She has an affinity with them. Always has. Once, when she was only four or five, one of old Earl Old Moose's wolf dogs got loose and people were terrified. He treated those creatures horribly, and they were vicious."

She looked out at Oakley. "My sister realized Oakley was missing and panicked. When we found her, she was in the forest, sitting on the ground beneath a tree, with that wolf dog laying on the ground with its head on her lap, looking every bit the trained lap dog.

"Of course, he didn't look like that when we reached them. Had it not been for Oakley, one of us might have been hurt. She just put her hand on him and said "Those are our friends, big buddy. Be nice."

"And?" Clayton asked.

"And he did. He sat and never growled or snapped as we asked Oakley to come home with us. He walked right beside her, and she insisted on taking him home. Her mother about had a fit. She was scared to death of the animal and didn't want it anywhere around them.

"She called her husband, Oakley, who was deployed somewhere. I don't know where, but he said to let his daughter decide because she knew the animal's heart."

Grace smiled at the memory. "He was right. Oakley had that wolf gentled by morning. It took a bit of doing, but thanks to Sadie's grandmother, Earl Old Moose agreed to sell them the wolf dog. He said the animal was mean as hell anyway and more trouble than he was worth.

"That was Oakley's first pet."

“And look at her now,” Clayton remarked. “I think she knows their hearts.”

“So do I.”

“And I want to hear more about her vision on this training program. She must have a reason for wanting it bad enough to give up a successful military career. As young as she is, she could have climbed that rank ladder, you know.”

“I do. But Oakley walks her own path. And you’re right, she does have a reason, but I want you to hear it from her.”

He nodded. “What do you think Sadie will think of her?”

“You mean is she like Sadie?”

Clayton shrugged. “It seems like the women from these parts come equipped with far more than the rest of us, so naturally it makes me curious.”

Grace grinned and gave him a kiss. “Have I told you today that I love you?”

“You can’t tell me enough, beautiful.”

She smiled and stood. “I think I’ll see if they will let me join the dance. Want to join?”

He shook his head. “No, but please don’t let that stop you.”

“Thanks,” she gave him another kiss and took off across the yard, calling out to Oakley.

Clayton watched as Oakley spoke to the wolves, and then they ran to meet Grace, greeting her like an old friend, leaping and yipping, circling her as she twirled around and danced.

He smiled at the sight, suddenly filled with certainty that Oakley and her wolves were going to be a catalyst for change. He had no clue what that change

would be, but was a hundred percent confident it would become clear.

And he fully intended to help fund and protect her and the wolves from whatever might try to stop them, because no matter how you present it, people are afraid of wolves and what humans fear they seek to destroy.

He had no doubt. If the wolves were destroyed, it would break Oakley. Clayton couldn't say why he believed that, only that he did. She and those wolves were linked in a way he didn't understand, but could certainly see.

And as a person with no family left alive other than Grace and her son, Oakley deserved to have someone guarding her back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oakley held the pups at attention for a few extra seconds, then made the motion for them to be at ease.

They were, without question, the most remarkable creatures she'd ever worked with. At eight months, they were probably at 80% of full size. Considering they already stood twenty-eight inches at the shoulder and were both an inch shy of six feet from tail tip to nose, that meant it was likely they'd reach thirty inches or more.

At present, they weighed eighty pounds, at full maturity it was in the realm of possibility they could weigh in at well over one hundred and twenty pounds. If asked to guess, she'd say Ba'Cho would end up being heavier and Nashoba, taller.

Most people couldn't tell them apart. Oakley had no problems with that. They were unique to her, but then she knew them, and it was the same with animals as people. Once you get to know someone, the way you view them is colored by your emotions—whether you like them.

Two sets of ears perked up a full three seconds before she heard the sound of the ATV. She turned her head and saw Judson Blackstone, Clay's oldest son, headed toward her. That brought a smile to her face and the dogs as well.

To their credit, they stayed seated. Their expressions and the swish and thump of their tails revealed their excitement. Oakley smiled at the sight. Ba'Cho and Nashoba loved Judson, and going on runs with him.

At first, Oakley accompanied them, unsure whether they would obey Judson. She still had a secret fear that nature would overcome nurture and training, and they'd take off, never to be seen again.

So, far they'd proven themselves trustworthy.

"Mind if I take the boys for a run?"

"I'm sure they'd love that, wouldn't you guys?"
She signed as she spoke.

An answering yip from each had her bending over to give each one a caress on the back of his neck.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Judson said. "Ivy said to tell you that Dad and Grace want to talk to you about something."

"Now?"

"I think so."

"Then I better head up. Will you bring them to the house when you're finished?"

"You know it."

"Thanks, Judson."

She watched as he started the ATV and gave the wolves the hands signs to accompany him. A second later, they were off. She watched for a couple of seconds, then turned and headed for the house.

The back screen door opened just as she reached the bottom of the steps. Ivy walked out, carrying her baby. "Good morning," she greeted Oakley with a cheerful voice and bright smile. "Did Jud find you?"

"He did."

"Good, they're inside. Go on it."

"You're not staying?"

"No, we have a few errands to run, and I need to check on one of the new foals before I go."

"Need a hand?"

"No, but thanks. I should be back before noon. Do you want to draw the blood for the next set of tests on the boys?"

“That’d be great. Thanks Ivy.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m enjoying learning from you. This project with Ba’Cho and Nashoba is unlike anything I’ve ever read about. I love being part of it, however small.”

“Your part is anything but small, and I am grateful. It’s vital I have an objective view, someone who can be impartial and go by the results in determining progress. I hope you’ll accept equal partnership for the research when we publish.”

“Are you serious? That would be amazing.”

“And well earned. Without you and everyone here, I wouldn’t have made nearly as much progress. I’m in your debt. All of you.”

“Nonsense. You’re family, and family helps family, it’s as simple as that.”

Oakley loved Ivy’s kind soul, and her brilliant mind and attention to detail. “Still, thank you. And text me when you’re on your way back, and I’ll have everything set up.”

“Super. Okay, see you soon.” She smiled down at the baby. “Can you wave bye?”

A gurgle and a smile had to do, and that was fine with Oakley. As cute as the baby was, she still wasn’t all that comfortable with infants or small children. After knocking off her shoes, then toeing them from her feet and placing them on the shoe rack beside the door, she entered the house.

Grace and Clay were sitting at the kitchen table with mugs of coffee and slices of pie on the table for three. “Have a seat,” Grace waved to the empty chair. “Is Jud taking the boys for a run?”

“Yes, and thank you,” she sat, then added. “For everything. This past week has been so productive, and Jud and Ivy are such a huge help. Even taking care of Jackie and working as many hours as she does, she’d

made time to help me with all the tests and record keeping, and—well, it's a lot and I realize how huge a gift that is. Doing it all on my own at the res, having to make a drive here or FedEx stuff to Naomie in Texas, really slows things and makes me concerned that someone might contest the chain of possession of the specimens and that could shoot the whole thing in the foot. Anyway, thank you. What you've done has been greatly appreciated.”

“And part of the reason we asked you to come sit with us,” Grace said and looked at Clayton.

Oakley lifted her cup to sip the strong brew, looking over its rim at Clayton. He smiled at her. “We've discussed it with the entire family, had a lengthy discussion with Naomie and Russell Walker, and decided to move ahead with becoming involved with the training project.

“What we'd like to do first is make the situation here permanent, for you and the wolves, that is. You spend a couple of weeks here, then go back to the res and they have to adapt to the new surroundings time and again. Not to mention the trouble that's been brewing over you having wolves on the reservation.”

Oakley looked at Grace. “You didn't mention that. Neither did Micah or Trish when I last spoke with them.”

“I didn't want to worry you, and once I told Clay, he came up with a solution. So, what do you say?”

Oakley wanted to say yes, she wanted to shout it. This place was perfect. They'd sent most of the cattle to the Montana ranch, leaving only about fifty cows and a dozen bulls. The horses were kept near the barn, while the barn used for vet services was near the foreman's home, Jud's, and Ivy's now.

The guest house was normally occupied by Sadie and her spouse, Leo, but at present they were in Virginia, visiting people Leo worked with, an

organization run by ex-FBI agents from the Behavioral Unit. They were due to return next week.

Oakley had been given a small cottage down by the lake, a good distance from the cattle and the horses. It was a nice place with the most beautiful view of the night sky she'd ever seen. She and the dogs sat out on the lake shore every evening, watching the stars appear. It was one of her favorite moments of the day.

And the most lonely, which it shouldn't have been with the wolves lying on the ground at her feet. The truth was, she missed Gunner. Speaking with him once a month only added to that feeling. She wanted him to be part of Ba'Cho and Nashoba's training and be accepted as part of their pack.

Now, it looked like that might not happen. Every time Gunner thought they might be sent home something else happened to keep them where they were. Oakley understood duty and knew Gunner would always honor his oath, but it was becoming clear that she couldn't forget him or stop wanting him to be part of her life.

Was that going to be another disappointment in life? If so, it sure would be a tough one to overcome. She wasn't accustomed to feeling this way, and now that she did, she didn't know how to stop.

"Oakley?" Grace's voice snapped her back to the moment.

"Sorry. That's incredibly generous, but I feel like I'm already a burden and don't want to be more."

"Don't ever say that" Clay's voice was uncustomarily harsh. "I apologize. But you need to know that you're not a burden. What you're attempting to do not only have merit but heart. You're trying to save a noble breed from becoming extinct like so many other species of life. I not only support that, but admire it and as I told you, want to help. So, say yes, Oakley. You're family. At least to us. Let us be that for you."

That nearly brought tears to her eyes. No one had wanted to be family with her since her dad died. She'd been alone for so long she didn't know what it felt like to be part of a family. Until she came here.

Now she had the chance to stay and something inside her wanted to scream yes before the offer was rescinded.

"I'd like that," she replied and looked at Grace. "A lot."

"Then it's settled. We'll help you get your things moved from the reservation and if you like the lake cottage, it's yours."

"Are you kidding, I love it. Thank you."

"No need for thanks, but there is one condition," Grace added.

Oakley's heart sank. Normally conditions screwed things up, but she had to respect them by hearing what they wanted. "Which is?"

"That you consider taking on a partner in training."

"I'd love to," she quickly responded. "But the person I want isn't available."

"Well, there's someone waiting at Vet Services to talk to you about that."

"Now?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you want me to save your pie for later?"

Oakley looked from Grace to Clayton and at his smile, she pushed back in her chair. "Well, I reckon so. At Vet Services?"

"Yes."

"If Jud returns before I get back, would you ask him to bring the boys there?"

"You know I will."

"Okay then, I guess I'll see you after a while."

“We’ll be right here,” Grace’s smile seemed somehow secretive, making Oakley wonder what she was going to find when she got to Vet Services. She almost wanted to back out. She’d love to have a partner, but not just anyone. She wanted Gunner.

And there was no guarantee that would ever happen, so she might as well pull up her big-girl panties and go meet whoever the person was Grace and Clay wanted her to work with.

She just hoped whoever it was, they loved the wolves. Otherwise, they were done before they started.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He understood why Jud loved it here. There was plenty of sky in Texas, a horizon that seemed to go on forever, and mile after mile of emptiness. This was different. Just as much sky, but the landscape beneath it was awe inspiring. He'd been through this part of the country but never spent much time here.

Back in the day, when he and Jud were assigned to the same team, he'd listened to Jud talk about his family and their ranches. The Blackstone family was what you might call old money. As far back as Jud could remember they were born into it. His family spent on land, buying up as much as they could to keep it from being developed and depleted.

It surprised Gunner when Jud retired from active duty. Then he met the reason. Ivy. Gunner was glad Jud found love, and now had a wife and a child. He'd never have imagined that, but seeing Jud today was like meeting a new man. One who smiled. A lot.

"So, you and Riggs ran back into the fire," Jud said as he escorted Gunner to the vet center.

"You're telling me you weren't tempted?"

Jud's grin was sheepish, which told Gunner the answer. "I'm happy where I am," Jud said.

"I can see why."

"How long're you gonna stick around?"

Gunner shrugged. "I reckon that depends on Oakley. I have two weeks."

"I hear ya, and just between us, according to Ivy, Oakley's been lonely. She mentioned something Oakley said about feeling like an intrusion on people like me and Ivy or dad and Grace."

"I can understand that."

"So, can I. That was me, once."

“But not today.”

“No, not today,” Jud smiled. “Okay, I’m gonna go check on the things and take the wolves for a run. I put them in the kennel while I tended to new foal. I’ll send Oakley your way. Just wait here.”

“Will do. Thanks, Jud.”

“It’s good to see you, Gunner.”

“Same here, bud.”

“See you later,” Jud started up the ATV and drove off, leaving Gunner watching the dust trail behind the vehicle.

He wandered around the building, checking things out and wondering if this was a good idea. Maybe he should have warned Oakley he was coming, or at least asked if she wanted him to visit. He’d let Riggs and Georgie convince him it was the thing to do.

It stood to reason that pretty soon he’d either have cause to thank them or decline ever taking their advice again. In the distance, he saw some cowboys driving horses toward the barn. He watched until the horses were in a paddock and then turned away to glance towards the house.

Gunner saw her long before she spotted him. He watched her walk, noticing the way she scanned the land around her, and even lifted her head once as if smelling something on the air. Surprisingly, she jerked her head around and looked in his direction.

His breath hitched a bit when her gaze found his. Even with the distance between them, her gaze carried a punch. In the next breath she launched herself into a run. He smiled as he watched her eat up the distance between them.

“You’re here!” She shouted as she drew within range. “You’re really here!”

She propelled herself through the air at him. Gunner caught her, let the momentum spin them around and then pulled her in close.

Oakley hung onto him. “God, you feel so good.”

The way she said it woke something inside him, a need he’d tried to suppress or ignore. The desire for someone who had that dept of emotion over being in your embrace. He wanted to be that man. For her.

“You’re here,” she put her hand on his face and then his chest when he set her down. “You’re here and you’re whole and –“she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight. “You’ll never know how happy I am to see you.”

“Oh, I think I have an idea,” he replied and then whispered. “This is what I wished for every day.”

That brought tears to her eyes, and when she pulled back to swipe at them, saw Gunner’s eyes widen. She turned and saw the wolves running toward them, their long legs eating up the distance, leaving Jud in their dust on the ATV.

Oakley watched with pride. Wolves are known as coursing predators, which means that as opposed to animals like tigers or lions that typically ambush, wolves take their prey on the run. Many people were unaware that wolves are among the best of all terrestrial endurance athletes. She and Ivy clocked Ba’Cho and Nashoba running flat out, and they registered forty-two miles an hour.

Right now, they were running full out and what a sight to see.

“Would you look at that,” Gunner released her and knelt on one knee, holding his arms out loosely to his sides as the wolves approached.

They stopped five feet away, sniffed the air, then moved closer. All at one their tails started to twitch, then wag, and shortly thereafter, their rear ends got into

the action. Within seconds they were wiggling, excited and all over Gunner, licking and rubbing against him.

Oakley didn't care that tears ran down her face as she watched. She had no doubt that Gunner was just here on leave. He'd be leaving soon, but right now, she had this and this was a moment right out of a dream for her.

The wolves remembered him. They were excited to sniff and rub against him, seek the touch of his hand. "They're magnificent," he looked up at Oakley who watched with a happy smile on her face.

"And so are you," she sank down to one knee in front of him, parking herself close. "God, it's good to see you, Gunner. I—"

He saw her expression morph into a look of uncertainty and filled the silence with a confession. "I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again, but I promised myself that if I did, I would tell you something."

"Then tell me," The touch of her hand as she placed it against the side of his face spoke as much as her words.

"This is it for me. Active duty, I mean. When I report back it will be to make things final."

"Why?" she seemed surprised, which he'd halfway expected. Walking away from who you've been for most of your life was more of a challenge than facing an enemy. At least when you face a physical enemy, it will be a battle not dissimilar to a hundred others you've fought, so your odds of survival are decent.

Life can stop your clock in a blink and without warning. And you have no control at all.

That had never mattered much to Gunner. He was a weapon of war, at least in his mind. That was his worth and he took pride in being the best he could be to continue earning his worth.

He'd always fight for survival, but if he fell, then so be it. He'd die serving something he believed in. That had to matter. To him. He didn't care what it meant to anyone else. Maybe he was lucky he didn't have any "back home", or anyone whose life would be affected by his death.

That way of thinking served him well. Until it didn't.

Which was right now. Right here, kneeling in the dirt and feeling pretty much like he was in a kind of natural cathedral or a sacred place.

The rising mountains, cascading pastures and rolling fields of grass, moved in accordance with the dictates of the elements, earth, fire, wind, and water. Taking only what is needed to survive and playing its role in the ecosystem of this land.

This was a place for truth, and sometimes speaking the truth was the most fearsome foe of all. Speaking the truth meant baring yourself, what's inside you, to someone else. Letting someone see you for who you are. All of it. Good and bad.

Gunner zeroed in tight on her eyes, locking his gaze to hers and holding fast until there was no need to hold. They were connected. He knew she was aware of their surroundings, as was he. Above the clouds drifted, providing breaks in the sunlight, creating shifting shadows that passed by like swirls of energy, riding the wind.

Something new appeared. Rising with the current was a song. Ba'Cho and Nashoba.

It was a singular experience. And perhaps one that should have given him a whisper of unease.

But it didn't and that told him everything he needed to know.

"You, them, us." He admitted, hoping it wasn't the wrong thing to do. "I want that. That's what I came to

tell you. If you don't want it, I'll go back to doing what I know how to do, or if Riggs calls it quits, I'll work for him or—”

He paused, searching her eyes for a sign. What he saw gave him the courage to continue. “I want you, Oakley. And them, and us. A life, or at least a chance to see if we can make one. I can start as friends if that's what you want, but I want you in my life and I want to be part of yours.

“And that's why I'm here. To ask you what I should do when my two weeks of leave ends.”

Her smile was a balm to his frazzled nerves. Damn he could face down a battalion of armed men easier than waiting these few seconds to discover if she was going to shoot him down.

His smile started to appear halfway through her sentence when she said, “If I'm lucky, you'll tell the Navy it's time for you to step into the next phase of your life and thank them for all you learned.”

“And then?”

“Then you come home to me,” she then looked at the wolves. “And them.”

“Where?”

“Home isn't a place, Gun, it's a who. So, you come home to us, and we'll get started on figuring out the where and what kind of life two smart strong people like us and two wolves can create.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

“Then kiss me. And remember, I've dreamed of this for six months big boy, so you better make it good.”

Gunner laughed, delighted by Oakley. “Well, damn, no pressure girl. I mean—”

He never finished the sentence or the thought. She kissed him and then there wasn't need to think of

anything else. This is what he survived for, what he wished for and now what he needed. He just had to prove to her that she needed something as well.

Him.

That was an admission he'd been so afraid of, and the one that now seemed like more of a lifeline than an encumbrance.

This last tour had slapped Gunner in the face, giving him a hard look at who he was and the shape of life to come. He'd suffered through the barrage of memories, good and bad, analyzed his reactions to every event that battered him, and tried to understand how they'd shaped him, if at all.

He saw himself, his strengths and weaknesses, his morality and humanity and honor. Gunner knew his sins, and would pay his penance, but of late, had found himself wondering if prayers had any effect on a man's life? Did the presence of prayer fuel a positive outcome for a person? Did a lack of prayer cast a dark pall upon a person's life?

Gunner asked himself all those questions and a hundred more, slicing deeper with each question until finally his secret was revealed. The thing he hid away, hoping it would never again have power over him.

Something had loosened the locks and freed the one thing that scared Gunner Hale. Love. Love had power he didn't have the muscle or brains to fight. Love could either give you a life of bliss or send you down the tunnel to hell.

Thus far, he'd not yet been freed from his sins of the past and had not yet made the full escape from hell. But he was trying and wished for redemption. Maybe he would have prayed, but he wasn't sure how to do that since he had no confidence his prayers were heard.

Until he had a conversation with Oakley, the last one they had before he deployed. He asked her if she

prayed, and her answer surprised him.

“Doesn’t everyone?” She turned her head from watching the sky to focusing fully on him. It was his last day before deployment and they chose to spend it outside, by a stream that ran through the Walker’s land. The wolf pups were exploring but staying close. It was already clear they saw Oakley as their alpha female.

