



SOUL *of a*
LYNX
AWAKENING PRIDE

LACEY THORN

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Soul of a Lynx

By Lacey Thorn

Soul of a Lynx

by

Lacey Thorn

Captured...

Murphy's life has become nothing more than a series of beatings that leave him hovering closer and closer to death. His lynx is locked inside him. His bond with his brother gone. No one is coming to save him, and he no longer believes he can save himself.

Unwanted...

Oakley Talbot is nothing more than a science project, created in a lab by a mad scientist. Shifters hate her for the blood running through her veins. Hunters hate her for the exact same reason. She belongs nowhere. Not with the family she has. Not with the team she's built.

Soul Bound...

A man unwilling to die. A woman with no idea how to live. Together, they'll find more than either hoped for and bring the mightiest hunter of all to his knees.

While each novel is a stand-alone regarding the HEA of the couple, the plot develops with each story. This series is best read in order.

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Dedication

This one goes out to all those who've stuck with me from the beginning of the Awakening Pride series. While Soul of a Lynx ends the original series, this is not goodbye. There are several spin-offs, including The Holloways and a new one that will feature Tony Sandoval and his group of super soldiers. Plus, there will be more members joining the pride as they head out to find those alone and unaware.

Chapter One

Murphy Dockery forced open his eyes, hissing at the pain as the light hit pupils too accustomed to the dark. His head pounded, and the fracture to his right femur was still in the early phase of healing. Animal genetics were a double-edged sword when it came to injuries. They'd kick in and begin advanced healing, too advanced, so advanced the bastards holding him captive would cackle with glee while they broke him again. Merely because they could. Because his body allowed for it.

His mind was fuzzy, leaving him unsure of how long he'd been held. Days? Weeks? Months? He'd locked down the unique bond he held with his brother when he'd first been taken. He hadn't wanted Finn to feel what Murphy's captors were doing to him. Didn't want to remind his brother of a time when Finn had been subjected to a similar fate. One that had left Finn raging over a mate he'd believed had left him to die. Now, the bond between brothers was broken. No matter how hard Murphy tried to reach out to Finn, there was only silence where before their connection had always run deep.

He wasn't alone, though. The pain-filled cries of other captives surrounded him. No matter how many times they moved him, and he'd counted at least six places since he'd been captured in Illinois, there were always other shifters around him. Rage ate at him. How was it that Blane and his ilk of hunters had so many shifters caged and hidden away where no one could find them? The more he learned of the Blanes and the hunting society network they were a part of, the more he raged. What type of humans felt they had the right to decide an entire group of people shouldn't exist and went about enacting a genocide validated by their morals and beliefs? Hunters. Marcus Blane. Talbot, the sadistic doctor who worked with Blane and did God knew what kind of experiments on shifters like Murphy.

A feminine scream ripped through the air. Murphy growled, though he was in no condition to offer any aid to the female. He feared what they were doing to the lass. The pain in her wails tore at him, and he swore yet again that, once he got free, every one of the bastards would die. It made him think of members of his pride and the hells they'd suffered from hunter hands.

He thought of Kenzie who'd served in the Marines with him and become a core member of his family. The strong, fierce woman had been part of Talbot's inhuman experiments when she was a baby. Hell, the mad doctor had managed to lock her animal so deep inside her that she'd barely felt it before she'd met her mate. Even then, Talbot had managed to get his dirty hands on Kenzie again through another shifter who'd injected her with a drug to lock down her lioness once more.

Then there was Ariel, a young woman Murphy had come to think of as a baby sister. She'd been put through hell by hunters and the games they liked to play. Games that had her running from the mate who'd wanted to love her. Murphy knew she didn't feel good enough for the man who loved her, Daniel, and that unworthiness had them both avoiding one another and running in different directions. Hell, Murphy had been with Daniel when Blane had managed to capture Murphy. Daniel had been shot with multiple bullets that day, and Murphy had no idea if his friend was dead or alive. He did know if Daniel died, Ariel would never heal, so he'd begged a universe that seemed anything but kind for his friend to survive.

Kenzie and Ariel weren't the only ones Murphy thought of, though. There were others, too many others, who'd suffered at the hands of members of the hunting society. Even his brother's mate, Laura, had been taken, and in the short time she'd been in hunter hands, they'd managed to take one of her ovaries.

For Talbot.

Talbot. Murphy wanted to do some experiments of his own on the damn torture doctor. He hadn't seen Talbot in a

while, though, not since they'd moved him from New Mexico, and Murphy didn't miss the bastard. He wondered if any of those who worked for or with Talbot knew just how batshit crazy their doctor was. Blane had to at least suspect. From what Murphy had seen, the man was far from obtuse.

The door to the room they kept him in slammed open, hitting the wall and bouncing back toward the figure stepping into the opening. Murphy didn't move. He didn't need to. He knew who it was by the scent on Blane's skin.

"Looks like our little cat boy is awake. Gotta love the way you animals can take a beating and be ready for another one so quickly." Blane gave a braying laugh that made Murphy tighten his jaw as he fought to keep his lips closed. "Maybe, we should force a shift. Get a good look at the skin you wear, demon. Decide where I want to display it."

"Which is it, Blane. Animal? Demon? Though, I think that last one is more suited to you. Hell, your wife and daughter both left you for animals. That's got to burn."

Murphy didn't flinch when the first kick landed. He took it along with the next several Blane doled out. All of them on the still-healing leg. He heard the snap as the bone gave again and growled.

"Get him up and on the wall," Blane ordered, and hard hands jerked Murphy to his feet.

His legs wouldn't hold him. Not with his femur freshly broken. Not that it mattered. They dragged him to the wall and lifted him, so they could shackle his wrists to the top chains. Then they locked in his ankles, drawing a hiss as they purposely jerked his broken leg.

"Let's give him some incentive to talk, boys."

Blane's order had their fist flying. Hard hands pummeled his body. Booted feet kicked. Bone cracked and broke. He didn't even fight to stay conscious. He let the darkness tugging at him take hold. Let it pull him under to where there was no pain.

He came back to consciousness with a roar as bolts of electricity surged through his body. His feet dangled in water that lapped up and over his ankles. Cables were attached to his skin, and he smelled the burning of his flesh.

“It’s only a matter of time before I get my hands on my daughter,” Blane stated, and though Murphy couldn’t see the other man’s face, he knew Blane would have a smug smile on his lips.

Murphy was the one who laughed, though. It would be a cold day in hell before Blane got his hands on his daughter, Amia, again. Amia Esponetti now. Mate to his alpha’s right-hand man, Reno Esponetti. Not a single member of the pride Murphy was a part of would allow Blane to get his hands on her. He’d tortured Amia, and her body bore the scars from it. He’d buried his own daughter alive. Repeatedly. Sometimes leaving her in the ground for days at a time, with a timer counting down how much oxygen was left before she wouldn’t be able to breathe anymore. Blane killed anyone who tried to befriend her after she ran from him and his men. Shot her then put a tracker under the skin where the scar was, so he would always know where she was.

“You want to laugh, you fucking animal? Hit him again!”

Another jolt of electricity went through Murphy, and he clenched his teeth. Muscle spasms over broken bones threatened to take him back into the dark.

“Again.”

Murphy passed out then woke to another jolt. They continued electrocuting him until his muscles refused to react. The last time he came awake, Blane was in his face.

“You’re little pride knows I have you. They know, and they worry what I’m doing to you. Worry if you’re already dead.”

Murphy said nothing. He couldn’t have if he’d wanted to, but his brain was still working. Blane’s bragging meant one

thing. He had someone inside the pride. Someone watching what the pride did and reporting back to Blane.

“They should worry. I want them afraid. I’m going to kill them, cat boy. I’m going to slaughter them where they sleep. That lion you follow and his little scientist mate. The abomination they created. I’ll kill every single one of them while I force Amia to watch. While that animal she defiles herself with is helpless to do anything to prevent it. I hear your brother planted a mutation in the animal he fucks, too.”

A growl rumbled from Murphy’s chest. Blane would never get his hands on Tah, Abby, or their daughter, Regan. The alpha and his family were well-protected. As for Finn and Laura? Murphy’s brother would shred anyone who tried to hurt his mate or unborn child. As would the rest of the pride. No matter what Blane had planned, he’d never get his hands on any of them.

“Don’t worry,” Blane murmured. “I’ll make sure you live long enough to see me take down your lion.”

Murphy forced a laugh. It hurt, but once he started, he couldn’t stop. A hard punch landed in his face then three more. It cut off his laughter, but he didn’t feel any of them. He felt nothing. His entire body was numb. Definitely not a good sign.

“Take him down,” Blane ordered. “Toss him in the corner. See how long it takes him to heal from that.”

Murphy floated. He felt nothing as he was torn from the wall and thrown into the corner. Inside his head, there was nothing. His lynx was silent. The bond he shared with his brother, the one he’d taken for granted, was gone. Finn had always been with him. Until now.

Murphy faded in and out. He dreamed of his mother. Her smile. The warmth of her arms as she hugged him close. The way she ruffled his hair. The way her body had been broken, carved, and left for her family to find. His father’s shouts of horror. The screams of his brothers while little Brenna sobbed. His world had been full until it had been ripped apart. Until his family had turned on him, blaming him

for his mother's torture and death. Beating him. Trying to kill him.

Gripped in the tight fist of grief and guilt, Murphy had been numb then, as well. Had it been his fault? Had someone seen him shift? Had he given away what he'd been taught to hide? His mother. His beautiful, funny mother who loved him unconditionally. Gone. He'd taken every blow his father and brothers had dealt him. He'd wanted to die. Only Finn's screams had gotten through to him. His younger brother had fought to get to him, to protect him, while Finn's twin, little Brenna, had sobbed over the broken body of their mother. They'd broken Finn's leg that day. Murphy had barely survived. The two of them had been carted away, forced out of Ireland and not permitted to return. Their father had seen to that. Brenna had been a pawn in a game none of them had understood, but the threat had been clear. If Finn or Murphy set foot in Ireland again, Brenna would die.

At some point, Murphy realized he had a fever. Infection had set in, and he had no idea from what. It took a lot for a shifter to get an infection, though. Murphy was cognizant enough to understand that. To understand death might be visiting him a lot sooner than he'd wanted. God, he wanted to see his brother again. To see his homeland and the only member of his family left in Ireland that he cared about. His baby sister, Brenna.

Murphy faded in and out. At some point, he knew someone else was in the room. Heard the man whispering as he moved his hands over Murphy. His skin felt as if it were burning. Other times, he was sure he'd freeze to death. He didn't remember Blane returning, but he must have. He felt the touch of evil as his bones were rebroken. Heard it in the whispers of the man in the room with him.

"Shot them. Shot them all. Waited so long and now, he's gone. One by one by one. No more savior. Gone. Took my friend. Took his mate. Killed the father. The wolves will howl. Killed them all. One by one by one. They all fall down."

"Who?" Murphy forced the word out of a throat that felt as if it had been sliced by razor blades.

“The alpha,” the madman whispered. “They went for her and got them all. Gone. One by one by one. They all fall down.”

“No,” Murphy croaked.

He wanted to surge to his feet and yell, but it couldn't be real. It was the fever. He was having a fever dream. That was what he was experiencing. Just a delusion brought on by the infection, by the fever. It had to be. Tah was alive. There was no way his alpha had fallen. No way the pride had been taken out. No way his family and his brother were gone.

“Finn.”

He wasn't sure if he'd merely thought his brother's name or if he'd voiced it aloud. It didn't matter. What did was, for a moment, he felt his brother. Felt the link they'd always shared flare to life. Heard his brother scream his name. Then there was nothing.

Chapter Two

Oakley Talbot pressed her finger against her lips and signaled her team toward the entrance. They needed to be silent and fast. They'd managed to get one person on the inside of this group of hunters. It was what they did. Find a den of hunters, infiltrate, scope it out, determine how many shifters they held, how many humans, and the state of prisoners. Then they went in and got them out. Sometimes, with guns blazing and a hail of bullets. Sometimes, it was sneaking in as quietly as possible to save as many as they could. Especially when one of those inside might be the shifter former Ranger commander, Tony Sandoval a.k.a. Sandman, had put out a call about. A shifter who was very important to the new alpha in Oklahoma. The one Tony kept encouraging Oakley to meet. As if she had any thoughts of a pride outside of the men she lived and worked with. They were the only pride she needed.

She ducked inside the cavernous barn being used to hold prisoners and hugged the wall as she slid along the corridor. A gun was holstered on her right hip while her trusty K-bar was on her left. She might use them. She might not. Chances were, she'd stick to hand-to-hand combat or in her case, hand to claw. If luck was on her side, she might even be able to do a full shift and cause as much damage as possible to the assholes who made it their mission in life to hunt and kill as many of her kind as possible. Shifters. People lucky enough to have two sides, human and animal. There was an entire group of people who wanted her and those like her dead.

“First room's clear.”

The masculine voice of her righthand filled her ear. She and Trav had been friends since they were kids. Grown up together. Joined the Army together. Most assumed they were more than friends, but they'd be wrong. Trav was her best

friend and confidante. The one man she'd always been able to depend on.

"Keep going," Oakley ordered. "I'm heading left."