He’d never imagined Oakley to be religious. First, because of her ethnicity. Surely, she would have held onto beliefs taught to her as a child. Or perhaps she was one of those Native children you read about, who were forced into Christian schools to pray the Indian out of them. Gunner had no clue if any of that was true, but it was an oft repeated tale.

“To God?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she smiled at him and looked toward the sky again. “How can you look around at the beauty of this world and not feel there’s something more. Something bigger and more powerful than we’ll ever be.

“It doesn’t matter to me who people pray to, or even if they do. A wish is nothing more than a prayer, right? And we all wish. So, maybe we all pray, too, giving life to those dreams and desires inside us and hoping the Universe attaches some of its energy to our wish, helping steer its path to manifestation.

”Calling it God is no different than calling it anything else. Mankind has invented a thousand Gods and will invent a thousand more. It’s how we build a sense of security for ourselves, something that protects us from what happens when we exhale our final breath. Something that keeps the demons of our sins at bay so that we can maintain and perform. Something to comfort us in our loneliness. There are a million reasons we wish or pray, and no method, language or process is superior to another.”

Gunner considered her words. She made sense, at least to him. And it eased a small scratch of worry he'd picked at since he started contemplating life and his presence in it.

He'd spent six months fighting to stay alive, achieve their objective and survive. It took that long to figure out. Gunner felt this decision was the most important of his life. Once he truly walked away from his life as a SEAL, everything would change. He'd change.

And he was willing to figure out how to live a civilian life and enjoy it. But he needed more than a job and roof over his head.

He needed redemption, a second chance, a chance to prove he was worthy of love. Equally as important, he needed to prove to Oakley that he would always defend and protect. He'd give his last breath to make sure her life and wolves would always be safe.

Right now, he felt like he'd reached a pivotal moment. All the soul searching, second-guessing and worry that he'd read things entirely wrong between them, got stirred all up with things from his past and he pretty much felt like an engine about to blow. There was an actual tingle in his nerves, and it was growing stronger.

It was time to take that leap of faith. Now or never.

Oakley felt a vibration run through Gunner, an energy she could only relate to as that quickening you feel throughout your mind and body the moment before you're thrust into battle and reality becomes hell with death waiting at every turn.

That energy didn't just accompany your entry into battle but escorted you on your exit as well. Once on safe ground, your body has to release all that dark

energy, all those battle chemicals surging through your adrenaline-fueled system.

Some people scream, pound something with their fists, kick or throw things, generally wreak havoc in order to deplete their energy. Others hold it until their minds register the ‘all’s clear’ and then the energy disperses like a carbonated beverage, bubbling and fizzing, tinglingly and electrifying every cell in you. Making you vibrate.

Gunner was the latter. Oakley pulled the wolves in close, creating a circle of four, each wolf touching each human, connecting them all. A curious energy seemed to spark to life and replicate as it traveled, uniting them.

“Can you feel it?” she asked in a low voice.

“What is it?” he asked, astonished that she felt it as well.

“It feels like hope,” Oakley whispered.

“Yes.” He recognized the feeling. It did feel like hope. But also, something else, something he was not quite brave enough to name.

“And maybe more,” he added, hesitant to commit to, or ask for more.

Oakley smiled. “Yes. It definitely feels like it may be more.”

Her kiss confirmed her words, and for the moment, that was enough for Gunner. Combat soldiers know how to let go. You never know when your last breath has been taken, so you don’t let your moments of humor, comfort, or happiness slide by. You grab hold and enjoy them for as long as they last. And that was what he would do. All the way to the moment he had to step on a transport and do what was necessary to finalize his retirement, walk away from that life, and with luck into another.

With her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Oakley hated feeling distracted. She's received two emails and a voice mail from someone interested in cloning the wolves. She responded to the emails that she wasn't interested and would direct further communication to her attorney.

This morning, a text appeared on her phone. She had no clue who it was from. The caller ID wasn't available. The text instructed her to think carefully before she said no. It stated that it was in her best interest to accept the deal. So many bad things can happen to animals.

She didn't want to admit it, but felt she knew who was making the offer and the not so veiled threats. Right now, what she'd like more than anything was to discuss it with Gunner. But he had to leave in a matter of days, and dumping this on him now would be unfair. She'd just have to pay attention and see what developed. Once Gunner was officially retired, she'd tell him everything.

Which left her with nothing to do right now, but stew on it. The sound of someone calling her name made her turn. She saw Ivy and let her eyes follow the direction Ivy was pointing.

The moment she spotted Gunner leaning on the gate rail, her heart seemed to thud in her chest. Actually, there were various physical reactions to the sight. She stood there and looked. How could you fall so crazy in love with someone you've spent so little time around? How was it possible to feel you know someone's heart so well when your time together has been so short?

She thought of their phone conversations, things that were said and things left unsaid. Neither of them dared to step onto the path of 'relationship, what if' –

what if we try this or that when you get back? What if, what if?

Oakley looked at the what ifs in terms of how to avoid injury, how to achieve an objective, and how to survive exiting the theatre. Those were the what ifs that dictated the potential success of any mission. She had the K9s trained with as much care as their human counterparts, perhaps more. They had to know how to follow orders without question, and how to lead when their handlers could no longer command.

Gunner understood that without her having to explain. He understood a lot when you got right down to it. His looks were deceptive. Big and mean. That's probably a standard reaction when an opponent faced Gunner. But he was a lot more than courage and muscle. He was brilliant.

It shocked her to discover that he continued to take classes from online accredited institutions, and was not far from the time when he'd face writing a doctoral dissertation. You'd never know it by just being around him. More times than not, he was quiet. He spoke when he had something to say.

Or when he teased or poked fun, and he enjoyed that.

All these things she'd learned about him made her see beneath the big and mean, and into the heart. She'd never been so scared in her life. Falling in love was monumental. And terrifying.

Oakley reminded herself that putting energy into the negative only makes it stronger. So she purposely changed her stream of thought. She recalled moments she and Gunner laughed or argued, the moments when he touched her and made her come apart, and the way he sometimes looked at her that took her breath.

What a miraculous thing. She saw him now, smiling at her as he leaned on the gate, both forearms propped on the rail. Oh, yeah, there it was, that

hormone storm he could evoke in her. Call it chemistry or whatever you want, but she knew all the way down to her cells that Gunner Hale was her mate.

She couldn't help wanting him. With newfound enthusiasm, she broke into a run.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gunner opened the truck door for Oakley, waited for her to get in, then closed it and walked around the front of the vehicle to get in behind the wheel. He sat there for a moment, basically letting things sink in.

He felt her hand on his arm and turned his head to look at her. “Was this a mistake?” she asked.

“No,” he shook his head. “No, it was the smart move. It’s just...”

“Not what I thought was on the agenda for the day either,” she admitted. “But Clay is right. Ba’Cho and Nashoba have to be registered with someone as an owner or guardian. Like it or not, animals are considered property.”

“I think I see the need for that,” he agreed. “If you want a say on how the animal lives, then you have to claim legal. I just didn’t expect to have kids today.”

Oakley laughed and gave his thigh a squeeze. “I am grateful you said yes, Gun. I need to know that if something happens to me, they’ll be protected.”

“I’m honored you asked, but surprised you didn’t ask someone you’ve known longer or had more history with. Maybe Charli.”

“No. Charli would be a bad choice.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s influenced by Grady, who may be influenced by Mason. And I think Mason may be pushing them in a direction they don’t want to go.”

“You mean that billionaire? Grady mentioned it before we headed home. Mason was pretty psyched about it. Is there a reason Grady should be against it?”

“That’s something I’ve been wanting to discuss with you, but honestly, I just wanted to wait until later.”

Gunner would put money on the topic being unpleasant in some manner, but he'd sure hear her out. "This has the ring of something I need to hear whether I want to or not."

"I don't know. I don't want to dump anything on you until I know there's something to merit attention."

Her consideration was appreciated, but he hated that she felt she had to protect him. "We have an hour's drive back to Clay's," he said, and started the truck. After checking his mirrors, he pulled out onto the street. "You might as well tell me now."

When she didn't respond, he added. "Unless you prefer I spend the next few weeks worrying about whatever it is, and not being able to be here."

"No, of course not."

"Then what it is?"

"Not a what. A who." She looked directly at him. "Samir Abdul Amir."

Something in her voice when she spoke the name told him this wasn't your garden variety, bad guy. This guy had done something that cost Oakley, and she hadn't moved on from it. "That sounds like the name of trouble."

"Yep."

"Trouble for who?"

"The people at Sanctuary, the Walkers, you, me."

That was a lot of people. Who or what connected all of them? The answer was obvious. Her. They all had met or had dealings with her. What the hell had she stepped in?

"And the trouble stems from...?" He cut her a look.

"Me." She didn't flinch from his question or his gaze.

“I feel like this tale has history.” It’s the only scenario that made sense, at least in the few seconds he’d had to consider it. She had to have been involved in something, sometime in the past, that had resurfaced and could now affect the people she named.

What made that theory fall short was that she included him. He wasn’t into anything, nor had he been involved in anything that would bring trouble to Riggs or his family. But he’d hear her out. Who knows, she might provide information that would alter that initial perception.

“It does,” she agreed.

“Then start at the beginning.”

Oakley did exactly that. She walked him through the entire operation when she and Charli faced Samir, and she killed his wife, and the aftermath. Then she told him about the offer Mason received.

Gunner stood corrected. What connected all of them was not something that should cause Oakley shame. She was a soldier in a combat situation. She acted in the manner she’d been trained. The timing of Samir’s reinforcements was unfortunate for her, but fortunate for Samir.

He lost his wife, but only lost vision in one eye from the bullet that grazed him. “I’m guessing he made a promise to find and kill you?” Gunner asked.

“Slowly and painfully.”

“And you’re sure it’s him?”

“How can I be?”

“I get it, but we’ll need confirmation.”

“I agree. But I’m a civilian now, and I don’t know anyone with the clout to get me the information I need. Clay offered, but I don’t want him tied up in something that could blow back on him or anyone in his family. You know?”

“I do. And I have a suggestion.”

She cut him a sharp look. “I can almost hear it in my head now. And I’m betting if you say it, I won’t like it. Damn, I shouldn’t have told you.”

“Why?” he felt insulted by her statement. What had he said that made her suddenly on the defensive? He wouldn’t get the answer by going in hot, so he tamped down his emotions. “What’s going on, Rising Wolf?”

“What’s going on is that we could be up against someone with a lot of resources in terms of following and financing. He can afford to bring an army. But if we encourage him to come after me, then we can end him once and for all, and no one will be in danger.”

“Except us, of course.”

“I said me, Gun.”

His eyes went hard and flinty, and she knew she was about to face an argument with him. “I know what you said, Oakley, but that’s not how we’re training the boys. We’re training them to work in teams, as one four-member team, or two, two-member teams. Or have you been training them in the three-member team while I’ve been asleep?”

“You know better than that. But you’ve got to report back in two days, and then who knows how long it will take before you can get back.”

“And you think this guy will move on you that fast?”

“I don’t know. That’s just it, this is all speculation. It’s in my gut, Gun. I know the man trying to work a deal with Mason is Samir. I swear to you I can feel it. What I don’t know is how much Mason might tell Samir about me. For example, where I am.”

Gunner’s foot was pressing the brake before his mind caught up with his actions. “You can’t stay here.”

“I know. But Mason thinks I’m at the reservation so —”

“No, he doesn’t. Clay spoke with him yesterday, remember? He made an offer of funding.”

“Are you sure? How did I not know—”

“You were in the surgical bay with Ivy, working to save that colt.”

“Oh, yes. Right. So, Clay spilled the beans on us being here?”

“Afraid so. I didn’t think anything about it until now.”

“I wouldn’t have either. But now, I can’t go back to the reservation. I sure can’t go back to Texas, so ...”

“I have an idea. A guy we served with. He was promoted and given his own team a few years after joining us, and now he’s retired and living on a big spread in Montana. He does a lot of search and rescue in Yellowstone and around the ski resorts in these parts. Let me call him and see if he’d put you up until we can get something more permanent arranged.”

“Okay, thanks. And please don’t mention this to Clay or Grace. I don’t want anyone upset.”

“I think we have to, honey. What if—”

“Samir comes looking for me?” she interrupted.

“You have a better idea?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. Give me a few minutes.”

“Take all the time you need. Until we get back to Clay’s.”

Oakley didn’t pay attention to his last remark. She was already caught up in figuring out what she would need and how she could make a spur of the moment plan work. It took the rest of the drive back, but when Gunner parked the truck and turned to her, she smiled.

“You have a plan to avoid being captured?”

“Nope,” she smiled. “If he comes, it’ll be me doing the hunting. Me and the wolves.”

“All alone?”

“If you’re not here.”

“So, you won’t take off unless he comes?”

“Right.”

“And if that happens and I’m not here, where do I look for you when I arrive?”

“We’ll work all that out. There’s a lot to do. We’ll need to plan to be off the grid for a while.”

“Living in the wild?” he asked. “Just us and two wolves?”

“Sound too rough for you?” Her words were probably meant as a tease, but her tone was full of uncertainty. Was she worried he’d turn her down? That thought mentally jolted him. Since he’d met her, he’d worried about the day she walked away from him. It’d never occurred to him that she’d worry about him taking a hike.

“Sounds like paradise.”

Oakley’s smile was like the sun emerging from a dark storm. “It sure does.”

It definitely sounded like paradise to Oakley. She’d love to try living like her ancestors, making the trek through the seasons and across the land, following the pack. Could she survive?

Of course. She knew how to hunt, what plants were safe to eat. Her father, and then the Army, taught her how to build emergency shelter, survive the cold, the storms and man.

Could she be happy living a nomadic life? She cut a look at Gunner, suddenly wondering what such a life would be. Would the day in and out togetherness, the

effort required to survive, provoke snipes, and dissatisfactions?

Maybe thinking she could live the way her ancestors did was a fantasy. No, there was no maybe to it. She couldn't, because society would no longer allow it. The only way to live such a life was for everyone who ever knew you to believe you're dead.

She wasn't ready for that. Heck, she didn't know what she was ready for. She dove into this thing because of the wolves, and she was still determined to continue working with them. But her motives for doing so had started to change.

That was largely due to Sadie Three Rivers, her Aunt Grace's best friend since birth. Meeting Sadie changed her, and Sadie did it with one question. "Do you, of all people, Oakley Rising Wolf, believe that turning the wolves of the nation into servants of the government is an act of salvation?"

To her shame, Oakley had never looked at it from that perspective. Now that she had, her objective seemed to be losing nobility. She wanted to work with the wolves, but how could she advocate for turning them into something they were never designed to be? Trained to do man's bidding.

That wasn't their purpose. And they deserved to live the way nature intended, as part of a pack. Had she turned her life upside down for something that was a bad idea? She had no doubt that some still thought it a noble cause, but she was no longer sure.

She thought about that every day. Was her goal a form of exploitation? She was ashamed to admit that it could be viewed that way. At the very least, it denied a breed of magnificent animals something integral to their well-being. Freedom.

Oakley's ideas started to change, and soon so did her goal. She knew how to stop Mason from getting into bed with Samir and protect the wolves at the same

time. Sometime soon, she would talk to Gunner about it. But not until she had her plan fully developed.

At present, she was in the initial phases of planning and saw two goals that had to be reached to achieve victory. First, help the wolves find and integrate with a pack, and second, make sure if Samir came into the wilderness looking for them, he could not hurt them, even if that meant he was never seen again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gunner looked in his rear view as he drove away. For the first time in his life, he wanted to put on brakes, turn around and go back. He didn't have to deploy, but he did have things to take care of before his retirement was official.

But damn, he didn't want to leave her.

How the hell did that happen? Gunner wasn't sure how to deal with it.

But then he wasn't sure how to deal with a lot of what was going on. Like yesterday. They took the wolves out before dawn and didn't return until twilight. Just as they set foot inside the gate, Oakley and both dogs froze. Not just stopped and looked around, but froze, lifted their heads, and sniffed the air.

They remained that way for close to a minute, a minute in which he listened, trying to discern what had them so transfixed. When Oakley suddenly snapped to, she looked at him. "There's someone here we need to meet."

"How do you know that?"

"The smell is different."

"Do you hear what you just said?"

"Yes."

"And you realize that makes you sound like one of them," he gestured toward the wolves.

She shrugged it off. "Hardly. But I wish I had their senses."

"Then how do you explain it?"

"I don't," she replied and added. "And don't give me that look. I don't have an explanation and I'm not concerned about it. I don't sense any danger, but more importantly, neither do they."

He glanced at the wolves, who were still as motionless as statues. “Are you concerned about their behavior?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She patted her left leg, and when the wolves looked at her, she signed to them as she spoke. “Main house. No bark. No bite.”

They started walking, and Gunner fell in step with Oakley. “No bark, no bite?”

“It gets the message across.”

“I hope.”

“Trust me, Gunner. I’d never intentionally steer you wrong. There’s someone at the main lodge, someone I’d like you to meet. Will you come with me?”

“Sure.”

Together, they and the wolves made their way to the main lodge. When they arrived, lights were on in the kitchen, family room, and on the back porch. The sounds of voices filtered in, making the wolves’ ears prick up.

Oakley stopped at the front steps. “Listen, before I introduce you, there’s something you need to know. Sadie and her mate, Leo, are – well, they’re not typical, I suppose is the best way to say it. She has –powers, paranormal, psychic, whatever you want to call it. Sadie is different. So is Leo.

“Both of them believe they have Fae blood and were parented by Fae, who were exiled here when the door between worlds was magically closed.”

“And you believe that?”

“Let’s just say I’m keeping an open mind. But Grace and Clay believe, so that lends some weight, I

guess.”

“Enough to have you buy into that tale?”

“Enough to have me be quiet and listen. Look, I know it seems nuts. Sometimes I think I took a dive off the dock of reality when these wolves came to us, but I’m not going to say it’s impossible. I’m just listening and learning. Besides, they both have contacts that might be of benefit.”

“That’s good enough for me. I don’t care what people believe. All that matters is how they conduct themselves and treat others.”

Oakley stopped, threw her arms around him, and kissed him. “You really are my hero, Gunner Hale. The one I dreamed of but never believed could be real.”

“That’s one hell of a compliment, hot stuff, but I’m far from a hero.”

“No, Gunner,” she looked up at him, and when their eyes met, she whispered. “You’re mine.”

“Then I’m a lucky man.”

The yip Nashoba gave, followed by an answering yip from Ba’Cho made them both smile. “Yes, we’re double lucky to have you,” Oakley said. “Now, let’s say hello before we get busy feeding these guys and getting clean.”

“Hmmm,” he pulled her in close and nuzzled her neck. “Getting clean sounds like fun.”

“Doesn’t it?” She gave in to the nuzzle and then the kiss that had her libido singing. “You know we could visit in the morning. I’ll call and ask if that will be okay.”

“Works for me.”

Oakley pulled out her phone and made the call. It didn’t take long. “Grace said that’s fine. So, come on, let’s head home.”

“Home.” Gunner said, and then looked at her. “It’s been a long time since I had one of those.”

“Me too, but you have one now if you want it.”

“You mean the who, not the where?”

“I do.”

“I want it.”

“Do you?”

“More than anything.”

“I love you, Gunner.”

He could tell she was as surprised she’d spoken the words, as he was to hear them. He also watched an expression of uncertainty take shape on her face. He got it. If it were him, he’d be wondering. Was it too soon for such words?

Gunner responded with honesty. “I didn’t know if I’d ever hear you say that.”

“And now that you have?”

“Now I’ll want to hear it all the time.”

“Don’t tease. I need to know where I stand with you, and while I hadn’t planned on this being the moment for figuring that out, I guess it is. So?”

Gunner forced back his own nervousness. It’d been a long time since he spoke the words he intended to say, and an old fear surfaced. That fear that if he admitted his feelings, life would take from him what he wanted in recompense for past mistakes.

But he couldn’t leave her hanging, and he wanted to beat that fear. So he manned up and made sure to look into her eyes when he spoke, so that she could see he spoke the truth. “I love you, Oakley. If you’ll be mine, I promise I’ll always be yours.” He gestured toward the wolves. “And theirs. I’ll protect you all with my life.”

“There you go again, being my hero.” Oakley smiled and looped her arms around his neck. “And just so you know, you had me at hello.”

“Then I am the luckiest man alive.” He kissed her, and in that kiss, he felt a promise. For the first time since he was tossed into hell, he thought he just might have a shot at happiness after all.