She heard Trav curse but ignored it as she moved in the opposite direction. She pushed open the first door and found a female shifter tied down to a surgical table, abdomen splayed wide. The woman's eyes were wide open and lifeless. Oakley crossed over and shut them. Not that it mattered. There was no changing whatever horrors the woman had seen before she died.

"One dead," she whispered into her mic. "Moving to the next room. Find Jason."

"Give me two seconds," Trav ordered, and Oakley heard footsteps behind her. She didn't need to turn. His scent hit her.

"Plans save lives," he admonished as he joined her.

"They knew we were coming. They had to. It's too quiet." And the quiet worried her. "We'll be lucky if we find anyone alive."

"That doesn't mean you go off alone," Trav warned.

She opened her mouth with a rebuttal, just as a roar filled the air. She and Trav took off at a run, him barking orders into his mic as they moved. Another roar and the sound of something hitting the wall hard. Or someone.

Carnage met her gaze as they burst into a large circular room. It appeared the hunters had herded everyone into one room. Oakley assumed they'd planned to kill everyone, but the masterpiece in the middle of the room had changed that. Bodies littered the floor. Both hunters, who could be distinguished by the clothing they wore, and the naked bodies of the men they'd captured.

The guy in front of her was maybe six-one with shaggy red hair and a full beard. He was on the thin side but still fiercely strong. Especially if they were pumping him full of the drugs they favored. Ones that suppressed the animal side to prevent shifting. Affected shifters still had advanced healing, but everything else was shut down. A wonder drug for hunters

created by their torture doctor, Victor Talbot. A dead man now. He'd been taken hostage by the very people whose lives he made hell. Served justice by one of them, also.

"What the fuck!" one of the guys said as the rest of the team filed into the room behind her. The masterpiece turned toward them, and another roar spilled from his lips. He moved and took a step in their direction. She automatically leaned in.

"Hold up, Oak," Trav warned. "You don't know what drugs they have running through his system."

True. There were drugs other than suppressants. Drugs that made shifters wild, so they'd fight to the death. Drugs that made them so horny they'd fuck anything that moved. Still... She couldn't deny what she felt sparking through the air between them.

"He won't hurt me."

"Oak," Trav called, but she ignored him and walked forward until she stood directly in front of the wild man.

"Hey, there," she whispered, keeping her hands at her sides. "We're here to help, big guy."

"Kenz..." He blinked several times, shook his head, then inhaled. "Not Kenz."

Another deep inhale then he reached for her with a growl, jerking her against his naked chest. Naked and bloody.

"Stand down," she ordered as she heard weapons clear when her team responded. "You won't hurt me, will you, big guy?"

She purred the last as she wiggled her hand between their bodies and trailed her fingers up his chest.

"Mine," he growled, and that claim of ownership rocked her to her core, making her slick with the need for a man whose name she didn't even know.

"Not yet," she whispered, but his grip tightened.

"You four, fan out. Check the rest of the barn. Find Jason."

She nodded her agreement with Trav's order, though she never took her eyes off the man before her.

"He's drugged."

Oakley glanced around her specimen to meet the gaze of another male. This one was beaten all to hell and didn't look as if he were healing very well.

"Did he do that to you?" Trav asked before Oakley could. She knew the answer, though, and they both responded as one.

"No."

The other guy gave a weak smile.

"They wanted him to. Wanted to make him kill every shifter in this room as punishment."

"Why?" Oakley asked, moving her gaze back to the man they discussed. His body vibrated with unleashed aggression.

"Because he tried to protect us."

This was from a young boy. Hell, he couldn't be more than ten or eleven.

"He did protect us, River," the first male said. "All of us. For as long as he could. No matter how many times they broke him."

"You're not healing," she said and went to step around the red-haired man.

He jerked her back to him with a growl.

"I'm right here," she promised, running her fingers over his chest again. "I'm not going anywhere. Trav, will you check on the others, please?"

He moved around her, giving them both a wide berth as he went to the boy first.

"Hey, River. How long have you been here?" Trav asked as he moved his hands gently over the boy's frame.

"I don't know," River replied.

“How long have you been held by these men?” Oakley asked.

River glanced around until his gaze landed on another figure. One that didn't look as if it would be getting back up.

“My father and I have always been here.”

Oakley bit her lip then jerked her head toward the downed figure. One of her team immediately moved in to assess.

“He's got a pulse. Weak but there.”

“You're not healing.” Trav repeated her earlier words as he moved to the first man who'd spoken.

“I've been here too long. I haven't felt my bear in years. Not since I was first captured.”

“How long have they held you?” Trav asked.

“Years,” the other man responded with a weary sigh. “My den was attacked. They killed... God, they killed so many. I went after them, but I was ambushed. Drugged and taken.”

There was raw pain in his voice. Pain Oakley understood.

“What's your name?” Trav asked.

“Jasper, Jasper Nielsen. I was part of...” He paused then shook his head before dropping his gaze to look at the floor. “I'm part of the Holloway den.”

“We'll get a hold of your alpha,” Trav promised, but Oakley was still focused on the man in front of her, who practically vibrated with whatever drugs ran through his system.

“How much did they give him?” she asked as the trembling increased beneath her fingertips.

Growls filled his throat, spilling into the air, as his fingertips flexed where he held her to him. He wasn't speaking, and she wondered if it was so he could maintain his control over the need to attack when there was no one left

standing for him to take down. No one except her and her team. She had a feeling if she weren't braced against his chest, he might be unable to control the drug-induced need to attack.

"Enough for several shifters," Jasper replied. "They brought in enough for all of us but only gave it to him. For Murphy. His name is Murphy Dockery."

"How are you even standing?" Oakley asked Murphy.

He gave one word in response. One word that every shifter in the room understood.

"Mine."

He gripped her tighter, pulling her so close it was as if he needed her inside his skin. Or maybe, he needed inside her.

"Fighting or fucking."

She jerked her head as the boy's father, River's father, spoke while he pushed himself to sit against the wall. River ran to him, climbing onto his lap and wrapping around him.

"What?" Oakley asked, her gaze flicking between the male claiming her and the one speaking.

"The drugs. His heart will explode without an outlet," River's father warned. "Fighting or fucking."

"Jesus Christ!" Trav exploded. "Don't even think it, Oak. He'll tear you apart!"

"Look at this room," Oakley stated calmly, refusing to raise her voice in case Murphy took that as a sign of her being in danger. "He'll kill every member of this team."

"Not a chance," Trav argued.

"Yes, he will. Because we all know Murphy Dockery is the very important shifter Tony reached out about. We won't hurt him. I seriously doubt Murphy will have the same regard for any of you while in his current drugged state."

"We can dart him," one of her team offered, a shifter they called Bolts, due to the lightning-shaped scar on his neck.