Now, he drove away, watching her in the mirror as she stood there, waving with the wolves flanking her on either side. It was a sight he hoped to see again soon, only next time it would be her welcoming him home.

If he was lucky.

Oakley felt it settled on her, a weight that wasn't there before. It happened as soon as Gunner's truck disappeared from view. “Come on,” she said to the wolves. “Let's walk.”

She had no destination or purpose, just a need to move, as if the increase in heart rate and blood flow would speed her attempts to dispel the gloom trying to suffocate her. It'd been so long since she allowed emotion to take a seat at the table, she was scared to trust it—her own feelings as well as his.

Oakley snorted in derision, and the wolves looked up at her with a question on their faces. “Sorry, it just doesn't make sense. I understand how to deal with fear, uncertainty, finding my way in unfamiliar territory, and generally depending on myself. This—this thing with Gunner, it's...”

She didn't even know how to finish the sentence. What was it? Was she not sure they were a match? Uncertain if she really loved him or not trusting that he felt that way about her? Was she scared he wouldn't return or scared she wouldn't want him to? Why were her emotions so mixed up?

Nashoba bumped his shoulder against her thigh, and she stopped to look at him. “Do you want to load all of them up and run away with them when you see them heading out on deployment?”

Oakley turned at the sound of the voice, shocked that neither wolf reached to the presence of another. They were as calm as if the woman coming toward them was family. Sadie smiled, walked over, rubbed both of the wolves on the neck, then smiled at Oakley.

“You look like a woman with problems.”

“Not a problem so much as...” Oakley wasn’t sure how to put it all into words. Her world felt off-kilter right now.

“Let me guess,” Sadie filled the silence when Oakley’s sentence trailed off. “You walked away from a career that could have seen you making General one day. You almost threw in with people who think your idea of an army of wolves is brilliant, and now you wonder why in the world you did any of that, because it sure as heck isn’t the life your wolves would choose.”

How odd that a sense of relief washed through her. She was glad someone saw it for what it was. It helped her see it clearer, and it solidified her resolve to see her new plan through. “I’m still going to help them,” she gestured toward Ba’Cho and Nashoba.

“How?”

“I’m going to help them rediscover their true nature and find a pack.”

“And what if they leave you?”

“Oh, they will,” Oakley said around the lump that formed in her throat. “Sooner or later, they will. But maybe, if I’m lucky and can find a place near their territory, they’ll pass through now and then.”

“And if not?”

“If they’re safe and living their best lives, then I’ll be content.”

“Will you?”

“I’ll try to be.”

“Doing what, Oakley?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yet.” Sadie said.

“You think I’ll find my way?”

“Or it will find you.”

Oakley considered that, but remained silent. She had to start facing the reality of the choice she’d recently made. If she was lucky enough to succeed in what she wanted for the wolves, it was probable they’d return to the wild, and she’d never see them again.

Could she be happy with that? If she truly cared for them, she had to be. She had to give them the one thing denied to them. Their freedom.

“You’re probably right,” she finally said. “And I’ll face whatever comes, but first, I have to give them back what someone took when they robbed them of their mother and home. I have to help them find the place they belong.”

“And in doing so, find your place as well.”

Oakley stopped and stared at Sadie. “Do you believe that or are you just trying to make me feel better?”

“There’s a lot left for you to do, Oakley. You and your warrior, Gunner. You have talents and abilities. Look how well the K9s respond to you, how devoted they are. You train them to fight. Why not train them to be protectors or companions? Dogs are the most giving animals on the planet. Show them how to give in a way that saves lives, or at least makes life more tolerable.

Teach them how to make people feel safe, loved, or happy.”

“Do you think they possess that skill?”

Sadie laughed and gestured to the wolves. “You tell me, wolf mama.”

“Yeah,” Oakley smiled. “In spades.”

“Well, there you go, Rising Wolf. This isn’t the end of your career, life, or identity. It’s the beginning. The only question is, what do you want?”

And just like that, everything changed. Oakley actually stopped in her tracks, staring at Sadie. She supposed her brand of soul searching had been leading her in this direction. She knew she wanted Gunner, and for a time thought she wanted to train the wolves for working with humans.

Then Sadie walked into her life and asked the right questions. Questions that made Oakley step back from her original stance and consider things from another perspective. From the point of view of the creatures she claimed to be dedicated to protecting.

Why couldn’t Gunner be here? She needed to talk to him. Badly.

“I’m not sure I have a cogent position on that yet. I know I want the wolves protected, and not just these, but everyone on this continent. I know I want to experience a life outside the military, with someone I love, and I know I want to do the right thing. But I also know that I will likely have to face an opponent, someone from my past who has a score to settle, and will seek to hurt me by hurting anyone and anything I love.

“So, there’s a good chance that what I want will come with a price that’s costly.”

“What cost is that?”

“The life I’ll take from someone determined to harm these wolves.”

“And will you? Take a life for them? Would you stand there and kill someone who pointed a gun at one of them?”

“You don’t want to put me to that test, Sadie. You may have powers, skills or whatever you call what you can do, but I have something you don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m trained to kill.” Oakley spoke the quiet part with strength, looking directly into Sadie’s eyes. “And I am good at it.”

“That’s troubling, Oakley.”

“Maybe. But it’s what we do as a people. We train some to sue for peace, to learn the art of diplomacy and negotiation. We train others to take by force what peace couldn’t accomplish. And most of all, we train our people how not to hesitate pulling a trigger to save the life of an innocent.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Sadie started walking again, this time a bit faster, as if eager to be done with the walk.

“I reckon I have to be. It’s what I’m trained to do.”

“But you’re trained to do more than that, Oakley.” Sadie glanced at her, and for a split second there seemed to be lights dancing in her eyes. Oakley blinked and passed it all as an option illusion created in the shifting between light and shadow as they walked.

“You’re a teacher, Oakley. You have an affinity with wolves, probably with all canines. It’s inherited from your line of people, your father’s people.”

“How do you know anything about my people?”

“I’m a writer, remember? I research and search. Sooner or later, the information comes to me.”

Oakley chuckled. “That was a masterful evasion, and it’s okay. Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. But then, that’s where we are right now, isn’t it? I made a decision based on selfish desires. I wanted to see if this kind of training could work. I didn’t think about the wolves. Well, I did, but in a manner that was self-centered. Now I am starting to see that if I move forward with this, it will put them in more danger. They will be hunted and caged, force-bred, and if people like my old enemy have their way, they will be cloned into an army.

“And then the gray wolves, as we know them, will cease to be what nature intended. And it will be my fault.”

She paused as the truth of her own words slammed into her. “So, what do I want? I want to prevent that from happening. I want to know that when I take these wolves into the wilderness, they will find their pack, and that’s where they’ll want to be.”

“And you?”

“And I’ll step back, give them total freedom, hoping every day they live long lives.

“Then what?”

Oakley shrugged. “Then I figure out what’s next.”

“And that will make you happy?”

“I guess I’ll find out when I get to that place.” The answer to that question was a bit more complicated than Oakley had words for. She had a lot to work out in her mind, a lot of soul searching to do, and a lot of preparation for the day when she released the wolves back into the wild for good.

She had to make sure everything she did was in the best interest of the wolves. And that Gunner was aware of the danger if Samir decided to move against her. She’d try her best to ensure that no one knew where to look for them. But if things went sideways and

someone did come after them, intended to trap or harm, she had to be there to make sure they never succeeded, and no one ever knew where and how they vanished.

The conversation with Sadie turned Oakley's thoughts to her next step. Go somewhere the people here didn't know about. No one could reveal anything about her or the wolves if they didn't know where she was. She thought of Gunner's friend and made up her mind that as soon as she was back at the cottage, she would call the man. Gunner told her during their last conversation that all she had to do was call Matt Brickman.

Now she felt she needed to make that call, because her gut told her she was about to enter a whole new chapter, and this one might prove more challenging than she imagined.

PART THREE: CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

YOU CAN ONLY FIGHT ONE WAR AT A TIME.

“Are you sure?” Oakley felt herself shift without conscious choice into combat mode, making her hyper aware of her surroundings. It was something that happened before battle. Now she felt the same sense of pending danger taking shape in her reality.

“Unfortunately,” Charli’s voice in her ear sounded eerily like Oakley’s. Clearly, the news had also put Charli on alert. “I just got off the phone with Mason. The mysterious investor wants to meet with him and the trainer in person and see the wolves for himself. If impressed, he has unlimited resources.”

“Did he tell Mason his name?”

“No.”

“Then how can you know it’s Samir?”

“Check your messages.”

Oakley pulled her phone from the thigh pocket of her pants and accessed the message feature. A breath hissed between her teeth when she saw the image displayed in Charli’s message.

“How did you get this?”

“Mason sent it to me.”

That didn’t make sense. As far as she knew, Mason wasn’t aware of the history between her, Charli, and Samir. Why would he send Charli a photo of him and Samir?

“Why?”

“I asked him to send it to me.”

“Hold on,” Oakley felt like she’d missed something. “Did you know Samir was coming to meet Mason?”

“No. Since Grady’s deployed, Mason has been dealing with all the Sanctuary stuff himself. Everyone was interested in potential investors, and Samir was the most interested of all.”

“I get that. What I don’t get is why is he here, in the states?”

“He’s trying to close a deal with Mason, but insists on meeting the famous K9 trainer and the wolves, and seeing the genetic evidence they are full blooded grey wolves.”

“He asked Mason for that?”

“Yes.”

“And what did Mason say?”

“He said he would contact the trainer, and as soon as they had a chance to speak, he’d be back in touch with Samir. He said Samir appeared angry or upset, perhaps he’s accustomed to getting what he wants when he wants it.

“Anyway, Mason asked Samir if they could have a photo, shaking hands to show their commitment toward establishing a strong relationship between potential partners. He sent me a copy because I’d asked him to get a photo.”

“And he didn’t want to know why?” Oakley hated being a persistent questioner, but in situations like this, details mattered.

“Oh, he wanted to know, and I told him I thought I might know him, if he was the man I thought.”

“Does Grady know?”

“No. I—never mind.”

“No, what?”

“Nothing. Personal shit. It’s not important.”

That statement hit was an almost tangible force, and Oakley immediately felt ashamed. She’d not

stopped to think Charli might be going through a hard time with Grady gone. She thought about Gunner a dozen times a day, hoping he was safe and wishing she could hear his voice. How must Charli feel?

Besides, Charli was her friend, and if something was going on that Charli needed help with, Oakley needed to be the friend who offered it. “Talk to me, Charli.”

“It’s just... did Gunner talk to you about what they’re doing over there?”

“Not a lot except it was wetwork, and he could no longer smell anything but the stench of death. I don’t know what their objective is, but whatever it is, the cost is high. It’s eroding them if you know what I mean.”

“I do, and that’s why I don’t want to add any worries about anything going on at home to Grady’s plate. Between you and me, I just want him home to stay.”

“You think Grady’s ready for that?”

“If you’d asked me a few weeks ago, I’d have said no, but now, yes. He’s already promised.”

“Wow. What brought on that sudden change?”

“Our baby.”

It took a moment for it to sink in. “Baby? Oh my god, Charli are you—”

“Pregnant. Yes.”

For the first time in the history of their relationship, they both literally squealed like girls. Oakley didn’t know where the hell that came from, only that it filled her with joy to think about Charli and Grady having a child.

“Charli, that’s fantastic. I’m happy for you and Grady. You’ll make great parents. And I don’t blame you for holding back on things that would cause him

stress. We both know they can't afford to be distracted."

"Thanks for understanding, but back to you. What will you do?"

"First, wait. See if Mason asks for a meeting. How fast he responds will tell us if Samir left or is still here. If he's here, then the wolves and I will disappear."

"To where?"

"Where we can't be found, and no one will think to look."

"But what if they do?"

"Then they'll be in for a fight."

There was a long moment of silence. "Let me come fight with you," Charli finally said.

"No."

"Why?"

"You're pregnant."

"I'm not that far along and—"

"Don't." Oakley barked the word, then blew out a breath. "I'm sorry."

"No, I am." Charli replied. "I never stopped to think."

"Nor should you. Like I told you a long time ago, always be your authentic self with me. That's the person I love, so don't stop being her."

"Thank you. That runs both ways, sister. Still, I should have thought."

"It's okay, Charli."

Both fell silent, although Oakley wasn't aware of Charli's quiet. She was caught up in a memory, one that had altered her life. Flashes of memory skipped through her mind.

All at once, her own heartbeat thundered in her ears. Her legs felt strangely numb, and she couldn't seem to do anything but stare at that damn plus symbol on the plastic device she held in one hand.

Pregnant. She was pregnant.

No. No, no, no, this couldn't be right. It couldn't. She was determined the test gave a false positive, so she went back for another test. Three days and a dozen tests later, and she accepted it. She was pregnant.

Oakley remembered that feeling, could feel the echo of it. Nothing had ever unnerved her that much. It took her two weeks to schedule leave, and she had to wait an additional week before she was on a plane headed home.

She and JC hadn't been together that long, around eight months. Oakley sure hadn't planned on getting pregnant. Heck, she didn't even want to be married, much less a mother. But here she was. What would JC say?

A whole lot as it turned out. And none of it is nice. He accused her of entrapment, the old Indian girl trying to snare a white man, have someone support her and her litter of brats.

Oakley never said another word. But she did hit him hard enough to have him fall like a redwood, and she left him unconscious on the floor. When she left, she stopped on base to speak with the MP's and let them know there was an unconscious man on the floor of her house, and she wanted him gone.

No one questioned or argued, the only bright spot in the whole miserable day. Oakley left wondering what she was going to do. She didn't want to be a mother. At least not yet. And certainly not alone.

But she couldn't abort the child. The baby was hers.

So, she returned to duty, hoping she'd figure out what to do before she started to show. It didn't turn out that way. She miscarried while deployed, and her boyfriend blamed her, accused her of deliberately killing their child. Even though they hadn't exchanged a word since the day she knocked him out, he tried to play the grieving father and tried to sue her, claiming she deliberately put herself and their child in harm's way.

He lost, and Oakley never saw or spoke to him again the day she won in court. But she didn't consider herself a winner. She lost a child, felt the pain and warm blood that flowed out of her, a small life winking out before it'd had time to fully spark to life.

She'd failed to do the one thing a mother should do. Protect her child.

Oakley vowed never to make that mistake again. She'd never have children, never marry, never be the cause of innocent blood spilling.

That's when she became the love'em and leave'em player. It was all she had to offer. All she wanted to give. Until she met Gunner. He changed her in many ways, some of which she was just beginning to realize.

She found herself asking "what would Gunner say?" or "what would Gunner do?" and not just now and then, but regularly. She talked to him in her head and dreamed of him. And right now, was going to take a page from his book.

Oakley was going to be the friend she should be to Charli. "I'll be okay. And baby comes first, so don't feel bad. Besides, Gunner promised he'll join me as soon as he's clear.

"Y'all have gone that far?"

"I love him."

Charli accepted that simple answer. "Okay then enough said. Get a burner. Today. I'll do the same and

call when I have it set up. You need someone you can contact. I can get word to Gunner or whatever you want. I can pass along your location to Gunner until he can join you.

”We’d already worked out a plan, but I can’t use it if I’m going to Gunner’s friend’s place. Maybe you can let him know that I called Matt and will be heading for Yellowstone from there.”

“You’re taking the wolves into the national park?”

“Well, the wolves saved it once. It’s time for the park to return the favor and welcome two of its children home.”

“Amen girl, okay, get going. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have things set up on my end.”

“Okay and thanks, Charli. I mean it. Just promise you’ll put yourself and that baby first. You have to protect it. Just like me and the wolves. They need us.”

“And that’s what they’ll get. Talk soon, my friend. Be safe.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oakley put off telling Grace and Clay about the situation. She needed to speak with Gunner's friend, Matt Brickman, first. She didn't know why she was just standing there, stalling. After the conversation with Charli, she should be on red alert, slinging stuff into her truck, ready to head for parts unknown.

The truth was, she would have been if Gunner were with her. For a woman who'd spent most of her life in combat or commanding others, she sure had come to depend on Gunner's input and perceptions.

She trusted him. Not only that, but she also felt her chances of success were improved if he were with her. He wasn't just smart, but one of the military's elites, strong and lethal.

But he wasn't here, and she needed to set her plan into motion before Samir decided to come after her. With a jet, he could be in the area in a matter of hours. She needed to be gone before he made that decision.

So, she placed the call. It rang a half dozen times, then went to voicemail. "Hey, it's Matt. Leave a message."

His greeting brought a ghost of a smile to her face. He didn't waste words. "Hi. This is Major Oakley Rising Wolf. Sorry. Retired. Gunner Hale said I could call you. If you could give me a call back, it'd be greatly appreciated. Thank you."

"Okay," she glanced at the wolves as she pocketed her phone. "Let's get our gear together."

Considering that all she could take with her into the park was what she could carry on her back, she had to choose wisely. They could find fresh water, but would be forced to hunt for food. Which meant she'd need to cook it. A campfire and a spit. The spit was

easy enough. She asked Clay if she could snag a piece of metal from the supply barn.

A backpack water container might be wise if their trek took them away from water sources for a day. She had one in her gear. Aside from that, she packed a pair of socks, underwear, and a spare t-shirt, along with a wool blanket she could roll and affix to her pack. She looked around, trying to decide what else to take.

Weapons. She needed weapons, and for that she'd have to ask Jud. Oakley wasted no time searching for him. As luck would have it, she found him at the main house. Oakley knocked on the back porch door and heard Grace.

“Girl, I told you, there's no need to knock.”

“Manners,” Oakley entered, and then smiled when Grace chuckled and slid a pan of biscuits from the oven. “Did my mother drill that into you as well?”

“You know she did.”

“Well, good manners never go to waste.” Grace set the pan on the cooling rack and turned to look at Oakley. Her smile vanished. “What's wrong? Has something happened?”

“Yes. I have to take the wolves and leave.”

“Why?”

“Because they're likely to be in danger here.”

“Why?”

“Because an old enemy wants to even a score with me, and I think the people at Sanctuary in Texas just unknowingly revealed where I am.”

“We can protect you, Oakley. And them.”

“No. You can't. This enemy won't come alone, and he'll come armed. He means to kill me, Grace, and take the wolves. If he can't have them, then he'll order them killed and he'll kill anyone who gets in his way.”

“What did you do to this person?” Grace asked and poured herself a cup of coffee. “Want one?”

“No, thanks.” Coffee would just jack her up more, and that was the last thing she needed.

“Then come sit and tell me everything.”

“Ba’Cho, Nashoba,” she said, and then gestured. “Sit. Wait.”

They waited until she sat, then took positions on either side of her facing the door. Grace sat and sipped from her cup. “Okay, spill.”

Just as Oakley opened her mouth to tell Grace what had happened, her phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket. One look had he glancing at Grace. “I’m sorry, I have to take this.”

“Okay.”

Oakley stood and stepped out onto the porch, answering the call. “Mr. Brickman?”

“Matt.”

“Thanks, Matt.”

“Gun said you might call. What can I do for you Major?”

“Oakley, please. I wanted to ask how familiar you are with Yellowstone.”

“Very. I do a lot of search and rescue for the park and lead wilderness treks in the spring and summer. Not to mention having played there most of my life, why?”

“Well enough to help me locate a wolf pack?”

“A—a wolf pack? May I ask why?”

“I need to deliver something to them.”

“What?”

“Wolves.”

There was a long pause. “Okay, I never would have guessed that, and when we meet, I’d like to hear the backstory of this move, but for now, where do you want to meet and when?”

“Tomorrow. As early as possible. Text me a location near the park and how long it’ll take you to get there. Give me the time necessary for the drive, and I’ll call when I’m there, so you won’t have to wait.”

“How about you call me when you get to this location I’m about to text. You have to reach this point no matter which direction you’re coming from. That’s just ten minutes from me. This way, we’ll arrive at close to the same time.”

“That’s extremely thoughtful. I appreciate your help, Matt.”

“Any friend of Gunner’s...”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that. Thanks again. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Oakley crammed her phone to her pocket and turned toward the door. There sat Nashoba and Ba’Cho, watching through the screen. “It’s okay, boys,” she stopped and knelt to give them attention after reentering the house.

“Problem?” Grace asked.

“Help.” Oakley stood and reclaimed her seat. Without preamble, she summarized the events that led Samir to come after her.

“So, did he know about the wolves all along?”

“No. I don’t think so. He may have been keeping tabs on me in case he ever got the chance to kill me, but I think it was Mason who clued him in on my location. Not out of malice, but ignorance. But the result is the same. I have to protect the wolves.”

Footsteps on the back porch elicited the thump of tails on the floor, indication the arrival of a friend. Jud opened the door a moment later. “Hey, what are you ladies up to?”

“I need weapons,” Oakley announced.

“What kind and how many?”

“Do you have a compound bow?”

“I do.”

“I need one of those, a couple of handguns and a sniper rifle.”

“Going hunting for...”

“Evil.”

He and Grace blinked in surprise. “Pardon?” Jud asked.

“Someone wants to kill me and take the wolves. An old enemy. I spoke with a friend of Gunners, Matt Brickman.”

“Yeah, I know Matt. Good man, but why call him?”

“Because no one is aware I know him or even of him, and he can help.”

“With what?”

There it was the question. What exactly was her plan? “Save the wolves,” she restated what she thought was obvious.

“I thought you already did that.”

“So did I, then the Sanctuary deal revealed my whereabouts to Samir, and now he wants my wolves.”

“So, you’re just going to run away?”

“No. But I will take these guys somewhere they can be what they were meant to be, and live as they were meant to. My original idea was so flawed, it’s embarrassing. It’s enough that we train dogs to do this

kind of work, deliberately putting them in harm's way. If my plan went through and proved successful, it would destroy the wolves. They'd be hunted, captured, and made into slaves for the government. Not only the wolves would suffer. So would the environment.

“But not as much as the wolves.”

Jud smiled. “You're a remarkable woman, Oakley. I respect and support your decision and know Ivy will as well.”

“As will Clay and I,” Grace added. “Is there anything you need from us?”

“Yes, can you tell Jud, Clay and Ivy the backstory, and make Clay promise to put on extra security until...” she almost said *until I've killed Samir*, but caught herself in time and said instead. “Until it's over and I know there's no danger.”

“How will you know when that is?” Grace asked.

This time Oakley didn't hold back. “When Samir is dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Oakley checked the coordinates before slowing to make the turn onto what looked like an old dirt road, perhaps an abandoned logging road. Half a mile later, she saw the truck parked on the road. On the tailgate sat a man, a handsome man.

She stopped, turned off the truck and climbed out, calling to the man through the opened window of the door. “Matt Brickman?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He slid off the tailgate.

“One second,” she held up a hand, then opened the back door. Both wolves sat at attention on the seat, ears perked and alert.

“Friend,” she said and signed. “Friends.”

Both wolves gave a soft woof, the equivalent of an acknowledgement, then hopped out of the truck. Oakley closed both the truck doors and started toward Matt, with a wolf on either side of her.

“Now there’s something you don’t see every day,” Matt commented. “And tell me I don’t need to get back in my truck.”

“No, you’re safe,” she replied and stopped about ten feet from him. “This is Ba’Cho and Nashoba. They’re not yet a year old, but are about eighty-percent grown. They need a pack.”

“Or a pack needs them,” he commented. “Those are some magnificent wolves. Gunner said you wanted to train them like you trained K9s in the service?”

“I did,” she agreed, but because she needed to be honest, added. “But then I realized what a disservice that would be to all wolves. They’d been hunted, exploited, and all for nothing. Look what they did for the park after being hunted to near extinction, and then brought back. They saved in ways man never could.

“These guys need to integrate with a pack, to learn to be part of one and possibly one day lead. Whatever the case, they deserve freedom from being caged or hunted. I’m going to stay with them until we find a pack and they are accepted.”

“And what keeps the pack from doing away with you, Major Rising Wolf?”

“Who said they would try?”

“Do you believe you can walk with wolves, ma’am?”

She smiled and gestured to the wolves. “You tell me.”

“Good point. Okay, what do you want from me?”

“Is this the place to begin our trek into Yellowstone?”

“It is.” His gaze flitted to the wolves. “Okay, if I grab a map from the truck?”

“Of course. They won’t hurt you.” Oakley signed to the wolves as she commanded, “Friend. Say hello.”

Oakley gave credit to Matt. Aside from his eyes opening a bit wider, he didn’t give away any other signs of nervousness. Oakley walked over to him with the dogs and offered her hand. “Friend.”

Matt shook her hand, and when he released it, Nashoba moved closer and sniffed his hand. Matt remained motionless until Nashoba and then Ba’Cho smelled him. When their tails wagged, he smiled. “This is amazing. I’ve never been this close to a gray wolf.”

“How did you know that was their breed?”

“Yellowstone. I tracked a pack last winter for the park to prove they’d not left and hadn’t harmed cattle.”

“I think you may have just graduated from helpful friend to hero,” she smiled. “Grab your map.”

He did and spread it out on the tailgate of the truck. “Here’s where we are,” his index finger came down onto the map, then moved his finger to the right. “Here’s where you’ll have the most luck finding wolves – in the northern range, likely Lamar Valley.”

“Why there?”

Matt shrugged. “You’ll have to ask the wolves, Alpha mama. Four of Yellowstone’s eight wolf packs, the Junction Butte, the 8 Mile, the Rescue Creek and the Lapita Lake packs are found in this area.”

“Then it’s a good place to start. I need to hide my truck. Any suggestions on that?”

“Yeah, let me get one of the hands from the ranch to ride back over here with me later on and drive it back to the ranch. I hear from Gunner that he plans to join you in the park once the Navy cuts him loose.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a phone?”

“I do, but I won’t use it.”

“Why?”

“Can’t risk giving away my position. Besides, we have a system we worked out. With your help, I’ll draw a map of how we’ll conduct our search pattern. You can help me figure out the time it’ll take to get from one point to another. Then I’ll draw it, and when you speak with him, arrange to give him the map, and he’ll find me.”

“You sound mighty sure.”

“I am.”

“Why? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Because he’s Gunner, and if he says he’ll do a thing, only death or imprisonment will stop him.”

“Amen to that, sister. Okay, let’s get busy so you can get on your way. Draw yourself a simplified map,

and I'll mark this one for Gun. The best bet is to follow the shoreline here, around the lake. If you look here," he put his finger on a point on the map. "There's good cover here, some small outcroppings to give you some protection at night."

"Sounds good," she agreed, and they worked to devise a route and mark it on the map. She drew a fairly accurate, but much smaller representation on a piece of paper she had in her pocket, contained in a small plastic bag. "All he'll need to know is where the wolves and I entered the park."

"Exactly."

It took fifteen more minutes to finish marking the map for Gunner and drawing her own. Once complete, she refolded the paper and returned it to the small Ziplock bag, which she stuffed into one of the pockets of her camo pants.

"I appreciate your help, Matt."

"My pleasure. One more question. Have you ever had to survive in his kind of climate?"

She chuckled. "I grew up on the res in Wyoming and spent a decade with the Rangers. This will literally be a walk in the park."

Matt grinned. "Gun's a lucky man."

"I don't know so much about that, but I do know he's a damn fine one. And I think maybe you rank right up there with him. Again, my thanks."

"You bet." He shook her hand. "Stay alive."

"That's the goal."

The look he gave her said he didn't quite believe that quick quip, so she added. "Along with a few other things."

"I won't ask."

"Smart man. Okay, time to get loaded up."

“I’ll leave you to it. Are you sure I can’t leave you some supplies, a sat phone or something?”

“We’ll be okay, but thanks. Oh, here are the keys to the truck.”

“Thanks. I hope to see you again, Oakley.”

“Same here.”

With that, Matt got into his truck, made a three-point turn, and headed back to the main road. Oakley strapped on her weapons holsters, draped her rifle diagonally on her back, and then slung her pack on her back.

“Okay, guys, let’s do it,” she looked at the wolves, who sat patiently waiting.

They reacted by bounding to their feet. It was time to start the most important journey of their lives. The one that led them to their own kind and the place they belonged.

She just hoped she wasn’t leading them to their doom instead. There was no guarantee they would be accepted by a pack. They might be challenged, forbidden entry, or even hurt by the alphas of the pack. They might be spotted and shot by a frightened or hate-filled hunter, eager to brag about killing a great grey wolf.

Please don’t let that happen. She prayed. If she could help them find a pack who would accept them, they’d vanish into the forest, and Samir nor anyone else seeking to exploit them would be unable to find them.

Most people would consider that statement a hopeful boast, but Oakley believed it because she knew something they didn’t. Ba’Cho and Nashoba were, in all likelihood, fierce fighters, but they were also trained—trained to do things in an unexpected manner from the typical behavior of wolves.

They knew how to think like the woman who trained them. Which meant they knew how men fight

and hunt. And knowing that offered them an advantage, to not simply evade whoever came after them, but eliminate them entirely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gunner thanked the man who picked him up just outside of town and gave him a ride to the entrance of the Brickman ranch. He hitched his pack up more securely on his shoulder and headed down the long drive.

His conversation with Charli kept playing in his head, and with each repetition his anger grew. Since Oakley vanished, the man, Samir, who wanted to supposedly invest in the wolf training program, had demanded to meet her and have the wolves medically inspected.

The only way Charli managed to talk Mason out of agreeing to the demands was to tell him the story of what happened to her and Oakley, and the mission that ended up with Samir's wife dead.

Mason swore to cut all ties with Samir. Charli tried to reach Oakley to tell her, but her phone went straight to voice mail. That didn't surprise her or Gunner. Oakley wouldn't take her phone with her, not even the burner. She couldn't take the chance that someone could triangulate her position.

What concerned everyone was that Samir didn't protest Mason's exit from the deal. Everyone's bet was on him trying to find Oakley himself so he could take the wolves from her. Charli thought Oakley was safe. There was never any discussion on where she'd go besides Wyoming, so if Samir went looking, he'd probably start at Clayton Blackstone's place.

Having served with Jud and knowing the strengths of the Blackstone empire, Gunner had no doubt that the people on the Blackstone ranch would be equipped to protect their own. What worried him was the off chance that Samir would find someone who'd know just enough to point him in Matt's direction, and thus put Matt's family and Oakley in potential danger.

Gunner would have preferred to speak with Oakley about discussing it with Matt, but that was off the table, so he'd have to use his own judgment, and that told him to inform Matt and his family of the potential danger.

He noticed a rider on a horse headed his way. It wasn't long before he could see the rider clearly, and that brought a smile to his face. Matt Brickman was a stand-up guy, one hell of a SEAL and a good friend.

"Look what the cat dragged up," Matt said as he reached Gunner. He dismounted, and they met in a handshake that turned into a back pounding hug. "Damn, Gun, have you gotten bigger?"

"Not much."

Matt smiled. "Hey, man, that lady of yours? Holy cow. She's something. And man, those wolves look at her like she's their Alpha Queen."

"She is."

Matt's laugh cut short when Gunner remained serious. "For real?"

"They understand her," Gunner replied. "Or maybe it's that she understands them. She has – she has a kinship of sorts with canines, wild or domestic."

"That's not typical, is it?" Matt took hold of the horses' reins and turned it. "There's a room fixed for you if you want to stay the night and head out tomorrow."

"How long has she been gone?" Gunner had asked that question of everyone he'd spoken with about Oakley, and thus far, no one was certain. Jud Blackstone told him when she left their place in Wyoming. That's all his family knew.

"Since the day she arrived. We arranged to meet near the park. She asked me to have someone hide her truck, then grabbed her stuff, and headed out with the wolves."

Gunner nodded. How like Oakley. She wouldn't waste time for comfort or pleasantries. She might be retired from the military, but still had that 'get to it' attitude. With the safety of her wolves at stake, he didn't imagine she'd waste a moment.

"Then I reckon that's what I should do. Can you give me directions to where you left her?"

"I can do better than that. I'll drive you."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Is there anything you need before you go after her?"

"A weapon."

Matt grinned. "That I've got you covered on. What are you thinking?"

"Show me what you've got."

"All righty then."

Matt talked about people they knew, asked questions about Gunner's deployment and now retirement, and kept the conversation alive. Gunner tried to be engaged. God knew he owed Matt a huge favor for this, but his mind was caught up in the note he carried in his pocket.

When he arrived at his cottage on the Walker Ranch, he found a note taped to the bathroom mirror. He pulled it free from the mirror and headed for his bedroom before he finished reading.

Well, here we are, big guy, headed out on a mission. He's coming, Gunner, and he means to end me and take the wolves. I can't let that happen, but I also don't have the right to ask you to fight this war. You have your own, and that needs to come first. It seems we both have wars to complete to walk free in the future.

I really screwed up, Gun. I should have gone after him and never let Samir live, but I did, and now it's

fine that he wants to get even, but not that he wants to breed, clone, and basically subjugate the entire wolf breed. He has to be stopped, and if he comes after me, he'll have a fight on his hands—one I can't let him win.

There's nothing I want more than you here with us, but doesn't it make me a selfish woman to ask you to risk your life in a war you never were part of? I don't know. I wish I did. I'll stick to the plan we devised, but please know that I don't expect you to take up the fight. I'll be forever in your debt if you do, but if you don't, it won't change the fact that I love you.

That note struck home. He had been fighting a losing battle in a war that started when he was a kid, a war he would never win, because those who warred against him were all dead and gone, and you can't fight a ghost.

But this fight for the wolves, for Oakley, was real. He wasn't a boastful man, but Gunner knew himself to be good at what he did. He'd been a SEAL most of his life and understood war. He was fully aware that this war was different. He wasn't operating under orders, didn't have to observe any rules. He had one purpose—to destroy all enemies who sought to harm or kill the woman he loved and her wolves.

So, he reckoned he'd chosen his war. The war to save Oakley.

That thought brought a sense of calm that eased him as much physically as emotionally. Now he could be free of the encumbrances of uncertainty and doubts, and get to work doing what he'd been trained to do.

By the time that decision became fixed, they'd reached the barn. Matt handed the horse off to a hand with a kind thanks for seeing to its needs, and then gestured to Gunner. "Come on."

Gunner followed him to the lodge where the family lived. "Dad and Rylee are in town right now."

“It’s hard to believe your dad got married.”

“Tell me about it,” Matt agreed, then gestured.
“Back here.”

He led Gunner to a room that was clearly an office. On the opposite wall was a door. Gunner expected it to be a closet and it was. Of sorts. Behind the door was a room. A weapon’s locker.

“It’s kinda like a wet dream, huh?” Matt quipped.

“Kind of,” Gunner agreed, already trying to decide what would be the best choice of weaponry.

“I bet you’re trying to decide what to choose,” Matt surprised Gunner. “Yeah, I saw the look. But as one SEAL to another, I’d suggest you take what you’re most skilled and comfortable with—which, with you, would be all of them, but that’s a lot to haul around the mountains.”

Gunner recognized Matt was ribbing him and smirked. “I’d have to agree.”

“Can I also recommend you take a SAT phone with you? Worst case scenario, someone gets hurt. Seriously hurt. It’ll bring you help.”

“Good point and recommendation taken. Anything else?”

“Just one more thing,” Matt walked over to a storage rack and slid a small case off one of the shelves. “This thing can take wind and rain and is a real workhorse. The way I see it, you’re days behind Oakley, wherever she’s headed. This will help you search.”

“Kind of like looking for a needle in a haystack, isn’t it boss?”

“Not if you know what to look for.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, it’s not that you are apt to spot her, but you are apt to figure out where she’s been, or which she might be because of the wildlife. Think about it. Everything is afraid of humans, and wolves are apex predators. When they’re in an area, wildlife scatters, gets out of range. So, if you spent a little time above the trees high enough, you’ll spot the presence or absence of wildlife. Either one carries a clue.”

Gunner was impressed. “Smart. The Navy teach you that?”

“Naw,” Matt shook his head. “Search and rescue. When minutes count, you need to play every angle open to you, use all the clues, and hope like hell you’re on track and on time.”

“I heard that,” Gunner agreed and stuck out his hand for the case. When Matt handed it to him, he nodded. “Not too heavy it will weigh me down.”

“Gun, you’d have to be carrying a water buffalo to weigh you down.”

“I’m not *that* big.”

“Yeah, right and- oh, wait, I have one other important thing for you. Oakley and I mapped out a route, and she marked how far she wanted to travel each day. They’ll walk for a day, looking for signs of wolves. If they see anything, they’ll hang around for a day to see if they are still in the area. If they are not, Oakley and her wolves will move on.” He went to the desk and opened the top drawer. When he returned, he handed a map to Gunner.

“She marked her destinations on the map.”

“What did she base this path on?”

“My observations. I’ve been working with environmental groups for a while, and with wolf activists. I fly the park at least twice a month, looking for packs, and we’ve identified eight. Four of them are active in the areas Oakley hopes to pass through.”

“Smart.”

“She’s something,” Matt commented.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Well, when do you plan on heading out?”

“Is now too soon?”

“Not for me, but are you sure you don’t want a good meal and a night in a decent bed before you head out.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then let’s load up and get on the road.”

Gunner gave no argument to that. The sooner he was in Yellowstone, the closer he was to finding Oakley and her wolves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Oakley shifted, then rolled over on her side on the hard ground, seeking a more comfortable position. When it didn't work, she grumbled and opened her eyes. Everything froze. Her movements, her breath, and she almost felt like her heart had skipped a beat. How was she suddenly standing and where was she?

She stood in the center of a valley. Training kicked in, reminding her to survey the area, so that's what she did. She looked around, trying to determine where she was. To her right, left and behind, were mountains in the distance, a natural barrier that protected the valley on three sides. Before her was open land – a long narrow valley that stretched on as far as she could see.

Thick growth of trees protected the sides, along with less steep or high hills and outcroppings. The moon shone from behind her, barely halfway visible over the mountains. The shadows cast by the range of peaks were long at present, but she knew that would change. Their length would stretch as the moon's position in the sky changed, and then, when the moon was no longer visible, the shadows would vanish, and the land would take on a whole new look.

It was beautiful. The only thing that could make it more perfect, at least for her, would be wildlife. Safe, protected, healthy wildlife. As if in answer to that wish, animals started to come into view, appearing as from a mist she couldn't see.

Oakley marveled at the number and variety of animals that lined the edge of the valley, watching and waiting. But for what?

She felt it before seeing. A presence. No, a multitude. And then they appeared. Wolves. Oakley couldn't believe how many there were. Was this possible? More than likely, it was a creation of her

mind, a wish. If she could create a utopia, it would look like this.

Oakley wasn't a woman taken with flights of fantasy, so never for a moment assumed what she experienced was part of her physical world. This was something else, something different.

It was like a lucid dream.

"That didn't take long."

She recognized the voice and turned her head to see Sadie Three Rivers standing beside her. With Sadie was a beautiful blonde woman, younger than Sadie, but bearing a strong family resemblance.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, and who is that?" she gestured toward the blond woman.

"I'm Eliana, Sadie's daughter."

"Why are you here?"

"Because you called."

Oakley opened her mouth to refute that statement, but stopped. This was a dream. Let it go where it wanted. Maybe there was something to be learned.

"You're wise, Oakley." Sadie smiled and looked out over the land. "You know this must be saved, and know that you can't do it alone. But there are those who will assist you in your quest, if asked."

"Who?"

"Us."

"Who is us?"

"The Fae," Eliana said.

Oakley smiled. "I'm not sure my people believe in the Fae."

"No?" Sadie smiled. "Interesting. I spent time in the Appalachian Mountains when I was young, fell in

love with a Cherokee man, and learned about their beliefs from him and his father.

“As I learned it, the Nunnehi are an immortal race of spirit people in Cherokee mythology. In the Cherokee language, Nunnehi means “the People Who Live Anywhere”, but it’s commonly translated as “The People Who Live Forever”, or more simply, “the Immortals.”

“The Cherokee, I was told, believed the Nunnehi were a kind of supernatural human being. And I don’t mean a ghost or nature spirit. No, they are distinct from those supernatural creatures. They became known as “Little People” and if you learn about them, their ways, and their abilities, you realize they are the Cherokee equivalent of the Fae from European folklore.”

Oakley deferred to Sadie. “Well, I can’t argue with that. But why would a race of supernatural beings want to help me do something I have no clue how to do? “

Sadie’s smile was kind, not condescending or placating. Kind. It was a sensation as much as a visual expression, and Oakley felt momentarily bathed in it.

“You want to preserve them, to stop the extinction of this breed, and I suspect, if given the opportunity, many more. They can help.”

“How?”

Sadie looked out over the land, raised her right hand, and made a small wave, just one swipe. With the motion of her hand, all wildlife vanished.