“Don’t mix the drugs,” River’s father warned. “Heart goes boom!”

He flicked his fingers and threw his hands out wide.

There was something very familiar about River’s father, but Oakley couldn’t place her finger on what. She was too concerned about the man holding her as if she were his only lifeline.

“Take the survivors and clear out,” she ordered.

“Oak—”

“Now, Trav. I’ve got this.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around Murphy while her team worked to clear the room. Trav waited until it was just the three of them and Bolts remaining. Bolts was Trav’s righthand, which meant he was usually in charge of the rest of the team when she and Trav were elsewhere. Why was he still in the room?

“The rest of the team have cleared the building. Four other survivors. Blane’s not here. Neither is Jason,” Trav muttered.

“Jason’s on the floor,” Bolts said softly, and she glanced at him then followed his gaze to the corner.

“Damn it,” she muttered then stroked Murphy’s chest when he growled again.

“He knew the risks,” Trav murmured, nodding at Bolts who moved over and picked up Jason, putting their teammate over his shoulder before leaving the room.

Murphy leaned down, burying his face in her hair and inhaling deeply.

“Mine,” rumbled up from his chest again.

He was instinct. More animal than man, which was saying something, since the drugs the hunters used meant he wouldn’t be able to shift if he wanted to.

“Tell me you’re not planning to lose your virginity with a drugged male in a roomful of bodies,” Trav pressed.

“Of course, I’m not having sex in here. Are you nuts?” Oakley fumed. “You know what else I’m not going to do? Have this conversation.”

“He could seriously hurt you,” Trav warned.

“No, he won’t,” she vowed and glanced up at Murphy, a man she trusted even more than the best friend warning her to step away. “He’s my mate.”

The words echoed in the room as if taunting the fates that had brought them to this place, this moment.

“Only you would meet your mate like this,” Trav stated with a laugh.

Murphy dropped his head, trailing his nose down her throat to the curve at the base.

“Fuck. This is crazy. I can’t leave you here with him,” Trav barked and took a step toward her.

With another growl, her mate struck, teeth sinking deep as he marked her. Oakley screamed, more from surprise than any sort of fear or pain. Trav reached for her, and she watched him fly across the room and hit the wall hard. He slid down, shaking his head the whole way. Her mate took a step toward Trav, and she slid her body in front of him.

“Look at me, big guy,” she pleaded. “I’m right here. Just you and me.”

He growled, glaring toward where Trav was smart enough to stay on his ass.

“He’s my friend.” Oakley reached up and tugged Murphy’s gaze back on her. “My best friend. Not always the brightest, but he’s the one I know will have my back no matter what’s heading our way.”

“Mine,” he growled, and Trav had the gall to laugh again.

“God save me from stupid men.”

That got her another growl.

“You, shut up.” She pointed at Trav, who mimed locking his lips shut as if they were still children.

“You. I get the whole mate-mine thing.” She waved her hand by her neck. “Have the bite mark to show for it. I get that you’re drugged and probably fighting hard to keep your control. I even get the fighting...” She paused, glance sweeping around the room toward all the bodies on the floor. “Which it looks like you’ve done. Fucking? Well... That’s not going to happen yet. Bite or no bite. Think of me as a girl who likes to be wooed. Hell, is your name really Murphy Dockery?”

“Yes.”

His voice was deep, guttural, showing how closely his animal rode him. The ultimate torture. There. Just under the skin with no ability to shift. As if man and beast stood on opposite sides of the thinnest glass.

“I’m Oakley, Murphy. Trav over there is going to help me get you out of here and into one of the Jeeps we have waiting. We’ll be out of here and somewhere safe soon.”

“The team will have reached out to Sandman at this point. We’ll have you back in Oklahoma with your pride as soon as we can. Will you be okay until then?” Trav asked Murphy.

“Us,” Murphy snarled, gaze locked firmly on Oakley.

“I’ll go with you, Murphy, but I can’t stay. Not yet.”

She’d promised herself she wouldn’t stop until her sperm donor and Marcus Blane were dead. Until both of them and their men paid for her mother’s death. Both of her mothers. Neither of whom she’d ever known.

“You’re going with me.”

She got a full sentence from her mate then found herself thrown over his shoulder, which seemed prophetic since she was absolutely sure he was going to turn her life upside down.

Chapter Three

Murphy couldn't let her go. It had nearly killed him to separate long enough for him to shower and change. If the one she'd called Trav hadn't snarled that he reeked of filth and blood and wasn't a fit mate for anyone, Murphy might have skipped the shower. He'd taken one look at himself in the mirror of the room they'd taken him to and seen the truth. Still, he'd been quick but thorough, and when he'd got back to his mate, he'd pulled her right back into his arms. One sniff said she'd showered, too. Probably ridding herself of the gore he'd transferred onto her. The chopper had been there when they'd come out, and no one said how long it might have waited.

She'd led him to the helicopter, and they'd been airborne in minutes. She was the only thing keeping him sane, keeping him from ripping apart every person around them. The helicopter ride had almost broken him. None of them seemed to understand he was hanging by a thread. Except her. His mate. Oakley. She sat on his lap, arms wrapped around him, head against his shoulder. He held her. Close and tight. And he breathed her in.

At first glance, he'd thought his friend Kenzie had found him. Thought his brother might walk through the door at any time. Then Oakley's scent had hit him, and he'd instantly known who she was. His mate. His mate who had to be at least ten years younger than him.

"We're here," she said against his ear.

He followed her gaze as the copter landed and saw two vehicles and two men he didn't know. Oakley had assured him during the drive to the helicopter that she'd make sure no one was told he'd been found until he was in control of himself. She'd understood without him having to say anything.

“I’ve got you,” she said, showing just how in tune with him she was. “That’s Sandman, Tony Sandoval, and the hulk next to him is Aleksy Costas. They’ve been together since they were kids. They’re good people, Murphy. Family. Tony’s my cousin.”

There were two other shifters with them in the helicopter. The bear shifter, Jasper Nielsen, and a female who looked to be in bad shape. The rest were following in vehicles but should be here sometime tomorrow.

“Oak, it’s good to see you. What going on?” the one she’d pointed out as Tony greeted them as the door slid open. “Holy shit!”

Murphy growled and hated it. He couldn’t fucking control it.

“Not a word, Tony,” Oakley warned.

“I have to let Tah know he’s alive. That he’s here. There’s no way I can keep this from him.”

“No,” Murphy snarled.

“Not until he’s ready, Tony. We’ll take him to your place and have you look him over. They pumped him full of drugs to try to make him kill the other shifters in the room with him. Instead, he killed a dozen hunters while protecting the other shifters with him. He’s barely hanging on to his control. Fight or fuck.”

Oakley rubbed her fingers over Murphy’s chest while she shared what was going on with him.