Oakley’s heart leapt in her chest, fear jumping to the forefront, carrying on its back, anger. “What have you done? Bring them back!”

“Wow,” Eliana breathed, and when Sadie glanced at her, added. “She really is the alpha, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Sadie agreed and turned her attention to Oakley. “They’re not gone, Oakley. They’re simply

hidden. If you want to see them, then see through the veil. Call your children.”

“How?”

“That’s up to you, you’re the Alpha.”

This dream was taking a turn that was not just strange, but like something out of a fairytale or myth. Why was she dreaming this?

And what do you have to lose by playing along? Her inner self asked.

“Fine.” She looked out at the land. “Show yourself.”

For a split second, her breath caught in her throat, and her heart gave another lurch. There they were. She jerked her head around toward Sadie. “What kind of dream is this? What am I supposed to make of this? Is my mind giving me an impossible solution, one that gives me what I want, or –” she jolted to a stop and for a few seconds, just stood there.

Finally, she asked the question that hammered at her. “Am I dead?”

Both women laughed. “Far from it, Oakley. You’re here to lay claim to your name.”

“My name?”

“Oakley Rising Wolf – the wolf rises in the meadow of oaks. Look around you Oakley. A circle of oaks.”

“There are other trees, too.”

“Yes but look closer. The oaks dominate here. It is in their shadow life seeks respite in the heat, it is at their base, in the shelter of their branches life gathers for shelter from storms. The oaks protect.”

“In a meadow of oaks,” Oakley whispered. “But what does it mean, really?”

“It means it’s your time, Oakley. Time to rise and claim your destiny.”

Oakley’s thoughts immediately turned to Gunner. Was it her fate to have to walk away from him? She didn’t think she could do that any easier than she could walk away from the wolves.

“Every alpha needs a mate, Oakley.”

Sadie’s voice sounded further away, prompting Oakley to look her way. Sadie and Eliana were fading from view, both smiling.

And in the next moment, Oakley woke to find the wolves sitting there, watching, and waiting. She looked at the sky. Soon it would be dawn, and time to start another day. The only thing different about today was the dream.

What the heck did it mean? Maybe nothing. Maybe her mind was just conjuring up anything it could to comfort or strengthen her. Whatever the case, she had a mission, and since she was awake, she might as well get up and get to it.

Get to it. That thought evoked an image. Gunner. If she could have anything right now, he’d be here with her. The need for him to be there was so strong it shocked her. She’d never needed anyone for safety, security or reassurance, so why was Gunner being with her so vital?

To her great surprise, the wolves looked at her at the exact same moment, and she realized they knew the answer as well as she. It was no longer a possibility, something to explore or think about. Gunner had taken her heart.

Oakley might have pondered that had there not been an interruption to the quiet. Gunshots. But from where? She followed the direction the wolves looked. Whoever it was, if they had a gun, they were a danger to the wolves. Which meant it was time to pick up the

pace and find a safe perch to hunker down and observe for a while to see if there were more shots and whether there were people trying to track her.

The sun had yet to crest the horizon when Clay met up with Jed at the barn. “What’s this?” Jud gestured toward the driveway.

Clay turned his attention in the same direction. “You tell me. We’re not expecting anyone, particularly not before daybreak. Should we be concerned?”

“Well, someone’s here and it looks like they brought their family. Or a posse. Do you think that’s the guy Gunner talked about? The one looking for Oakley and the wolves?”

“That’s a distinct possibility from the looks of the vehicles.”

Jud snorted in disdain. “Well, you don’t see folks around here driving around a fleet of Cadillacs, flanking a limo big enough for a hot tub.”

“Indeed, you do not,” Clay agreed. “Let’s head up to the lodge.”

Jud whistled, and when one of the hands looked in his direction, Jud motioned him over. “We have to go to the lodge. Go tell Rick that we have company, so put the plan in motion.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jud and Clay started walking, falling in behind the line of cars, a dozen in all. By the time Jud and Clay reached the lodge, eleven vehicles had a dark-suited man outside each front door.

“Can I help you?” Clay asked when they were within speaking distance of the first car in line.

The man standing by the driver’s door spoke into what appeared to be thin air. Jud and Clay had already noticed the comm unit in each man’s ear. A few

seconds passed, and the front passenger door of the center limo opened. A muscular, tall man got up and walked around the rear of the car, looking around. He opened the rear passenger door, and a man exited the car.

“It’s him,” Jud said under his breath.

“How can you be sure?”

“When she shot him, he was granted a miracle. It lodged in his eye socket. He lost an eye but kept his life.”

“Then let’s wish them a pleasant journey and send them on their way.” Clayton took a step forward as the man walked to them.

“Mr. Blackstone?”

“Who’s asking?” Clay wasn’t friendly or rude, just indifferent.

“Samir Abdul Amir,” Samir replied.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for a friend who may have passed this way. A woman. Oakley Rising Wolf. I’m in the midst of a negotiation with her.”

“For what?” Jud asked. Already he felt twitchy, the kind of twitchy you get when you’re facing a viper who’s trying to wear the face of friendship.

“Interestingly, a pair of wolves.”

“Wolves?” Clay pinned Samir with a hard look. “Well, it’s clear you’re not from around here, so let me save you some time and aggravation. It’s illegal to own a pure blood wolf in the United States. They’re classified as an endangered and regulated species, so it’d be wise to forego purchasing anything from that woman. She’ll either get you killed or arrested for breaking a federal law, and then, you just might end up in jail.”

“Nonsense,” Samir chuckled in an arrogant manner. “My country will ensure I am granted diplomatic immunity. I am untouchable.”

“Not here,” Jud’s voice was deep and carried more than a hint of menace.

“Is that so?” Samir shrugged. “I assumed there were laws to protect the innocent.”

“Oh, there are,” Clay agreed with a smile cold enough to cast a chill. “But you’re not dealing with the country, sir. You’re in Wyoming, and here, we don’t take kindly to people showing up wanting to steal anything from this place, including its wildlife. So, I suggest you get in your cars, turn around and go home. There’s nothing for you here.”

“I merely—” Samir was cut short by Jud.

“Leave.”

“Or?” Samir smiled as he snapped his fingers. Almost instantaneously, every man standing at every car pulled a weapon.

Jud laughed. “Amateurs.” He whistled, and from all around them men rose from where they were hidden in tall grass, behind a rock, a tree, or a water trough. They held weapons as well, only theirs were not handguns. They were high-powered rifles that could leave an exit wound the size of a grapefruit.

Jud then looked at Samir. “You were saying?”

“You would not kill me. All of us,” he gestured toward his men. “You’d surely be imprisoned.”

“You can’t be charged for murder if there’s no body. Anything else?”

For a moment Jud thought Samir would buck up, but that was only a flash of fire in his eyes. Then he backed down and away, bowing in a thoroughly mocking manner, just a slight bend from the waist as he

stepped back, arms spread but low, beside his hips like someone making a magnanimous gesture of goodwill.

Jud didn't believe that was the man's intent. He simply didn't want to be killed. He and Clay watched as Samir returned to his vehicle, his men got into theirs, and the entire parade began to leave.

Once they were gone, Jud and Clay looked at one another. "What now?" Clay asked.

"I'm going to give Gunner a call and let him know they showed up."

"And I'm going to beef up security here and at the place in Montana," Clay said. "And ask Grace to call her son, Micah, and ask him to keep an eye open for strangers on the reservation."

"Good idea. Okay, I'll catch up with you later."

Jud turned, pulling out his phone. The call to Gunner went straight to voice mail. That meant Gunner was either still in theater or already on the hunt for Oakley. He hoped it was the latter, because there was no one better suited to help you fight a war and win than Gunner Hale.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gunner dipped the bandana into the stream, squeezed it out and tied it around his neck. Despite the coolness of the air, he was sweating like a racehorse. Altitude, he reckoned. He hadn't been in the higher elevations in a while and wasn't accustomed to it.

Not to mention he'd been steadily traveling at a four mile an hour hike in rough terrain. He could have slowed, but if he did, he'd cover less ground in the same amount of time, and Oakley already had a good head start. The only thing he'd sacrifice the time for was taking the drone up and searching for signs of her or the wolves.

He returned to the cover of the trees, where he'd placed his pack on a big rock. After unpacking the drone, he walked out to the edge of the stream and sent it upward, following high above the stream.

Had it not been for a call from Matt on the SAT phone, Gunner might have decided against taking the time to search with the drone today. He needed to keep moving, keep his mind focused.

According to Matt, a large party of hikers, more than twenty disappeared from the trails about five miles south of where Oakley entered the park. Matt didn't know if that was luck or if they were using drones and had spotted her, and then found the closest egress into the park.

Either way, it upped the urgency to find Oakley ASAP. As Gunner watched the monitor, he thought about the man who was after her. Grady's wife, Charli, had confessed to Grady what was going on and told him why this man, Samir Abdul Amir, wanted Oakley dead.

Gunner's respect for both women grew upon hearing the story. Aside from people in the military, it was difficult to find someone who got it. Soldiers don't

kill for fun, or revenge, for sport or because they have a taste for it. They kill because they've been given a task. To protect, serve and save, to achieve their objective using everything they have, while giving their best effort to keep any civilians from being harmed.

Having to kill a civilian to stop someone who would kill thousands for his own malicious goals was a tough call, and not one everyone could make. Oakley could. Not because she had, as some called it, the killer gene, or was a "bloodthirsty redskin", but because she was one hundred percent committed to the mission and seeing it through.

Yes, she killed a woman. A woman whose husband used her as a human shield and gave no care for her life or his children. He'd sacrifice them all to save his own hide.

She'd done her best to see the mission through, and for a time thought Samir Abdul Amir had died from the shot he took to his right eye.

As it turned out, he survived, one eye short and filled with hate for the woman who took his eye. He claimed he wanted to avenge the life of his wife, but every man or woman in service would call bullshit on that. No man who used his wife as a human shield could claim vengeance out of love.

He was just pissed that Oakley beat him. But now, he'd obviously regrouped, reestablished his foothold of power and wealth, and, if the intel was correct, was coming after Oakley and her wolves.

Gunner was there to do everything in his power to prevent that, but he couldn't help if he didn't know where she was, so he continued to search. The faint sound of gunfire brought a silence to the land. Small animals stilled their motions, elk on the opposite side of the creek bounded for the safety of the trees, and bird song and calls stopped.

Gunner focused on what he hoped was the area the gunfire came from, slowly and methodically searching. After an hour, he gave up, packed his gear, and hit the trail, feeling an increasing urgency to locate Oakley and the wolves.

If there was going to be a war, he was going to be not just in the middle of it, but at the forefront, daring anyone to get through him to get to her. Whether she had come to the realization he couldn't say, but he had.

Oakley was his woman. Not his to own or control, but his to cherish, love and stand beside through thick and thin. Now that he'd finally discovered he was capable of feeling that, and had been made to feel worthy of love, he wasn't about to give it up.

Nor was he about to give up the search. He'd keep going as long as it took, but wished he'd receive some clue or sign that he was on the right track. Two days ago, he saw wolf scat. He wouldn't have known that's what it was, were it not for Oakley.

The fact that it was cord-like and contained bone fragments let him know the animal had not just eaten recently. Recent feeds produced runny scat. He kept his eyes open, but since then, he's seen no other signs.

Gunner checked the time and steered the drone slowly. Mere seconds later, he came to a halt as gunfire brought sudden silence. It was a quick barrage, followed shortly by intermittent shots. The sound echoed over the valley, where he skirted along the edge in the cover of the trees. He quickly brought the drone back to him and packed it away before moving deeper into the forest.”

Four days. That's how long Oakley had been playing hide and seek with whoever was tracking her. She'd spotted a drone about six days ago, but was far enough under tree cover she wasn't spotted. But that

meant someone was looking, and she might miss spotting a drone if it were high enough.

That's when she decided to turn the tables. She'd track them.

Fortunately, she had help. Ba'Cho and Nashoba had already attracted attention, and she'd watched intense meetings take place between one of them and another wolf. It didn't take long to figure out they were earning their alpha status one skirmish at a time. Her biggest relief was that neither had sustained an injury. She had little with her in terms of medical supplies, and feared one of them being seriously injured in a fight.

Now, thanks to their skills and size, they were being followed by six other males and ten females. Oakley wished it wasn't happening in a time when she feared for their lives if Samir was actually after her. But who else could it be?

Not Gunner. What they found the day before was not the actions of the man she knew. Five wolves and the deer they'd obviously been feeding on had been slaughtered, and it wasn't from a hunting rifle. Whoever shot those animals came equipped with military weaponry, ruling out a normal hunter. And the killers took the wolves' tails.

That discovery kicked her survival instincts up a notch. Oakley thought about it, weighing the options, and decided she couldn't run. It was time to take the fight to whoever was out there. So, she and the wolves changed track and started following rather than leading.

At present, they were tracking five men, heavily armed and wearing clothing so new the dye smell made tracking them a cinch. Ba'Cho was in front of the men, leading them in circles. If they faltered in keeping a bead on him, he'd let out a zip or short howl.

"Call Ba'Cho to come," Oakley gave the command verbally and with sign language to Nashoba.

He issued a string of barks and yips, and then went silent. So did everything else around them.

Oakley marveled at the moment, standing there surrounded by wolves, knowing she was safe with them, all because she was considered Alpha by Nashoba and Ba'Cho. In the last few days, Oakley had started to wonder how long she'd be able to experience this. If she stayed with the pack, how dramatically would her presence impact the natural society of the wolves, and would that change put them more or less at risk from hunters?

I wish you were here, Gun. I need to talk to you, to hear your thoughts. What if I'm directing these wolves to their doom?

This wasn't the time to get distracted, so she signed to Nashoba, and they turned their attention back to tracking the men. Ba'Cho made it back to them before they caught up with the men, who'd slowed to figure out where the sound came from.

It was easy to see how nervous they were. They might hold expensive, high-powered weapons, but they sure weren't accustomed to this kind of terrain. Nor were they experienced in dealing with wildlife.

Oakley felt a wave of energy from the wolves around her, a sudden complete stillness. With alert stance and noses twitching, the wolves watched. A second later, she understood. A low rumble and rustling in the brush preceded the appearance of the bear. Ahead of them by a tenth of a mile, on the other side of the clearing.

It stopped, sniffed the air, and roared.

A moment later, gunfire obliterated all other sound. Three shots rang out. The bear wasn't hit and took to the trees, for all practical purposes invisible once it breached the barrier of underground on the edge of the forest.

Oakley knew where the shots originated. This might be her best chance to deal with the attackers. Oakley gave a silent thanks to Matt for providing her with a special weapon. A compound bow. Not everyone was fond of the weapon. If Oakley wanted to take out one target at a time, silently and efficiently, she couldn't think of a better weapon for this particular battle.

Surround them, she signed to her wolves. Lead your pack. No fight bear.

Oakley hoped her message was fully understood as the wolves split and took off. Each half of the pack traveled parallel to the men in the center of the clearing, currently only detectable by their noise as they wandered through the small, gnarled patch of briars and small trees entangled with vines.

She trailed behind the men, accompanied by Ba'Cho and two large female wolves who seemed to be vying for his attention. It occurred to her that Ba'Cho and Nashoba's line was probably being spread even now. Wolves didn't hide their mating, and there must be half the females in the pack in heat.

What she would give to see the offspring that came from those pairings. She put that thought aside and continued on. What happened next ended her plan of attack and turned the battle into a free-for-all.

She heard a man yell and understood what he said, but he certainly wasn't speaking English. It translated generally as "Bear! Run!"

Unfortunately, that was the moment Nashoba and the wolves following him attacked.

Oakley hurried toward the fight with her pack. She shot a man on the run. His weapon was pointed at the wolves. Her arrow went through his back, high on his right shoulder. His scream of agony attracted the bear, and in a blink the animal was on him.

Amidst his screams, the bear's roars, the gunfire, snarls, and barks of the wolves, it was a din of noise and death. Oakley took out two men, this time going for the kill shot, rather than leave them to be ripped apart by the wolves.

Not that they didn't deserve it, but she didn't have to be as inhumane as they would have been if the situation was reversed. When the dust cleared, the bear had already ambled off, eager to leave the scene, and the wolves were eager to feed off the dead bodies.

That didn't bother her. The men were dead, their bodies served no purpose now other than fertilizer for the land or food for the animals. She checked all the bodies before allowing the wolves to feed.

One man was alive, but not for long from the looks of things. "How many with you?" she asked in the simplest terms, as her knowledge of his language wasn't extensive.

He shook his head, and she placed her foot on his upper thigh where the flesh had been ripped away. His howl of pain rose above the other sounds, and she wondered how far away the sound could be heard. "How many?" she asked. "Tell me and I'll end it quick. Or I can let the wolves loose on you."

That opened his lips, and before she pulled her handgun and put a bullet in his brain, she knew that Samir was indeed, after her, and had twenty-five men with him. She'd just wiped out one team, as there were five teams of five men each, looking for them.

He laughed, spewing blood as he told her they radioed in their location. All the other teams will be converging on them, and they'll kill her and every wolf with her. That's when she released him from his torment, and the wolves moved in to feed.

Oakley called for Nashoba and Ba'Cho. "Feed. Find water."

She turned away, headed in the direction of a shallow river that snaked its way along the valley, eager to wash the smell of blood from her. Just as she reached the stream, she saw it, high in the air. A drone.

Her heart raced and she made for cover. If that was one of Samir's, her goose was cooked. She watched as the drone's altitude dropped and continued dropping. What was the operator up to?

It wasn't long before the drone landed on a small patch of bare earth. Oakley watched for a moment, then left her place of cover and approached it. There was something on it. She hurried to kneel down beside it. A piece of duct tape had a small plastic bag taped to the drone.

It took a minute to free it without damaging the drone, and then to cut the bag free from the tape without damaging the contents. It was a piece of paper, folded multiple times. On it was writing.

If you are reading this, stay close. I'm here and headed for you.

Gun

Oakley had never been so happy. Gunner was close. He'd be here soon. And with him and the wolves fighting with her, they'd not just defeat Samir and his men, they'd make sure he never hurt anyone again.

But what if it wasn't Gunner? She had to consider the possibility. If Samir had found where she was, there was a chance he knew about Gunner. Maybe this was nothing more than a trap.

Which brought a new question. What to do?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

While Oakley had been tracking the people hunting her, Gunner had been studying the way the wildlife disappeared, and then reappeared in an area once convinced the danger is gone. He noticed a pattern, like someone following a map. Could that be Oakley?

Then he spotted her. On the edge of a clearing, surrounded by wolves. He circled the clearing, actually a shallow valley, and spotted five men. He was on the move within seconds, doing his best to move quickly, but keep an eye on the drone's video feed.

He pushed back fear, as a sense of urgency captured him. The fight wasn't one that would end until one side or the other was dead. That wasn't going to be Oakley. No, he would reach her in time.

Gunner picked up his pace. It seemed like hours before he reached the area the drone was circling. The first thing he came across was the remains of a man. He'd been torn up and fed on from the looks of things. Was that done by the wolves, or the bear that started this fight?

Just then he heard a wolf. He slowed and looked around. "Ba'Cho?" he asked as a wolf silently appeared from off to his right. He knelt and waited for Ba'Cho, who ran to him, covered his face with wet licks, and then let Gunner hold him for a moment.

"I need to find her, buddy," Gunner whispered against thick fur on his neck.

Ba'Cho yipped and turned his head. Gunner got it. "Find Oakley." Gunner said and signed simultaneously. Ba'Cho gave a soft chuff, turned, and waited for Gunner. Gunner took time to bring the drone back, land and pack it. Then he and the rest of the wolves who'd shown up with Ba'Cho fell in step behind the big wolf.

They reached the area with the dead bodies. There were no wolves to be seen. And no Oakley. Where was she and why didn't she wait? He turned toward Ba'Cho to discover that he and the rest of the wolves had silently vanished, leaving him alone, wondering about his next step.

One thing was for sure, he wasn't staying there any longer. The smell of death was going to be worse in a few hours, and he wanted to be as far away as possible to avoid the stench. Not to mention the team that was probably headed in his direction right now, looking for what was left of the men Gunner walked away from. He understood men like Samir. He'd fought them or those who served them, his entire adult life. Samir would have sent more than one team. How far a head start he had would reveal its answer sooner or later. Gunner didn't see the point in waiting around. Maybe he should find a secure location to hide and send the drone up. If he spotted anyone, it'd let him know how much time he had before they reached him.