“His control looks fine, right now.” Tony’s gaze ran over Murphy but got locked on where her hand touched him. “And what the hell do you mean fight or fuck?”

“One of the other shifters told us not to sedate him.”

Murphy growled again.

“Shh, you’re fine. We’re fine. The other shifter said Murphy needed to have an outlet for the drugs in his system, fighting or fucking, or his heart would go boom.”

“And why are you involved in this, Oak?” Tony asked. “Why are you here when every time I’ve invited you, there’s been one reason or another as to why you can’t make it?”

“Because he’s my mate, Tony. Murphy is my mate. I have to make sure he’s okay before I can go after Blane.”

“We.” Murphy paused as he fought to maintain control. “We go.”

“There’s a whole pride of shifters here who want a piece of Blane, Oak. Not just you and Murphy. Besides there’s something else I need to make you aware of since you’re here.”

“I get that you need the reunion, but move your asses. We have two other shifters who need medical treatment,” Aleksy barked until he saw Murphy. “Jesus Christ! Murphy Dockery.”

“Take the other two to the med center at the pride. You didn’t see Murphy. You don’t know he’s here,” Tony warned.

“Fuck, Tony. We’ve got to do something about this death wish of yours.”

“Aleksy,” Tony growled, which was funny to Murphy since Tony was human and the male he growled at was most decidedly not. Aleksy was over six and a half feet of shifter. Plus, there was a weird thing with his eyes.

“Primal.”

Aleksy glanced at him and gave a nod.

“I stay that way.”

“Unless his delightful mate is with him,” Tony murmured. “You’ll love her Oak.”

“She must be special to take on Aleksy and you,” Oakley suggested. “Since I know to take on one of you is to take on both.”

“It’s good to see you, Oak. It’s been too long,” Aleksy said. “I’ll save the bear hug and kiss on the cheek for when

your mate isn't on edge and looking like he'd attack any man who tried to touch you."

Murphy growled, and all three of them chuckled.

"Let's get you both to the house. We'll do some bloodwork and see what those bastards pumped into your system. I'll counteract what I can," Tony assured them.

"Take the blood then give us some space for a bit," Oakley said.

Aleksy chuckled while Tony swore.

"It's good to have you back, Oak," Aleksy said as he walked away.

Tony herded them to the Jeep, and once everyone was in, he took off. Murphy held Oakley on his lap and was relieved when she leaned her head on his shoulder and didn't fight. He saw Tony glance back at them several times, but the other man didn't say anything. He pulled up in front of a farmhouse that was the last place Murphy expected for this man to live. Even Oakley laughed.

"Nice lodging," she offered with a smirk.

"It has its charm," Tony responded as they exited the vehicle and headed up the front steps.

"Down this way," Tony directed as they moved through the house. There were several men in the front room, several more at the dining table they passed. Some laughing. Some serious. They were a unit, a family.

"Oak! Son of a bitch, it's good to see you!" A big guy bounded to his feet with a baby against his chest, head on his shoulder, butt settled on the guy's forearm.

Oakley turned when she heard her name, and Murphy watched her eyes light up at the sight of the other man. Jealousy hit him hard. Not an emotion he was used to feeling.

"A baby!" she exclaimed. "Since when do you have a baby, Jonah?"

The guy came over and tugged her against his bare chest for a hug. When Murphy growled, he laughed.

“Jonah is a friend, Murphy. He’s part of Tony’s alpha team. He’s harmless,” Oakley tried to assure him.

The male was a caged beast. The last thing he appeared was harmless, even with a grin on his lips and baby in his arms.

“When did you get a mate, Oak? And what does Trav think?” Jonah joked, patting the baby on the back. “Besides, baby boy isn’t mine. Unfortunately. Little Emery here belongs to Mitch and his mate, Quinn.”

“Quinn?” Murphy asked.

“Quinn Jensen.”

“They found her,” Murphy murmured.

Jonah’s gaze narrowed on Murphy’s face.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Nope. You didn’t see anything,” Tony warned, coming back and stepping in front of Murphy. “He’s not here. You all got that!” Tony yelled to everyone in the vicinity. “No one saw a red-haired Irishman anywhere near this farmhouse.”

Jonah shook his head. “What is it with you and the death wish you have with the pride? The first time was bad enough, but I think Tah would have killed you if Aleksy and Daniel hadn’t been there.”

“Shut up, Jonah,” Tony snapped.

“Why was Tah going to kill you?” Murphy asked. “Wait! Daniel was there? He’s alive?”

Tony glanced at him. “Yeah, we got him out of there pretty quickly after he was shot. Before we realized you’d been taken. Damn, Murphy. I’m sorry. There’s a lot to catch you up on. Both of you.”

“Why did Tah try to kill you?” Murphy asked again.

“He gave Vic a shot to help her finish healing and wake up after she was shot all to hell,” Jonah explained. “Behind Tah’s back.”

“Bullshit,” Tony snarled.

“Why was Vic shot?” Murphy asked.

“Who is Vic?” Oakley asked.

“I’ll tell you about everyone later,” Murphy said then faced Tony again. “Explain.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a breath. When he spoke, it wasn’t Murphy he looked at. It was Oakley.

“I’m going to make this quick. Murphy will know most of the players. You won’t. I’ll give you an idea of who is who as I explain. Daniel is a lion shifter who was traveling with Murphy when they met up with Aleksy and me in Illinois. It’s when Aleksy met his mate. Blane took her.”

“Wait? Blane was actually involved in taking her?” Oakley asked.

“Lyra,” Tony answered then glanced at Murphy. “Blane took her because her brother is a member of the pride here. Reno Esponetti.”

“He wanted Amia,” Murphy snarled. Just the thought of that bastard getting his hands on Reno’s mate after the hell he’d put her through was reprehensible. He held his questions, allowing Tony to make it quick. There would be time later to find out if Reno really did have a sister.

“Yes, he wanted Reno’s mate, who happens to be the only child of Marcus Blane.”

“He’s not getting his hands on Amia,” Murphy stated. “He’s done enough to her.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed. “He has, and he won’t. I said that to explain why we were all in Illinois. How I met Daniel and flew him back here ASAP. Which is how we met the pride. We removed the bullets, but Daniel wasn’t healing the way he should have. His lion was shutting down.” Tony paused to

clear his throat. “He asked me to take over his care which caused a bit of a stir. I gave him a shot, and now, he’s primal.”

“What?” Murphy demanded.

“He’s fine,” Tony assured them. “Ariel ran off. Called Daniel for help. Couldn’t get a hold of you.”

“Fuck!” Murphy growled. “Is she okay?”

“This will go a lot faster if you let me talk and save any questions for when we’re drawing your blood,” Tony snapped. “Ariel called. Daniel went and refused to leave. This was when she found Quinn Jensen, the mom of this gorgeous little nugget here. Ariel and Daniel are mated now, but there was a little issue when they went to the Holloways for a visit. Ariel and her friend, a bear shifter mated to one of the Holloways, were captured by hunters. We were able to track them and get to Ariel before she was seriously hurt. While we were rescuing her, we were able to take Talbot.”

“He’s here?” Oakley demanded, glancing around wildly. “He’s here now.”

“Yes and no,” Tony answered, reaching out and squeezing her hand with his before continuing.

“Where is he?” Murphy demanded with a growl as he took Oakley’s hand in his. Family or not, he couldn’t handle another man touching her so freely. Not yet.

“Patience,” Tony said then continued. “They sent teams in to try and get to him. At least, we thought it was about getting to him. They sent groups in. Tested the perimeters. Almost took Quinn once. Didn’t realize they were after her until almost too late,” Tony told them.

“They went for her and got them all,” Murphy murmured.

“What?” Oakley asked.

“The shifter. The kid’s dad. He said that to me. The alpha. Shot them. Shot them all. Waited so long, and now, he’s gone. One by one by one. No more savior. Gone. Took my friend. Took his mate. Killed the father. The wolves will howl.

Killed them all. One by one by one. They all fall down.”
Murphy shook his head. “They came for Quinn. That’s the her. The alpha is obvious. They shot Tah. The savior? I’m guessing that’s Gabriel.”

Tony nodded. “He’s a liger shifter, Oak. The avenging angel of shifter lore. He and Tah are both fine.”

“The father. The wolves will howl? Shit, they got Professor Mueller!”

“He’s fine, too. Jess and her alpha wolves came in and helped with his care,” Tony promised.

“So did Tony,” Jonah added, reminding Murphy he was there.

“Who else?” Murphy asked.

“Gideon and Vic. Vic drew the fire to give the rest of them time to plan. She took out several before she went down trying to protect the professor. Tah took some down with a table then used his body to shield Abby and Quinn. Gabriel tried to shield Tah. It was a bloodbath in there. They’re all fine now, but it was touch and go at the time,” Tony told them.

“And Talbot?” Oakley asked.

“Quinn killed him,” Tony said then cupped Oakley’s chin and tilted her face to meet his gaze. “He can’t hurt us anymore. Not anymore.”

Murphy growled but kept his touch gentle as he urged Oakley farther into his arms and away from the other man. Tony could get the hint to keep his hands to himself or suffer the consequences.

She nodded.

“Why would he want to hurt the two of you?” Murphy asked.

“Because he hates—hated—Tony. My cousin is more brilliant than Victor Talbot could ever have hoped to be. Not to mention he’s a decent, kind human being,” Oakley whispered.

“Decent? Kind?” Jonah gave a mock shudder, but Murphy could tell the other man was picking up on the tension and trying to provide a buffer for it.

“And you?” Murphy asked his mate, a woman he didn’t even know. “Why would he want to hurt you?”

Oakley looked at him, and even before she opened her mouth, he knew he wouldn’t like what she said.

“Because I’m the only child of Dr. Victor Talbot.”

Chapter Four

Oakley stood by the door, watching as Tony drew another vial of blood from Murphy's arm. He wasn't speaking to her. Actually, currently, neither man was. Tony because she'd told him to shut up. Murphy because... Well, he was probably judging her by the blood she carried. She was used to that. It was part of the reason she steered clear of large groups of shifters. It was why she stuck with her team and stayed in the field.

"Is his body still here?" Oakley asked.

"Yes," Tony replied.

"No," Murphy growled.

She ignored the man the fates had decided was her mate. He'd bitten her, but they hadn't consummated anything. At the rate her temper was igniting, it wouldn't be anytime soon either.

"I want to see him," she told Tony.

"No," Murphy had the audacity to growl again.

"No one asked you, big guy, so get over yourself," she snapped, refusing to look at him. "I want to see his body. I need to see it."

"I've got enough blood for now. Why don't I show you to a room..." Tony trailed off as he met her gaze.

"You can show him to a room then take me to see Talbot," she ordered.

Murphy stood, took two steps, and used his body to press her against the wall. When she tried to jerk away, he slipped his hand between her head and the wall, protecting her. It was insulting.

“I’m going to see my sperm donor,” she snarled, leaning up into his face, which was fairly easy with the way he leaned down toward her.

“We’ll go,” Murphy snarled right back before snapping his stare to Tony. “How long’s he been dead?”

“A few weeks,” Tony offered with a shrug. “There’s been a lot going on. Plus, he was out of his mind at the end. I’m studying him. Trying to see what he might have taken.”

“You’re studying his body?” Oakley was impressed and repulsed at the same time.

“When was the last time you saw him, Oak?”

She shook her head, running her hand over Murphy’s chest when he growled. Then she shook her head again as she snatched her hand back and glared at him.

“Five years. Not since...” She shot a quick glance at Murphy, whose gaze was glued to her. “Not since the last time.”

“Let’s go.”

Murphy reached behind her and opened the door before grabbing her hand.

“Room,” he snapped at Tony. “Now.”

“I don’t—”

She snapped her mouth shut when Murphy pulled her to him, letting her feel every hard inch of his body where it touched hers. Every. Hard. Inch.

“Here or in a room. Choose.”

“Oak?” Tony asked softly.

“Room,” she muttered.

“Oak?” Tony asked again.

“Room. Now,” she snarled then shoved her finger against Murphy. “Growl at me one more time, and I’m going to shove my fist down your throat.”

He chuckled. The bastard chuckled, and she was pretty sure she heard Tony snicker, as well. He led them down the hallway toward the back of the house then paused and opened a door.

“This one will give you the most privacy. Find me when you...” He broke off and waved his hands before turning and walking away.

“What the hell was that?” she muttered then found herself tossed across the room.

She hit the mattress, bounced twice, then had a horny shifter draped over her like a weighted blanket. His hands were everywhere. So was his mouth. He licked over the bite mark he’d left, and she shuddered.

“It’s not too late to back out of this,” she said then moaned as he scraped his teeth down her neck.

“There’s no backing out,” he growled.

“Are you sure you want Victor Talbot’s daughter for a mate?” she snarled.

“I want you,” he snarled back.

“Then why the silent treatment after you found out?”

He paused, lifting his head from her neck, one hand already sliding up under her shirt.

“You think I care about that? I’m barely hanging on. I was close to ripping your clothes off and nailing you to the wall while your Tony watched.”

She grinned, imagining the look of horror Tony would have worn had that happened.

“You sound better,” she offered. “You’re speaking in full sentences.”