Gunner figured that was what he was supposed to do, because without warning, Ba'Cho had vanished, leaving him to figure it out. So, he hitched his pack up more comfortably on his shoulder and headed north, following the valley floor until he spotted an opening in the rock about twenty feet up. It would be a bit of a climb, but would provide an excellent place to observe and send up the drone.

Gunner didn't spot anything in the direction Oakley was supposedly heading, but did spot a team coming up behind him. Obviously, the team killed by Oakley and the wolves would have been wearing GPS. These teams needed to stay in touch.

But the one approaching was going to fall out of touch soon. Gunner was in the perfect position to pick them off one at a time, and they'd never know where he was and would be dead before they could call for

help. No one would think there was trouble for possibly hours.

That would buy him time. He'd stick to the program and try to make it to the next set of coordinates on the map. If he could hook up with Oakley and the wolves, they could then turn their attention to eliminating the threat against them.

Since he had a few hours until the next team was within firing range, Gunner settled back and tried to empty his mind. A memory he'd tried his whole life to suppress rose from its grave to lay claim to his mind.

Knowing he'd not be allowed reprieve, he opened himself to it and prepared for the pain. His right hand moved instinctively to his shin. It didn't matter that the scars were covered with socks and pants, he could still feel them. He had burns on both legs, his feet, and ankles. On his right leg, the burns extend almost to the height of the calf muscle, but only along the ridge of the shinbone. On the left, the worst of the burns were on the lower legs, above the ankle. It was almost a web of scars, like a crude knitting of skin.

He remembered the day it happened. It'd been with him since he was ten years old.

His father was at work, and his mother's shift at the café didn't start until three. Since it was summer, he and his sister were home alone between two, when his mother left to make the walk to work, and whenever his father returned.

This day it was too hot to be happy outside and like an oven inside the house. No one was in a good mood. Gunner's mother said she'd put a cake in the oven for them before she left for work. All Gunner had to do was take it out, put it on the rack to cool, and turn off the oven. His dad would be happy to have a fresh slice of cake.

He did as she instructed, and suddenly the heat wasn't so important. The house smelled of sweet, fresh-

baked cake. His mouth watered, contemplating that first bite into sweet soft heaven. His mother might not have the prettiest clothes or finest shoes, but she was the best cake baker ever. At least in his opinion.

Gunner and his sister were upstairs, sitting on the floor in front of an open window, playing her favorite board game. Both started in alarm at the sudden bellow from the door. “What the hell are you trying to do, son? Burn the house down?”

That’s when Gunner realized he hadn’t turned off the oven. He apologized, but that only earned him a look of disgust that preceded a backhanded blow that sent him sailing. “Stop being a damn pussy, boy. You’re fucking bigger than everybody five years older than you, and you don’t have to be smart to stand up to people. Never fucking back down. You hear me son?”

“Yes, sir.”

That seemed to satisfy his father. He stomped out of the room, slamming the door closed behind him. “Why’s he so mad, Gunner?” his sister asked.

“Beats me,” Gunner replied, knowing the words were untrue. His father hated him, and Gunner didn’t know why. All he knew is the man rarely had a kind word from him, and the only thing he’d taught Gunner was how to take a punch, and how to avoid one.

Gunner had given up a long time ago trying to figure out why his father hated him. As long as his dad didn’t hurt Gemma, his little sister, Gunner would take whatever was dished his way and never start trouble.

But he’d not let anyone hurt his sister.

That night, he failed.

They stayed in her room, not wanting to face their father. They’d wait for their mother’s return. Their father would start drinking and be asleep in his chair before she got back, and that was fine with Gunner and Gemma. They wished he’d hurry up and pass out.

But they grew tired and decided to lie down for a bit while they waited. Gunner woke to the smell of smoke and the sound of yelling. He ran to the door, and when he opened the door, smoke billowed in.

He thought his heart was going to jump out of his chest. The house was on fire, and they were trapped in Gemma's room. What did he do?

He had to get Gemma out. Gunner looked around frantically. Where were his shoes? He couldn't find them. Gemma was screaming. That terror mixed with the cracking hissing fire, groans, pops and crashes from the house as the flames consumed it. He was about to lose it.

Before he could chicken out, he grabbed her favorite old quilt, covered her with it, then picked her up and left the room. The floorboards were fine until he reached the stairs, then terror grabbed him like a rabid beast. The stairs were on fire. How was he going to make it down? He'd catch on fire.

Gunner had never known such fear. He stood there, battling with it, and might have lost the battle if Gemma hadn't whispered. "You can do it, Gunner. I know you can."

She believed in him, and that propelled him forward. As long as he lived, he'd never forget that journey. The way the splintered burning wood tore at his feet ignited his pants hems and burned through fabric to skin. The pain was almost unbearable, but he couldn't stop. They had to make it outside.

Gunner didn't know how he made it out of the house, but they did, coughing and wheezing. He set Gemma on the ground at the edge of the yard.

His father came stumbling out, beating out fire from one pants leg. Gunner ran to help him, and his father screamed at him. "This is on you! You hear me, you miserable little bastard. It's on you. You started this fire, and you deserve to roast in it."

Gunner would never have believed his father would actually try to burn him, but that's what he did. He grabbed Gunner and tried to drag Gunner into the burning house.

Gunner was fighting for his life, and neither of them noticed Gemma. She flew at her father as he bent over Gunner, trying to drag him toward the inferno. Gemma leapt onto his back and gouged his eyes. He straightened, screaming, wrenched her off and threw her.

Right into the fire.

The scene would replay in his mind until his final breath, the way her arms waved, hands grabbing for something, anything. The fire seemed to pounce on her, engulfing her small frame. Her mouth opened in agony, and she reached forward, as if for Gunner, and then she was gone, nothing but a fire encased small form.

When it fell, sending a curtain of sparks, Gunner felt something spark inside him. A strength he knew was invincible. He shoved his father and watched the man stumble and fall into the flames. Then Gunner went to the edge of the yard, sat down, and cried.

He'd promised to protect her.

He failed.

His father was right.

He was worthless.

Gunner realized he'd internalized that at a young age, he became the big strong kid who was too quiet and kept to himself. The one the other kids feared. It wasn't until he met Riggs Walker that he remembered what it was like to have a friend.

He was on leave in Florida, of all places. It wasn't his choice of locations. He chose it because a teammate, Juan's family was wealthy and owned a home in Miami. Juan invited the whole team. It was a ten bedroom house, after all. There was plenty of room.

Gunner had no desire to spend his leave drinking with the men he spent ninety-percent of his life with, but women in bikinis and a lot of alcohol sounded pretty good. Even better, since it was free.

He said yes.

And ended up on a beach in Miami, with people screaming “shark” and pandemonium taking place. Gunner took in all the people scrambling to get out of the water, all the people on dry land hurrying closer to the water to see what was happening, and all the women herding their kids way up into the dry sand, as far away as possible.

He saw all that and the thrashing in the water, and maneuvered his way through the people toward the water. He was five feet from the water line when he saw the man. Off to his left, hauling ass through the shallow water, heading in Gunner’s direction.

Gunner saw the man’s tattoo. He recognized it. Had an identical one on his left arm. Brother in Arms. SEAL. He grinned and waited for the man, then fell in step with him.

“Shark?” the man asked.

“Maybe.”

“Riggs,” the man grinned.

“Gunner.”

“Wanna go fishing, Gunner?”

Gunner would never forget the look in Riggs’ eyes or the silent message that accompanied the question. But he knew right from the start that Riggs was going to be a big part of his life.

Through his friendship with Riggs, he was able to see the reality of his childhood through someone else’s eyes. It helped him make a kind of peace with himself. Gunner had operated under a self-imposed mandate

since he was young. Protect the innocent. No matter what. Do your job.

He carried that mandate today and always would, but he had come to understand the emotional and psychological mechanics that had formed that particular dynamic. His past had shaped him into someone always seeking redemption, a life for a life. Every life he saved was a life closer to redemption.

However, understanding his specific twitches and switches didn't change who he was, and it wasn't until Oakley that he was able to pause – to set down the weight he'd carried and just breathe.

That's when he finally saw himself. Through the eyes of friendship when he looked at Riggs, or Riggs' family, and through the eyes of love when he looked at Oakley. It stunned him to realize that their perception of him was of an exceptional man. A man of value. A friend.

It'd been a long hard journey, but finally it was done. He no longer had to pay for a death he could never have prevented. She refused to forgive him, because there was nothing to forgive. Oakley saw him. She knew his war and found no fault with him.

She set him free. Now he was going to free her of danger. He was going to find and kill every man her monster had sent for her. And then he was going to find her monster and send him to hell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gunner made himself as comfortable as possible in the big limbs of the oak. He'd fashioned a rudimentary platform that offered some protection against being spotted, but still afforded him the view he required.

He'd made sure to stay within a hundred yards of the men searching for Oakley, and left a clear trail. At least until a hundred yards from his perch, and then he made sure the trail ended.

Sure enough, just at twilight they appeared, walking in single file. Apparently they weren't all that well trained. The man in the rear didn't watch the rear, just the men ahead of him. That worked for Gunner.

One silent shot preceded that rear man falling. Ironically, those in front of him didn't notice. They were too busy looking around, clearly out of their element, and nervous. Gunner picked them off one by one, and when it was done, cleaned his weapon and made himself comfortable. He'd stay until morning to see if the bodies attracted any attention. If wolves showed up, maybe Ba'Cho or Nashoba would be with them and help him locate Oakley.

Three hours before dawn, he heard it. Wolf howl. He wished he understood the communication, but since he didn't and couldn't communicate with wild wolves, his focus was on staying well away from them.

Gunner waited until daylight, then sent the drone aloft. Despite an increasing eagerness to continue his march, he spent two hours carefully searching. He was about ready to call it quits when he saw them. Two wolves. Big wolves. Just inside the tree line. A sense of excitement sprang to life. It was Nashoba and Ba'Cho.

He carefully set the drone down in the clearing, turning off everything but the camera. The wolves sniffed at it, then vanished. Gunner thought about

bringing the drone home, but something told him to wait.

And so he did. For an hour. Nothing happened, and he chided himself for wasting time. He powered up the drone and was about to lift off when a wolf reappeared. Ba'Cho. The wolf used his paw to tap ground in front of the drone, then turn and walk away, stop and look back. Gunner didn't understand. Ba'Cho repeated the motion, tapped the ground, and this time looked into the forest and then at the drone. It yipped and looked into the forest again.

It seemed he was asking to be followed, so that's what Gunner did. He lifted the drone into the air and followed. Sure enough, Ba'Cho walked about a half mile along the tree line, then stopped beside a big rock. He tapped the ground, looked up at the drone, tapped again, then disappeared into the trees.

Gunner lowered the drone. He could see a patch of dirt that had been stamped on, packing the ground until it was a smooth surface. On it, probably written with a stick, were the words "Follow. Ba'Cho. We will meet."

Gunner wasted no time, and he'd been traveling for less than an hour when Ba'Cho appeared beside him. With Ba'Cho by his side, Gunner felt more confident traveling in the dark. The wolf would help him steer clear of dangerous footing.

And with Oakley headed for him, that cut his travel time. Eager to reach her, he walked at a fast pace, which seemed to have little impact on Ba'Cho.

Gunner watched the wolf, thinking about what Oakley originally set out to do. Did she still mean to continue toward that goal? Is it even possible to get a pack to accept two grown wolves who will probably fight for dominance? Is it fair to put her wolves in that position?

He didn't know the answer, and that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was being there for Oakley

and the wolves, whatever that involved. He promised, and no one was going to stop him from honoring that promise.

And so he walked through the night, following Ba'Cho. The horizon was just starting to lighten as they reached the crest of a hill and looked out over the valley. Gunner's chest tightened at the sight.

There she stood. On the valley floor, surrounded by wolves, with Nashoba by her side. She saw him and raised one hand. Even from this distance, he felt her. How odd. He'd never experienced this kind of awareness to another. He actually felt her intention a split second before she took off, running towards him.

What a sight. A gorgeous female warrior, running flat out. Legs and arms pumping like pistons, eyes focused on her goal. Him. The wolves followed, staying behind her and Nashoba, who gave Oakley a quick glance before turning on the heat.

Watching Nashoba run was like watching art. His strength, speed and agility were incredible. Gunner realized Nashoba's intent soon enough to prepare. When Nashoba launched himself, Gunner maneuvered so that he could catch the wolf and basically swing him around a lot like he'd do with Oakley. The only difference is that he went to the ground and wrapped his arms around the big animal.

"It's good to see you, buddy."

Nashoba's response was to wiggle out of the embrace and swipe his tongue across Gunner's face, his tail thumping rapidly.

Oakley reached them and offered a hand to Gunner. He took it and she pulled. He'd forgotten how strong she was, and let her haul him in close.

"God, I've missed you," she said right before she pretty much climbed on him and kissed him.

Could a kiss change your life? He couldn't remember a point in his life that he wouldn't have scoffed or laughed at such an idea. Today, it seemed maybe he did believe, because right now, he felt like he was finally home.

When she slithered to the ground and looked up at him, she was smiling. "You wear that hero suit well, Gun. Thanks for the rescue."

"Looks like you didn't need it," his gaze moved over the pack, who watched, waiting patiently.

"Blame Nashoba and Ba'Cho. They keep defeating the alphas of the packs we encounter, and this pack grows."

"And they all consider you the alpha."

Her answer impressed him with its straight-forward honesty. "Yes. Thanks largely, I assume to Nashoba and Ba'Cho, but yes. And now they'll accept you."

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. "At least for now. Once we've dealt with whoever is after us, then we'll do what's right."

"And that is?" Here it was, the question he'd dreaded asking. He knew how much she wanted to work with wolves, train them and showcase their skills.

He understood that, but standing here, looking at them, seeing how they watched her and waited for her direction, he wondered if they would choose her leadership if it was not for her wolves. Was her training turning them into a new kind of wolf?

Gunner hoped her goal had changed, but regardless, his promise was rock solid and could only be broken by death. He'd do whatever she asked and give his life to protect her.

But what he hoped was that now she saw the wolves, or more importantly, recognized her connection to them, and that was likely to determine all their fates, because he and the wolves would follow her lead, to heaven or hell.

Apparently, he was getting two wishes granted today, because of her answer. “We let them go. We leave the park, try to get a grant, and record the integration of Nashoba and Ba’Cho into pack life in Yellowstone. Pay attention to any surprising changes because of that integration. In short, try to determine if their appearance was a blessing or curse to the wolves of Yellowstone.”

“We?”

“Oh shit,” Oakley’s face flushed. “I’m sorry. I thought—”

“You thought right, hot stuff,” he interrupted quickly. “I just like hearing you say we and us. It makes it sound like—you know...”

“That we’re a couple? Mates?”

“United.”

Now she surprised him. Tears filled her eyes, and he watched them spill down her cheeks, even as her smile brought with it a gift of joy. That’s the sensation she emitted.

“And that makes you happy?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You don’t have to call me ma’am, you know.”

“Then what should I call you?”

“You’ll figure it out. I have confidence.”

And with that, the moment ended. Lovers became warriors and turned their minds to the mission. “It’s close enough to dusk,” she said. “We could head for the next camp area. I know a place, it’s not far. I’ve been

watching it for a while, and the small lake is a common watering hole for most wildlife that passes through the park. Now that the pack has taken up residence there, the rest of the wildlife has moved back a few miles. Just enough to be out of range for the wolves to catch them if they picked up the scent.”

“Lead on,” he agreed.

“We walk together.”

That short statement said a lot. About her and about how she saw him. As her equal in all ways, but never her superior. Oakley understood his strengths and appreciated them, physical and intellectual. But she didn't use that as a measurement of the man he was.

She saw people's hearts. That was the first and only thing that had scared him about her, and only now was he able to admit it to himself. He feared she'd look into his heart and find him lacking.

Instead, she helped him see that he was, in fact, whole. He just needed to drop the shroud he'd worn for too long.

How ironic that the thing Gunner thought he'd never have would be presented to him in a wilderness of unbelievable beauty, surrounded by a pack of gray wolves and with a woman who had no idea how extraordinary she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“This is a good spot,” Gunner commented as he looked around. The lake was an irregular shape, it originated from a small waterfall on the far side of the valley. The water pooled against the rock, forming a quarry with years of water erosion. It was deep, cold, and clean.

From the looks of it, a stream naturally formed on the valley side, carrying the overflow of water a short distance before spilling into a sudden depression. That portion of the lake occupied over a third the width of the valley and was perhaps a mile in length.

Oakley’s camp was near the falls, higher into the mountains. A small, shallow cave provided shelter from the elements, and a wide clearing gave enough space for the pack to rest or keep watch.

“Put your gear against the back wall. It’s the only area that stays dry in a downpour.”

“You think we’ll have one?”

Oakley shrugged. “Don’t know. Maybe.” She bent over and started untying her shoes. “It doesn’t smell like rain, but that could change.”

Gunner watched as she toed off her boots and carried them and her gear into the cave. “Need a hand?” she asked upon return.

“Nope, I’m good.” He took care to place his weapons in a specific order. He never strayed from the order, and because of that, he always knew where to reach for a specific weapon. It came from a lifetime of being paid to fight and survive.

“Hungry?” Oakley’s voice behind him had him turning to face her.

“Starving,” he replied, not bothering to hide the way his gaze moved down her body. It was a visual

feast, and one that propelled him across the small distance. One arm went around her waist, hitching her up fast and hard against him as his free hand cupped the back of her head.

The groan that came from her when he claimed her mouth was the sound of pleasure and need. He understood it on a non-verbal level, and felt it throughout his body. Increased blood flow to his muscles brought a pump to more than just the erection straining at his pants. Nerves beneath the skin tingled where his flesh made contact with hers.

Oakley tore away from him, grabbed his shirt at the waist, and dragged it up, over his head. Gunner was happy to take part in this game, and by the time his pants were bunched around his ankles, she was nude from the waist up with her pants and underwear wound around her left shin.

Not that she seemed to mind. She just latched hold of him and walked him backwards to a small pile of what looked like mat made of the tall grass that grew in wide patches in the valley. It'd been spread on the floor, several layers, each overlapping the other in an opposite direction.

She pulled him down onto the mat with her, then pressed him to roll onto his back. Gunner didn't mind one bit when she climbed in top of him and with his erection in hand, did a slow slide, taking him into what had to be the slickest silky warmth he'd ever felt.

Despite his intention to go slow, take it easy, Gunner felt the demand intensify as she started to ride, slow at first and then faster. If the feel wasn't enough to force him to fight for control, the sight sure was.

She was uninhibited passion, pure woman. Strong, seductive, demanding. Oakley gave as she took, and it robbed him of any thought other than her and their union.

Gunner didn't know what time it was and didn't care. They were surrounded by a pack of wolves. If there was danger, the wolves would let them know. So, right now, he would savor this moment. He'd waited for it, longed for it way too long. Now it wasn't a want – it was a need. An imperative.

Or so it felt, and she was driving it higher with each stroke, kiss, caress or moan. He felt himself ignoring plans, concerns, worries or dangers. This was their moment.

When the orgasm came, it had her body stiffening, straightening up and then back, arms wide as if offering herself to the gods. Gunner tried to hold back, wanting to prolong the moment, but she straightened, put her hands on his chest and locked gazes with him.

That lock never wavered as she took him to the peak of need and then released him, pouring her warmth over him, tightening around him, squeezing until he was spent.

And then she slid off him onto her side, keeping one leg hooked across his body, along with one arm. Her head nestled at the junction of chest and shoulder, her face moist and warm against his skin.

For a long time, they just lay there, content and warm. Then the night air began to overcome their body heat. Oakley shivered and sat up. “Okay, as much as I purely love seeing you naked, it's getting colder and the temperature will continue to drop. Time to get dressed.”

“Copy that,” he agreed. Gunner loved the way she could go from pure sex to a warrior in the blink of an eye. He couldn't decide which of those personas was the sexiest, so figured he'd just count himself lucky she was possessed of both. “But I gotta say, seeking you naked was worth every bit of shit I went through to get here.”

“Was it bad?” she stopped in the middle of lifting her top up to pull over her head.

“Every day without you was.”

“Damn, Gun, don’t use that voice on me. It turns me to goo.”

Gunner chuckled. “Okay, on to serious topics if I may.”

“Sure, shoot.”

“What changed your mind about training the wolves?”