“I need you, lass. I know we don’t know much about one another, but I figure we’ll have a lifetime together to learn. Right now, I need to feel you. Skin to skin. I need to be inside you,” he groaned. “I need it before I lose control and hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she murmured, repeating the words she’d given Trav in the barn room where they’d found Murphy.

“You’re a virgin, and I’m hanging by a thread, Oakley. You’re my mate. I want to love you, not fuck you. At least, not our first time. I don’t want that to be your memory.”

“I landed myself a romantic,” she murmured.

Murphy moaned then in one quick move he gripped the hem of her shirt and pulled it up and over her head. Her bra was gone in another blink, but he didn’t immediately go to her breasts. He kissed her. Softly. Sweetly. Even though his body trembled. No, she didn’t know everything about him, but his actions spoke volumes. He was a man who would take on a roomful of hunters to protect those around him. He was a man who held himself steady, despite what they’d injected in him. He put her first when his body was probably demanding he take her, ride her hard and fast, over and over again.

“Ah, lass. You’re so beautiful.”

He trailed kisses along her neck, licked the spot where he’d bit her, then dipped his head lower to brush his lips across her turgid nipple.

“Murphy.”

She’d kissed before. Had a man touch her with his hands. Above her clothes. She’d never known anyone like Murphy. He moved down her body, his mouth tasting every inch of her along the way. At some point, he maneuvered her out of the rest of her clothes, tugging off her jeans and panties and tossing them to the floor before jerking his shirt off. How could a man look so sexy with healing cuts and darkened bruises? With a body that wasn’t in peak condition. Yet, she couldn’t look away. Not as those skillful fingers moved to the button on the jeans they’d given him to wear, popping it open and easing down the zipper. They glided down his thighs, but her gaze stopped and stayed on the erection where it rose thick and firm. She reached for him.

“Don’t!” he snapped, and she froze in place, eyes wide, fingers reaching greedily for what was on offer.

Control. He didn’t want to lose control. He didn’t want to hurt her. She knew he wouldn’t, though. No, a man like Murphy would never hurt his mate, and she was ready for him to loosen his grip on that tight control. She touched, wrapping her fingers around the thick shaft and gliding them down to the base before tugging them back up to the head and swirling her palm around it. He let her do it twice more, a groan spilling from his lips. She looked up his body, saw the exposed line of his throat, watched his Adam’s apple bob, then leaned in and licked over his crown.

“Fuck!”

He exploded into action, pushing her back on the bed, pushing her thighs wide and dropping his mouth to her core. He held her open, using his mouth for the most intimate kiss she’d ever had.

“Oh, God!”

He crooned something against her folds, and the vibration felt incredible. Her hands were in his hair. She tugged him closer then tried to push him away. He didn’t stop. He ate as if he were starving. She screamed as she came. She was still coming when he rose over her and thrust deep. The sound he made was animalistic, but it was the man she wrapped her arms and legs around. The man who rode her hard, giving her orgasm after orgasm. He turned her to her stomach and jerked her hips up until she was on her knees. Then he took her from behind, and God, he hit so deep. She dropped her chest to the mattress and gripped the covers tightly while he brought her to another climax. Drool trickled from the corner of her mouth, and she was certain her brain was mush.

She groaned as he pulled out and rolled her onto her back once more.

“Murphy.”

“Shh, baby,” he groaned as he managed to get them so that he stood beside the bed while her ass was just barely over the edge. “Put those sexy feet up here.”

He took both her legs and placed her ankles over his left shoulder, holding them there while he stepped closer and took her again. One hand held her legs in place. The other gripped her hip. His gaze stayed on her face.

“Tell me it feels good,” he commanded.

“So good,” she agreed.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“Yours. All yours,” she vowed.

“Mine,” he agreed. “All mine.”

In that moment, with him inside her, her body awash with pleasure she’d never known, there was nothing else she wanted to be.

Chapter Five

Murphy felt like the biggest dick in the world. He'd taken his mate's virginity and continued to take her until they'd tried as many positions as he could think of. Hell, at one point, he'd had her nearly folded in half. He'd fucked her for hours. Came at least four times before they'd rested. He'd been hard again within an hour. Hard and hungry for his gorgeous mate with her long, dark curls and golden eyes. And she'd met him with an equal and urgent hunger every time. Now, she lay curled on the bed beside him, one perfect breast unveiled, the nipple soft from slumber. He traced a finger around it and watched as it peaked.

"Again," she murmured and rolled toward him.

He couldn't help but smile.

"No. I need to go see my family. My brother."

She sat up, ran her hands through her hair and stretched, her breasts jutting toward him.

"I could be persuaded," he muttered, cupping her and rubbing his thumbs over her nipples.

She pushed his hands away as she rose to her knees, and Murphy groaned while he drank her in.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

"Great."

He leaned in and dropped a kiss on her lips then took it deeper when she gave an eager response. He forced himself back, knowing he needed to see Finn, Tah, Reno, Logan, Zane and the rest of them. Diane and Professor Mueller would want to look at him. He'd have them check with Tony on the blood taken last night.

"You're dressed. Give me a minute."

She jumped out of bed and bounced in the most perfect way.

“No rush. Stay here. Go back to sleep for a bit then catch up with Tony. I’ll come get you later.”

He’d been rough on her. Kept her up most of the night. She needed to rest because he knew when he took her to his cabin later, he’d spend the entire night making love to her again. He dropped another kiss onto her upturned face and forced himself to turn and head out the door.

Tony glanced up as they passed each other.

“You’re up. How’re you feeling?”

“Fine. I’ll go see Diane later. I need to find Finn, Tah, and everyone. Let them know I’m back.”

“No need,” Tony told him then nodded toward the front of the house. “We couldn’t put off letting them know you were here any longer. I gave you the night. I reached out to your brother this morning then called Tah.”

Murphy continued toward the door at a faster pace, pushing it open and stepping out into the sun and fresh air and family. Finn was leaning against the porch rail but turned as soon as Murphy walked out. They both moved, chests hitting hard while they wrapped their arms around each other. Tears fell like rain, and Murphy didn’t care.

“I couldn’t feel you,” Finn growled, stepping back. He punched Murphy in the shoulder. “You shut me out, you bastard.”

“I couldn’t let you go through that again.” Then he hugged his brother again. “God, I missed you. Every day. I shut you out...”

Murphy paused, hanging his head and shaking it back and forth before meeting Finn’s gaze again.

“I shut you out, then I couldn’t find you. I’ll never block you out again.”

“Hell, brother. What did they do to you?” Finn asked.

“I’ll tell you with everyone else. I don’t...” Another head shake. “I don’t want to tell it more than once.”

“Christ. It almost killed me when you were gone. Went out of my mind with worry. We searched for you. Quinn thought you might be in New Mexico.”