“They did,” she replied and pulled her t-shirt on. “Watching Ba’Cho and Nashoba with the others. If I were not in the picture, they’d be out there defeating more alphas, making more babies and leading the pack.

“It’s an anomaly, you know - brother Alphas. I ran extensive searches and found no literature about that. But here they are, co-ruling a pack that is growing daily.

“I have to do what is right for them.”

“Have to?”

“I’ve got a lot to make up for Gun. I lost a child once, you know. A miscarriage. I was still with the Rangers. I didn’t inform my commander about my pregnancy. I figured women had been carrying kids since people appeared on this world. They worked, took care of the home, the kids, the food, and the animals, and fought if the need arose.

“All while pregnant. I figured I could too. But to be completely honest, back then I had a bit of an attitude. Big bad ass Ranger, you know.

“Anyway, I miscarried and my boyfriend, who never wanted a child or wife, tried to sue me. That didn’t work, but there was punishment.”

“What kind of punishment? The Army?”

“No. Me,” she met his eyes, and he could see the pain in hers. “I told myself then and there it would never happen again. I’d never let a child be put at risk. If I could do that, then maybe I’d be redeemed.”

“I forgive you.”

His soft tone seemed to act like a switch, one that turned on her tear ducts. She didn’t make a sound, just let the tears fall. “Thank you. I reckon my problem is that I don’t know how to redeem myself.

“Or didn’t. Not until now. Now I know the path to redemption.”

“And it lies where?”

“Saving them and letting them be what they were meant to be, live as they should. Wild. I have to set them free. Give them back the life taken from them. Once that happens, I’ll be free, too.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. Now, tell me everything you’ve observed, and let’s figure out how to dispose of the trash quickly.”

“Okay, but I need to ask. You’re spoken with Charli and Jud, and maybe Riggs and Matt Brickman?”

“Yes, to all. Why?”

“Do they know who is out here looking for me?”

“Yes. A man you’ve fought and bested before. Samir Abdul Amir. He’s recruited or hired trackers and killers. From what I can tell, they’re split into groups of five. Obviously, you and the wolves have already taken out one cell. I dispatched another a day ago. How many more are following is anyone’s guess.”

“I don’t get it. I can’t believe he’d find anyone to give him any usable intel. “

“You forget one thing.”

“What?”

“Money. Apparently he has a lot to throw around and knows how to use it to get what he wants. He starts with the hired hands, offering a wad of cash for information. One of them tells Samir that Gunner showed up and headed for his friend’s place in Montana. Chances are, Oakley is there. He doesn’t know the friend’s full name, but knows he was a SEAL and the last name is Brickman.”

“Did that happen or are you speculating?”

“He did show up in a line of twelve limos at Jud’s place, looking for you. He left empty-handed. Some of Jud’s men got photos, and Clay called in some favors and had them identified. It’s Samir.”

Oakley nodded. “Then tomorrow we leave tracks and take him where we want the standoff to take place.”

“And where might that be?”

“In the middle of the biggest wolf pack in the nation,” she said, and cut him a smile. “Nashoba and I have been tracking a pack. It’s huge. If he and Ba’Cho win the allegiance of that pack, they will rule over a pack of nearly three hundred wolves. That’s unheard of.”

“Is a pack that large dangerous to other wildlife?”

“Wolves only kill to survive, they’re not like people. Wolves are stewards of the land, Gun. If we leave it to them, the land and its inhabitants will flourish as well.”

“And you?”

She looked away, and he came up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders, and turned her to face him. “And you, Oakley?”

“And I will love them to my last breath, and will let them go for that reason.”

“And I will ensure you achieve your goal.”

“And then?” she asked with an attempt at a smile.

“And then you and I will figure out what’s next.”

She nodded. “I love you, Gun. With all of me.”

“And I love you, hot stuff. Now, what do you say we snuggle up on that enticing bed of leaves and grass and get some shut-eye?”

“I say it sounds good.”

They lay down, her with her head on his chest, arm draped over him, her hand on his chest. “Thank you for coming for me, Gunner.”

Gunner smiled. “I’ll always come for you, babe. Don’t you worry. You’re not alone anymore.”

That statement brought a sudden epiphany. She might not be alone anymore, but neither was he. Gunner had spent his life as a solo act when not on a mission. Now, it seemed he was part of a new team. A team of many, trying very hard to find its way to being a team of two.

PART THREE: CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THIS DECISION CHANGES YOUR LIFE. FOREVER.

Oakley sat on the bank by the lake, watching the wolves drink, play in the tall grass or sniff around, cataloging new scents deposited during the night. Gunner knelt by the water's edge with a string in one hand.

She'd chuckled when he said he was going to catch breakfast. She understood spear fishing, or even just standing with her hands in the water until something swam close enough to grab. But a string?

Feeling confident she'd win the wager on who could catch a fish first, she snatched up the stick she'd sharpened and walked a few yards away from where he knelt. She'd already discarded her boots and rolled up her pants legs to her knees. She stepped out into the water, positioned the spear in striking position, and watched the water.

Just as she saw a fish dart by her leg, a shout came from Gunner. "Got 'cha!"

Having missed her shot spectacularly, Oakley turned to see Gunner standing there with a fish dangling from his string. A big fish.

"Well cut me off and call me shorty," she said. "I've never believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Oh ye of little faith," he walked over to her. "I caught, you cook."

"Cook?" she laughed. "Brother, there isn't any cooking out here. No fires in the forest."

Gunner frowned. "I hate sushi."

"Then don't call it that."

“Okay fine, what do I call it?”

“Raw fish.”

He looked up at her with an ill expression on his face, and she laughed. “Lighten up, big guy. With luck, we’ll find something edible on the trail.”

“An eighteen ounce sirloin would hit the spot right about now.”

“Don’t I know it. Well, hand it here.”

They discussed their route and went over what they’d do if they encountered the enemy. Both understood the necessity of having it not just firmly fixed in your memory, but also in knowing the routine so intimately in your mind that your body falls naturally into the physical aspects.

They’d practiced every morning and night, and at least once during the walk of the day. After four days, Gunner felt they had it down. What they needed was food. They’d eaten all his rations, and she only had a few packs of dried fruit left.

Thus the need to fish. Both drew the line at eating raw game. Fish was bad enough, but not nearly as indigestible as raw red meat.

Breakfast was fast, as neither of them wanted to eat the fish. It was only a way to survive, so that’s what they did, and then they hit the bricks. They’d been walking for about three hours when one of the wolves started to sniff and circle, chuffing and grunting.

Another animal or animals had been here recently. She wandered the area, flanked by Ba’Cho and Nashoba, and trailed by Gunner. “So, I’ve been reading up a little on the structure of wolf packs,” Gunner commented. “And recently read that wolf packs are socially structured under a strict dominance hierarchy and are controlled by an alpha male and female pair. The other pack members align in a pecking order. Is that correct?”

“Wolf scat,” Oakley said over her shoulder. “A couple days old. And that view is a bit outdated, I think since it was based largely on captive studies.”

“Someone captured an entire pack to study?”

“No the pack assemblage was composed of unrelated animals interacting under the confines of captivity. You can imagine the results. Captive conditions are notorious for producing vastly different behaviors than what occurs in the wild.”

“That makes perfect sense. Spot anything else?”

“Just more scat. We’re a day or so behind the pack, but I’m willing to bet they know where we are.”

“So, back to the pack stuff. Does this alpha status imply that, like you said about your wolves, they have to fight their way to the top?”

“Yes and no. In a typical pack, competition can take place among members to improve or obtain a better ranking, but leadership positions in most wild packs are determined by lineage. The parents are dominant over the offspring.

“But we’re in a typical forest. In places like this, there are relationships that extend beyond parent and offspring. There are same sex-second-order relatives such as our equivalent of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, not to mention grandparents and grandchildren and even unrelated individuals. In that case, it’s more accurate to refer to pack members as dominant breeders, subordinate breeders or non-breeding males and females.”

“And that’s why you chose Yellowstone.” He stopped walking and stared at her.

Oakley stopped and looked back. “Yes.”

“Damn girl, intelligent is sexy as hell on you.”

“Always the flatterer,” she smiled, then abruptly stopped. A moment later, the sound of wolves snarling

filtered in.

“It might be them,” she looked at Nashoba and Ba’Cho, who walked several steps ahead of her. Everything about them gave off a “battle ready” vibe. Gunner froze in place, all his senses tuned to his surroundings.

It wasn’t long before the pack who accompanied them, wolves beside and behind them, began to react to another pack in the immediate vicinity. Within minutes, Oakley’s pack was still and watchful.

Snarls, yips, growls and barks came from the wolves surrounding them. Gunner found it impossible to stop possible escape scenarios from playing in his mind. If this went south, they might not make it out.

He’d go down fighting, but couldn’t let anything happen to Oakley. Gunner mentally inventoried his ammunition and weapons. As he stood there considering the best weapon for the situation, a large wolf stepped forward from the opposing pack.

Their alpha, he assumed.

To his shock, Oakley was the one to step forward to greet him. Nashoba and Ba’Cho stayed positioned just in front of him, every fiber of them on alert. He knew how they felt. He’d attack at the drop of a hat, himself.

Oakley spoke in her native tongue, and signed to them. It floored Gunner that he understood her. How was that possible?

“Greetings children of the forest. I’ve bought your children home. They need a pack and will lead and guide you well.”

When the Alpha snarled, threw his head back and howled, Gunner imagined the answer to be “lead? I’ll show you lead.”

Sure enough, Nashoba stalked up beside Oakley, looked up at her, completely disregarding the alpha,

then gave the alpha a stare that lasted so long Gunner started to wonder if this was the equivalent of a Mexican standoff. Were the two alphas going to marshal their forces to fight for dominance?

No. They were not. But they were going to fight. Nashoba let out a growl that made a shiver slide down Gunner's back. The other alpha did the same, but with a far less dramatic effect.

Then the existing alpha leapt at Nashoba.

To say it was an unfair fight would be accurate. Despite heart and determination, the existing alpha wasn't a match for Nashoba and was belly up in defeat in under two minutes.

Another wolf stepped forward, probably one who wanted to try for the alpha position. To Gunner's surprise, Nashoba turned his back on the wolf and yipped to Ba'Cho. Ba'Cho left Gunner where he stood and stalked out to meet the challenger. Gunner knew it must be his imagination, but he'd almost swear Ba'Cho gave the other wolf the equivalent of a taunt with his growl.

The fight was over almost before it started. Ba'Cho and Nashoba walked over to stand in front of the pack of the defeated alphas. Along the way, they gathered the old alphas, giving them affection and acceptance.

And then they stood in front of their new pack, threw back their heads and howled.

Soon every wolf in the vicinity had joined in. It was quite a moment, one not many humans ever witness. Gunner knew for sure he'd never forget. Nor would he ever forget what happened next.

Ba'Cho and Nashoba fell silent and turned to look at Oakley. She walked up and stood between them, then looked out over the sea of wolves and made the

sign for pack. “Pack,” she put her hand over her heart and then knelt.

Gunner thumbed the safety off the weapon he held, not even realizing his action. But then he never imagined he would see hundreds of wolves converge on where Oakley stood with her wolves. Soon she and her boys were surrounded, wolves almost behaving as if in line to greet their queen.

It took a while, much longer than he imagined, but Oakley touched and spoke to every wolf. She even accepted a pup from a nursing mother, nuzzled and loved it, before returning it and giving the mother some affection.

Then she stood and offered a hand to Gunner. “Please.”

This could be one of the stupidest things he’d ever done. It was sure among the most intimidating, but he made his way through the throng of wolves until he reached her. She took his hand and raised it. “Pack,” she announced.

Nashoba and Ba’Cho howled, and no sooner had they raised their voices, the rest of the pack joined in. When there was silence, Oakley looked at Gunner. “Now it’s time to send them away.”

“To where? Those men are still out there.”

“Looking for us and our boys. We’ll leave them a trail so they can follow us.” She looked at her wolves. “Take the pack to safety. We lead the enemy away. Protect the pack.”

For a few moments, both wolves just stood there, watching her. Gunner got the feeling they were loath to leave her. She was, after all, their alpha. Then Oakley knelt down and pulled both their faces close. She lowered her head, as did they, and all pressed their heads close, foreheads touching.

When they straightened, Oakley had tears streaming down her face. She hugged each wolf, then stood. “Protect the pack. They’re yours now.”

Nashoba licked Oakley’s cheek, while Ba’Cho’s wet tongue smeared away the tears on the other side of her face. Then Nashoba turned, barked, and as one, the wolves not standing, rose and made space for him and Ba’Cho to walk between them. Gunner and Oakley watched as the pack followed, and continued to watch until every wolf was gone from sight.

“Now we invite the enemy to come,” she said, looking up at Gunner, not trying to hide her tears. He knew her heart was breaking and longed to ease that pain, but right now, she was enough like him that only one thing would stop the hurt. By making damn sure Samir and his men never hurt another wolf.

“You mean invite them to die.” He said.

“That’s exactly what I mean. They came here aiming to kill us and turn these wolves into slaves. We can’t and won’t let that happen.”

“Hooyah.”

Her smile told him that his response was the correct one. This was not the time to let emotions hold sway. He might no longer be active, but he’d definitely found a new war, and he intended to win it.

Losing wasn’t an option.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Oakley sat up, instantly alert. Gunner's touch on her back told her he was awake. She closed her eyes, searching for a smell or sound, for whatever woke her.

Her eyes flew open with the realization. There was a wolf nearby. Oakley patted Gunner's leg and then signed to him they had a wolf nearby. She rose slowly and looked around. About a hundred yards away, a rotten tree stood at aslight tilt, its jagged top visual testimony of a catastrophic break.

On the top of the decaying log stood a wolf. Watching.

"Nashoba." She whispered.

Oakley watched the wolf's ears move, and the way its tail joined in, and she smiled. He pawed the log twice, looked down at the ground, then pawed again.

"He wants us to go to him."

"Then let's go," Gunner replied.

Together they crossed the short distance, neither unable to break the habit of watching their six. When they reached Nashoba, Oakley immediately embraced the big wolf.

"What's up buddy?"

Nashoba looked at the ground behind the stump, prompting Oakley to do the same. One look down had them both looking at one another. Gunner reached down and picked up the drone.

Oakley signed to Nashoba. "Where this live?"

He looked up and then to the east. She nodded and glanced at Gunner. "What do you think?"

"I think if we can hook up one of the batteries I have and access the imagery, we might be able to tell where they've been looking."

“And a location?”

“I think I can find that if they set it up to return to them with their current location set as home, because of a beacon one of them wears.”

“That’s actually smart, and don’t give me that look. I want to rid the world of them, but I can still acknowledge them coming up with a clever idea.”

She then reached over and rubbed Nashoba’s face. “Little did they know they had Nashoba to contend with.”

“Copy that,” Gunner’s focus was caught up in fiddling with the drone. Oakley remained quiet, content to sit there rubbing Nashoba, watching Gunner work under a moonlit sky on one of the best locations in the country to marvel at the sight of the Milky Way overhead.

“Son of a —“

She knew without asking. Whatever he found was bad. “Show me.”

“You don’t want to see this.”

“Probably not, but I need to. Show me.”

He handed her the drone. “Play, pause, fast forward, rewind,” he pointed to the controls.

Oakley hit play and felt something collide with her, at least that’s what it felt like. She halfway succeeded in smothering a grunt, but the sound triggered reactions from both males with her. Gunner’s hand was on the middle of her back, and Nashoba’s paw on her leg before the sound ended.

Where there was first shock and disbelief, now anger was taking root, growing rapidly, sending its black acrimonious tendrils out, rapidly growing and determined to find and destroy every man who had any hand in this massacre.

The video showed footage of men with assault rifles mowing down dozens of wolves, what looked like a small pack. They left the suffering alive in agony, took time to cut off tails and laugh at the carnage, and then left.

Oakley handed the drone to Gunner. “I’m going to kill them. You need to know that. It’s not a phase meant to indicate I mean to make war and hurt them. I mean to make war and end their lineage. Every single one ends here, in this valley, erasing their line forever.

“I love you, Gun, but I have to say it again because I do. This isn’t your war. It’s one that’s been in the making for a long time. It feels like it’s being enacted by people who witnessed it, not the ones who were participants. Does that make sense? I don’t even feel like I’m that person, but I still carry the hate and the guilt and – and I don’t know. It’s a nasty mix of feelings that I thought I’d put to rest and here we are, having to deal with someone I should have tracked down and killed a long time ago.”

“Nice speech.” He gave a quick smile. “But sugar, I already told you. It’s us now. A team. Your war will always be my war. I am curious if I have the facts, however.

“Your team came under heavy fire, cutting you, Charli and one other off from the rest of the team. You decided to keep going. The target was in the building and this might be the last chance to complete the mission. So, you pressed on and ran into Samir in a courtyard. He had a woman in front of him, clutching a rope that circled her throat. He’d kick her leg, forcing a step, cutting off her air if she didn’t comply. In his free hand was a gun, pointed at the back of the woman’s head.

“You ordered him to drop the weapon, and you’d let his family go.

“He refused and taunted you, saying you didn’t have the courage to shoot an innocent woman.”

He paused and locked gazes with her. “You shot her and got off another shot, one you thought was a kill shot to Samir, that entered his eye socket. The mission was deemed a success, and it wasn’t until much later it was discovered that Samir had survived.

“Now he claims revenge on you for killing his wife. What does he really want?”

She blew out a breath, moved her head from side to side, loosening the muscles, and then answered. “He wants to kill me for turning him into a eunuch.”

“A eunuch?” Gunner crowed. “You shot his dick off?”

“There was time for another shot.”

Gunner grinned. “Do you have any idea how sexy you are right now?”

Oakley gaped at him like he’d lost his mind. “Seriously? Because I shot a man’s dick off?”

“No. Because you shot an asshole’s dick off who would use a woman as a shield.”

“Oh,” she said and grinned. “Well, when you put it like that.” Her smile faded quickly. “I have to end them, Gun. If I don’t, then I allow whatever evil they inflict on the wolves to happen. I have to stop them. I have to save as many as possible.”

“I’m down with that, hot stuff, but why does it seem like you’re doing it as penance?”

Oakley never dreamed anyone would ever see through her that way. And yet, there he sat, Gunner Hale, seeing her through eyes that saw things with a singular clarity. She felt both awe and shame.

“Is this about your child, babe?” His voice was soft and made her feel comforted.

“I couldn’t save the child I lost. I know the medicine, I get it wasn’t anything I did, but it was my child and never got a chance to be born. But this is more than that. I didn’t realize it until we got out here with them. This is a journey I started as a child, in the area of the reservation bordering the park in Wyoming.

“I’d just turned ten and gotten a new slingshot for my birthday. I wanted to shoot at rocks and trees. My dad let me go, and I got caught up in a pretend hunt and was running through the trees when I heard something. It wasn’t a bark or a growl, it was something else. But what?

“I started searching and found it. Three wolf pups, very young. Too young to be weaned. I didn’t know what to do, but was sure there was something wrong. The mother would never leave pups this young unattended. Which meant something had happened to the mother.

“I knew I had to take care of them. So I took them home and made them a place in the back of the barn where we stored the garden tools. I snuck milk from the morning buckets and found some old rubber gloves my grandmother wore when she did the dishes. I used one to make into a kind of bottle, and fed those pups every three hours for a week.

“I was so scared when I came to feed them one morning, and one of the pups was dead. It hadn’t been killed. It was just dead. It had to be my fault. I wasn’t feeding them enough. So, I upped the feedings to every two hours.

“I did it for three days, and on the fourth day I missed two feedings. I fell asleep on the back porch and woke to my dad asking me if I was going to sleep on the step all day or wanted some lunch.

Oakley paused, still stroking Nashoba’s face. “I have never been so scared or felt so awful in my life. I must have scared my dad when I jumped up and said I

had to go, because he grabbed me and forced me to sit down.

“It didn’t take much for him to get it out of me, and when he knew what I’d done, he just stood and offered his hand. “Let me help.” That’s all he said. So we got the milk, put it in the glove, and I put it inside my shirt against my belly to warm it.

“My happiness at my dad helping took one to the chin when we arrived. Only one pup was left alive. I lost my shit, Gun. Completely. Scooped up that puppy, crying and apologizing, and feeling like the most awful person ever to live.

“My dad stopped me. He made me sit and listen, and he said this. “Oakley, it’s important that you listen to me. Will you hear me? With open heart and open mind?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You have a gift, Oakley. You connect with animals in a way that most people can’t. You connect with wolves. Look what you hold. A life you saved. A ten year old girl with no idea how to save them, but with the heart and determination to try.

“Perhaps if you’d asked for help, all may have been saved, but that was not the path you were destined to walk. You are young and until now haven’t experienced loss that took a piece of your heart. Now you have, and you understand the value of what was lost. That lesson will be your guiding star, Oakley, helping to keep your heart focused on doing what is right, even when others see your actions as wrong. These aren’t the last wolves in your life. They’re the first. There will be others and one day you’ll understand why.”

“Do you?” I asked him. “Understand why?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me.”

“No, I’d rather you tell me.”

She looked at Gunner. “I never got to do that, but maybe he never expected it anyway.”

“What would you tell him if you could speak to him now?”

Oakley looked from him to Nashoba, and then up, at the sky. “I’d tell him I understand. The Dreamwalker helped me see.”

“Dreamwalker?”

“Sadie Three Rivers.”

“You believe in dreamwalking?”

“I believe in a lot of things, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Just not dreamwalking. Does that matter?”

“Not to me.” She looked at him. “Does it to you?”

“It makes me curious.”

“Then one day you should meet Sadie.”

“How do you know her?”

“She and my aunt Grace have been best friends since birth.” Oakley gave Nashoba another rub, then stood. “It’s about to get ugly.” Oakley talked so Gunner would understand what she signed to Nashoba. Protect the pack. Safety is east. High ground. Elk grazing. Stream.”

Nashoba gave a short yip, then bounded away, without a backward glance. Oakley watched him go, then offered a hand to Gunner. “I know you offered, but it’s important that I ask.”

“What?”

“Will you fight with me, Gunner? Will you help me save the wolves?”

“Your war is my war, hot stuff.”

She went eagerly into his arms when he reached for her. Oakley didn't have any doubt about the right or wrong of what they were about to do. She knew her cause was right, and not the devil himself would stop her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

For five days they led their pursuers, fast enough there was little time for sleep. Whenever their followers tried to stop and eat, defecate or rest, Oakley and Gunner would fire a shot, just to let them know they were close.

When their enemy turned and left, it was a surprise. But they'd deal with it. Putting safety first, they hiked for half an hour, deliberately leaving a trail that led away from the direction they wanted to travel.

Once Gunner was satisfied they'd left a clear trail, they turned back the way they came, leaving no more trail to follow and keeping beneath the cover of the trees, should the enemy try aerial surveillance, which seemed unlikely.

They'd hiked for two hours before Oakley called a halt. "I smell wolf."

"Friend or foe variety?"

"Don't know. Let's make camp and find out."

They piled their packs against the trunk of a massive tree, with branches big and thick enough to support a blanket of limbs and leaves that would keep them dry should it rain.

It also gave him something to their back, since the tree grew at the base of a short but steep incline. It would take some effort to make that short ascent.

They sat side-by-side on a flat topped rock beside the tree, one half buried beneath the incline. Oakley leaned over and whispered. "I smell it again."

"Is it one of yours?"

"I don't know..." she smelled again, and it was like having alarms going off inside her, screaming of danger. "It's hurt. It's—shit! Weapons!"

At the moment she hissed weapons, a shot rang out and wood on the tree beside them splintered. They rolled in different directions, each scrambling for their weapons. Gunner reached his first and lay down cover as she hurried to arm herself with something besides her sidearm.

Once she had her crossbow in hand, she let everyone know she was ready by taking out one of the men wasting his ammo, shooting in the wrong direction. He must have had a partner close by, because a shout rang out, and a moment later, the night was filled with the sound of weapons fire.

It didn't take long to realize how ill-prepared their enemy was. They were hired muscle, either promised they would be paid a small fortune, or they were men in service to Samir, men who knew he'd just as soon kill as reward them. That incentivized excellent service where they came from.

At least excellence in terms of dedication to the mission. Given the chance, they'd turn on their master and run, only to end up slaves to another master when their funds ran out. They should have jumped ship when they had the chance.

Moving silently, keeping to the shadows, Oakley began picking them off. When she'd killed six, she started to wonder. Had all the teams joined up into one party? It seemed so, but why?

Even as she asked herself that question, Gunner had a similar epiphany. He'd taken out five men, and there was still a significant enemy presence. How many men had they sent?

Not that it mattered. He'd kill them all.

And so they fought. They fought until their rifles were empty, their handguns down to only what was in the clips, and the quiver of arrows lay empty on the ground. They fought until they were backed up against the rock incline, with no path to freedom apparent.

“Surrender now, and I will let him live,” Samir demanded, keeping his weapon trained on Gunner.

“Not a chance,” Oakley replied. “You’re going to kill him anyway, so why should I give you what you want? You’ll have to kill me, because I’ll die defending Gunner. I’ll cheat you of what you want, so kill us both.”

He laughed. “Yes, there is something I want. Something I will have. You. You will give yourself to me, you and your wolves.”

“I’ll never give you my wolves, so go ahead and shoot.” She paused, then added “besides, if I can do this with a gray wolf, imagine what I could do with some of those beasts from Russia.”

She saw it hit, saw the flash on his face – he could have what he wanted without having to try to capture the wolves. He just needed her.

“You dumb bitch. You just sealed your own fate. But, you can still save this man, and your precious wolves. You will come with me. You will serve me. In the day, you will train my new army of wolves, and at night you will bend over like a bitch in heat for me or whomever I may want to watch fuck you.”

“No.” Gunner immediately argued.

Guns were raised, but she stepped in front of Gunner. “Hold on. Give us a moment to talk. Tell your men to stand down.”

It was a relief and surprise when Samir complied. Oakley stepped close to Gunner, keeping her hands in clear sight. “I smell wolves. The first I smelled was an injured animal. Now I smell others. Familiar smells. Our pack is close.”

“It’s your call.”

“Do you trust me?”

Gunner grinned. “Lead on, Boss.”

That told her what she needed to know. He was with her. “Fine,” she said, and turned to face Samir. “When you release him and he’s out of range, I’ll surrender. Not before.”

She started to be concerned that he’d back out of the deal, then he agreed and snapped orders to his men. All weapons were lowered. Gunner gathered his gear, walked to her, and leaned down to whisper. “At first sign they mean to harm you...”

“You better,” she interrupted. “The wolves are west of us. Find them.”

He nodded and walked away.

Samir snapped an order, and one of the men approached Oakley and tied her hands behind her back. As she was being bound, Samir issued another order. “Take four men and find the giant. Kill him. But make it slow, I want me to suffer as he bleeds out.”

“Okay, deal’s over,” Oakley said.

“Oh. Well, in case it’s escaped your attention, you’re tied up, you dumb bitch. What do you think you will do?”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t want to find out.”

Samir laughed, and after a few seconds, the rest of his men did as well. When he stopped, it all stopped, like someone flipping a light switch. Was that out of devotion or fear, she wondered. Most likely, fear.

“At sunrise, you will summon your wolves. If you do not, my men will find and kill him. Slowly and painfully.”

“Good luck on that, buddy. If that’s your plan, you better send all of them, but then again, you need men with you, so – well, what does it matter? He’ll kill those you send and then come and kill you.”

“We shall see.” He pointed to a man. “You. Bind her securely. There will be no escapes.”

“Yes, Samir.” The man actually bowed his head, then hurried to Oakley and tied her knees and ankles.

Samir walked over, looked and sneered. “Dawn.”

She didn’t speak, in fact she refused to show any reaction. She just looked at him until he turned and walked away. Fools that they were, they built a fire. Oakley watched, marking in her mind where each man was. She wasn’t close enough to the fire to feel its heat or be caught in smoke when the wind shifted.

Whoever they were, they knew how to build a smoke call. The thing was so filled with leaves and small branches with dead leaves attached, it was a billowing tornado carrying the stink of burning vegetation. She smiled to herself. Neither Gunner nor the wolves would have trouble pinpointing her location.

Her task, until they arrived, was to free herself, so that when her calvary arrived, she was fighting ready. That proved to be a very arduous task. The knot in the rope around her wrists was not readily available. Right now, all she could do was keep twisting and pulling, trying to loosen or stretch the fibers.

Oakley estimated she’d been at it for nearly three hours when she smelled them. The pack. It wasn’t long before she heard them. Just one. No two. Soft chuffing sounds.

It was no surprise when Nashoba and Ba’Cho materialized from the darkness. “Bite ropes,” she whispered and moved her arms toward them. It took only a few seconds for them to comprehend what she wanted, and they went to work, biting and tugging.

Between the three of them, they loosened the knot enough she was able to get one hand free. That’s all she needed. Oakley signed to the wolves to accompany her and retrieve her weapons.

She'd just finished tightening the bow harness when one of the sleeping men woke, got to his feet and hurried over to a tree to relieve himself. When he saw the wolves circling the camp, he stumbled back. His mouth moved way before any sound emerged, and by the time he croaked "help!", a wolf was already on him. He was dead in seconds, lying on the ground with his throat ripped out.

By then, men were waking, scrambling for weapons and shouting. Oakley felt a hand on her shoulder. Considering her wolves hadn't reacted, it could only be one person.

She looked over her shoulder. "You ready, big guy?"

Gunner grinned. "Let's get to it."

The next twenty minutes were a blur for Oakley. She and Gunner fought their way toward Samir, who was behind five rows of men, three columns deep. "Only fifteen?" Gunner scoffed when they faced off. "If you drop your weapons and run, you'll live."

"And if we don't?" One yelled defiantly.

"Then you die."

They fired the first shot, one that struck neither of them, but hit a wolf standing behind them, a young male. "Oh hell no." That tore it for Oakley, and it was on.

She and Gunner became what they'd been trained to be. Killing machines. Achieve the objective at all costs. Failure isn't an option. Get the job done.

The wolves joined in, every bit as effective in the way they worked as a pack, and just as lethal. Their kills were just delivered with a lot more pain and took longer.

When the dust finally started to settle, there were two men trying to back away from the situation, hands before them, supplicating. "Please," it was the younger

man who spoke. “Let us live, and we vow there will be no more bad blood between us. If you will—”

He never got to finish that sentence. Two wolves attacked in concert. The first knocked him down, and as soon as he hit the ground, the other pounced, biting down on the man’s throat and then wrenching its head.

It was a loud and ugly death. Samir watched it with horror, then appealed to Oakley. “What does it achieve to kill me? Doesn’t that make you what you claim to champion against? A cold blooded murderer?”

“Nope” She replied nonchalantly and looked at Gunner. “Because I’m not going to kill you.”

“You’re not?”

“No. You’re free to turn and walk away any time you want.”

Gunner watched it go down with pride in the way Oakley played it. He could see the man’s fear as Samir looked around. There were hundreds of wolves, all ages, all sizes, and all watching, like an army of silent sentinels, waiting on their next command. It was enough to terrify the bravest.

“Go on,” she gestured. “Leave.”

“What about them?” he gestured toward the wolves.

“What about them?”

“Will they harm me?”

“What do you think?” She took a few steps closer to him, along with Nashoba, Ba’Cho and four other big males. “Aren’t you the man who wanted to imprison their alpha, enslave or annihilate their entire breed, and all for revenge you were never owed? Your wife died because of you. You knew it would happen, and you didn’t care. You were willing to sacrifice her, you miserable bastard.

“You are a murderer, a man with no honor. But it’s not for me to decide your fate. You have a chance. Make it beyond the circle and no one will touch you.”

“Walk through them?” he screamed, waving wildly at the wolves. “Are you insane?”

Oakley smiled. “Goodbye Samir, I sincerely hope you rot in hell.” She turned her back on him and walked to Gunner. “Time to go, big guy, and let the pack do its thing.”

“I’m with you, hot stuff.”

She turned and walked through the wolves to the far side of the pack. By the time they’d made the walk, Samir’s screams and howls had long died. The wolves were feeding. Considering the size of the pack, Oakley figured it would take a while, but she’d wait a bit before moving on.

“Let’s wait here for a few minutes,” she suggested as they stepped out into the moonlight. “There are rocks just over there.”

“You okay?” Gunner asked.

“Yes.” She answered immediately, then quickly recanted. “No. I don’t know. I didn’t think it would be this hard, you know? Saying goodbye.”

Oakley turned to face him. “I don’t know if I can do it. Not a forever goodbye, you know?” Right now, she didn’t know if she could hold it together for another five seconds. Her chest hurt, her eyes burned, and a sob was threatened to choke her.

“I do, baby,” he gathered her in his arms, and suddenly Oakley didn’t feel alone anymore.

“We don’t have to leave,” he whispered against her hair. “We can stay, help protect them. They need your love, too, Oakley. Can’t you see that?”

He turned her and there stood her wolves. Ba’Cho and Nashoba. She couldn’t stop the tears this time.

Oakley sank to her knees and they bounded to her, covering her with their bodies as they pressed against her, each of their faces touching hers.

It took her a few minutes to pull herself together. When she raised her face, the wolves licked away every trace of tears, thumping their tails on the ground, eager for her to be happy.

She smiled and gave them a hug, a big group hug. “I love you always.”

Then she stood and signed. “You lead pack. You protect pack. You love pack. Oakley love you.”

They yipped in response, and she hugged them again. “Okay, go.”

With tails wagging, they did. She and Gunner watched them go, then she swiped at her eyes.

“I mean it, hot stuff. We can stay.”

“No, we need to go.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t want to change them, and if we live with them, it will alter them. And they don’t need me,” she gestured to her wolves, now comfortable with their new family. “They need to be free. Come on, let’s go, Gun. The wildlife will take care of what’s left out here. Chances are no one will ever happen upon them. This isn’t part of the park often visited.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“Then let’s hit the trail. I’ll call Matt and give him our location.”

Oakley suddenly chuckled. “Don’t you find it funny that all this time we had that SAT phone, but we never thought to call for backup.”

Gunner shrugged. “Don’t call for it until you need it.”

“And you’re a one man band, aren’t you, big guy?”

“If you say so.”

“Oh I definitely do. So call your buddy. It’s time for a new chapter.”

“Doing what?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? You have any ideas?”

“Nope. You?”

“Not a clue.”

“We’re a perfect fit,” Gunner commented.

“Indeed we are,” she agreed and took the hand he offered. She might be walking away from creatures she loved, but she was walking with a man she loved and a man willing to make her war his own.

That made her very lucky.

CHAPTER THIRTY

IT ALL ENDED WITH A WEDDING

It was the perfect evening. The air was cool, but not so much as to demand a jacket. The overhead moon spilled stars across the sky as the Milky Way looked over them.

The yard was decorated with strings of lights and wildflowers. A small four-man band was there to play, and the smell of floor on the laden tables inside the house spoke of all the dishes brought by attendees.

Russell Walker and his wife, Naomie, danced along with Russell's sons and their mates. Charlie and Grady were there with most of Gunner's ex-teammates, all of Matt's Brickman's family, as well as Clay Blackstone's family.

It was a much larger affair than they had anticipated, but the bride and groom didn't care how many people came. The whole county was welcome to join in. It was the biggest celebration of their life.

"Well, I never saw this coming," Riggs commented as he watched the bride and groom share a kiss.

"It's such a wonderful love story though, isn't it?" His wife, Georgie, said and smiled. "When I first met him, he kind of scared me."

"He kind of scares everybody," Riggs replied and clapped as the newly married couple turned to face the people gathered to witness their joining.

Gunner and Oakley made their way through the people, hugging, kissing and smiling. When they reached Riggs and Georgie, Gunner pulled Riggs in for a back pounding hug.

"I remember watching you and Georgie get married on Heritage," he said. "I didn't think I'd ever

witness that, but you did it.”

“And now so have you,” Riggs pointed out. “You know you’d have been welcome to have your wedding there.”

I appreciate it,” Gunner thanked him. “But we wanted to do it here, where we’ve decided to stay.”

“We’re happy for you, Gunner,” Georgie hugged him, and then Oakley as well. “I hate you’re not returning to Texas, though. What are you going to do up here?”

Gunner looked at Oakley, and she nodded. “Riggs, you remember Matt Brickman?” Gunner asked.

“I do. Good man. I just was talking to him. Seems his family’s happy you decided to settle here.”

“They’re good people,” Gunner said. “His family owns this house. They invited us to live here as long as we want.”

“Well that’s generous, but what will you do?”

“That’s the other part of the surprise. His family is all about stewardship of the land and protecting the environment. They, Clay Blackstone, and Sadie Three Rivers teamed up and formed an environmental watch group. They want us to use Oakley’s wolves as a study, for her to continue working with them, paying attention to whether the other wolves begin to pick up on what she teaches through their interaction with her boys.”

“For what purpose?” Georgie asked.

“To learn,” Oakley answered. “And to protect the wolves. The more we understand, the easier it is to respect and honor each other, to live in peace. We need to watch over them to ensure they’re protected from us. Left to themselves, they’ll do fine. Nature isn’t flawed.”

“And that’s something you want to do?” Riggs asked Gunner.

“It’s a dream come true, my friend.”

“Then here’s to dreams coming true,” Riggs held up his glass.

“Amen to that, brother.”

He looked at Oakley, who was looking off to one side, smiling. She must have sensed him looking at her and glanced up at him. “Look.”

Gunner glanced and smiled at what met his eyes. “Your boys are here.”

“They came to share our joy.”

“Then go share it, baby. Dance with your boys while I watch and wonder what I ever did to get so lucky.”

She grinned, kissed him, kicked off her shoes, and ran over to the edge of the yard where the forest began. “Wanna dance big guys?”

Gunner released Charli from a huge hug, and Grady tapped him on the shoulder. “So, no more wars for you, Gun?”

“Gunner’s days of war are over, I hope.”

“Well, I reckon you’ve got something better now, brother,” Grady lifted his glass in Oakley’s direction.

“I reckon so,” Gunner watched her, spinning and running, leaping and circling, with two enormous wolves dancing along side her. Oakley hadn’t realized it yet, but her wolves would never leave her. They dropped by often, just long enough to get or give some affection.

Or to show off new members of the pack. No, the wolves would no more abandon her than she would them. It was remarkable to witness. Even more so to be part of. Through them, Gunner understood true commitment, true devotion, and unconditional love. He learned that was how Oakley felt about him. She loved him without condition or reservation.

Like the wolves, she was all in, and because of that, Gunner now had everything he'd ever been afraid to wish for. A woman who blessed him with the thing he'd wanted his entire life.

He wandered out to where she and the wolves danced and she held out her hand to him. "Dance with us, Gun."

She'd get no argument from him. Gunner would take every chance he was offered to hold her in his arms. They danced beneath the stars, laughing at the wolves who performed around them, leaping and spinning.

Oakley looked up at him. "I know I said I'd never do this, and I swear I never imagined it would happen but... but..."

"But what?" he felt a small stab of anxiety.

"Let me go at this another way. What do you think of the name Gemma for a little girl?"

"A wolf?" it was the first thing that came to mind.

Oakley smiled "No, Gun. Daughter."

"Dau—" it hit him before the word was out of his mouth. He stopped moving so suddenly, she stumbled.

"Daughter? " his mind was in a whirl. "Our daughter? We're going to have a – you're pregnant?"

Her laugh was one of delight. "I am. What do you think?"

Gunner grinned, feeling as if all the darkness had been lifted. "I think she's going to be one bad ass little alpha like her mama."

"Or a ballerina?" she said teasingly.

"With me as a dad and these big brothers?" he reached out a hand toward the wolves who had drawn in close to them. "Hot stuff, she can be whatever she wants. I'll protect her regardless."

“I have no doubt. Now, what do you say we go finish up this celebration so we can get home and start celebrating our family. I hear we’re gonna have the boys in for the night.

Home. He liked the sound of that and remembered the first time they talked about him. “Home isn’t a place,” he remembered her first saying. “It’s a who.”

She was right. But that was no surprise. She was, after all, the actual woman who ran with wolves.

A Note from the Author

I've been a reader my entire life, finding solace, excitement, happiness, fear, and love in the pages of books. If anything has been a constant in my life, it's reading.

I also remember all of the times in my life when being able to buy a book was a luxury, a treat that I didn't get every week. I've never forgotten those times or how much those books meant to me.

That's why I am so grateful to you, the readers. Regardless of your level of income or profession, I understand how precious your reading dollars are and I feel humbled that you've used some of those dollars to purchase my books.

I hope my stories prove worthy of your investment and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Many blessings.

Ciana

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