“I heard Quinn was found. Why would she think I was in New Mexico?”

“She said it was an important facility for Talbot. Sick bastard. She figured if Blane was as obsessed with you as we figured, then they’d stash you there,” Finn offered. “Let’s head to the main house.”

Finn grabbed him again and hugged him tight.

“Let’s go,” Finn ordered as he released him and pointed to the ATVs. “I told Tah to gather everyone. He was mad as hell when he found out you’d arrived yesterday and spent the night at Tony’s. *I’m* mad as hell. Tony said you were in pretty bad shape when you arrived.”

“I was drugged.”

“Bastards. I fucking hate hunters. Every fucking one of them.”

“I know,” Murphy agreed. “Let’s head out. I’ve missed you guys.”

Tah was on the porch when they arrived at the house. Abby beside him. Reno and Amia, and Logan and Clara were all there. Daniel stood with them, too, with his arm around Ariel, who stood close to his side. Next to them were Daniel’s brother, Gabriel, and Kenzie. Finn stood beside Murphy. Tears filled Murphy’s eyes as it hit him that he was home. He was with his family, and he wasn’t just speaking of his brother. He was speaking about his pride. The brother who’d left behind Ireland a long time ago to stay with Murphy. The soldiers he’d fought and bonded with, and the mates they’d taken. He couldn’t wait to introduce his mate to them. For her to become one of them.

Tah headed down the steps and met Murphy with a hard hug.

“It’s good to have you home, brother.”

Murphy returned the squeeze, then Tah stepped back, patting him on the shoulder.

“Let’s head in. There’s a lot to talk about.”

Daniel lingered on the steps with Ariel, and Murphy headed straight for them.

“A great day to die!” Murphy snarled, repeating the words Daniel had spoken prior to being shot multiple times.

It was a memory that had haunted Murphy while he’d been in captivity. He’d feared Daniel was dead. Hell, he’d been the walking dead before that, rejected by the mate who now stood next to him. Daniel had thrown himself into danger after danger, as if daring the fates to kill him. Murphy had walked into every dangerous situation with him. Not because he had a death wish, but because he knew Daniel needed someone to watch out for him until he and Ariel could figure out how to bridge the distance between them.

“I’m so sorry, Murph,” Daniel swore as he hugged him. “Christ! The hell you’ve been through. It’s my fault, and I know it. I don’t know how I can make it up to you, but—”

“Stop,” Murphy ordered. “Seeing the two of you together is all I need.”

Ariel gave a cry and threw herself at him. Murphy wrapped his arms around the girl who’d become a baby sister to him from the moment she’d arrived at the Colorado cabin with a bad attitude and sharp wit. He’d seen the hurt behind it, and he and Finn had decided she was family. He hugged her fiercely before dropping a kiss atop her head then stepping back.

“I see you finally let this morose bastard win you over. Please, God, tell me you made him work for it?”

Ariel giggled, something Murphy couldn’t remember her doing before, and Daniel growled. Ariel stepped into him, moving her hand to his chest and rubbing. Murphy watched the tension ease from Daniel’s frame, and his eyes...settled.

“You’re primal.”

Daniel nodded. “Tony’s my doctor now. Tah doesn’t like it. Neither does Gabriel. But they accept it.”

“Met Tony last night.”

“We heard this morning. Tah might not show it, but he’s pissed,” Daniel warned.

“Inside,” Tah called from the door, and the rest of them headed into the main living room of the house.

“Brother.”

Reno grabbed Murphy for a brief hard hug, then Logan did the same.

“Where are the others?” Murphy asked as he took a good look at those around him and noted who was missing.

“Professor Mueller is in the labs below with Regan. Diane and Zane are at the medical center with Miles and Griffin. We had a couple of shifters brought in last night that needed immediate medical attention,” Abby answered.

“What about Gideon?” Murphy asked. The jaguar shifter had proven himself indispensable when it came to the medical center and taking care of injured shifters.

“He’s with Vic,” Tah said, and from the way he said it, it was clear something was still wrong with the badass Marine Murphy knew and loved. “She’s still recovering.”

“What does that mean?” Murphy wanted to know. “Is she okay?”

“She’s in a coma.” Reno was the one to answer. He was Tah’s second in command with the pride, just as he’d been when they’d been in the Marines. “Last time I spoke to you, we were in Illinois. What the hell happened, Murph?”

“I got caught. Dared. Woke up. Wished I hadn’t.”

“Murphy,” Finn growled.

“We all know what happens when a shifter is captured. Most of us have been there. It was fucking hell. Blane took a

special interest in me.”

“Because of me,” Amia said. “I’m sorry, Murphy.”

“Not your fault, lass. I know better than anyone you can’t pick who your father is. A lot of people draw the short straw on that one,” Murphy told her before continuing. “They moved me around a lot. Blane liked to keep me handy for when he had some anger to work out.”

“Oh, God,” Abby murmured.

“The other two shifters who flew in with me? Any word on them?”

“The bear shifter, Jasper, is stable and will be moved later today. Back to the Holloway Den. One of the Holloways is on his way now.” Tah stated everything matter-of-factly. “The woman was in pretty bad shape. They took her into surgery as soon as she arrived. She’s got drugs in her system to repress her animal, so she’s not recovering at a normal shifter rate.”

Murphy nodded. He had plenty of those drugs in his system, as well.

“Jensen Holloway has been doing some research into that. He’s managed to create something to counter the repressive drug. He’s used it on several bear shifters with great success.” Tony walked into the room. He nodded to Tah then moved in close to Murphy. “What the fuck did you do to Oak?”

“Nothing. What the hell are you talking about? Is she okay?” Murphy demanded.

“Who is Oak?” Tah asked.

“His mate,” Tony snarled. “Though according to her, that’s not true.”

Murphy growled. “She’s mine.”

“Yeah, well, your mate is currently meeting with her team, who brought in the other five shifters who survived with you. Then she’s heading out with them. When I asked her about you, she said you could go fuck yourself. Something

about you being too embarrassed of her to want to introduce her to your brother and pride.”

“You’re mated?” Amia asked.

“Why would your mate feel like you were embarrassed of her?” Abby demanded.

“Because she’s my cousin,” Tony snarled in reply. “The only child of Dr. Victor Talbot.”

“She’s my mate,” Murphy snapped, but Tony ignored him.

“You want to know why I hate Talbot? You want to know who he left for me to find? My aunt. Oak’s mother, or at least, one of them. He implanted his sperm into the harvested egg of a female lion shifter then implanted the fertilized zygote into his wife. She carried Oakley for three and half months. Until that sick bastard decided it was time to take her. Then he ripped Oak out of her mother and left my aunt to bleed out. Left her to die and took Oak and hid her from me for sixteen years!” Tony roared the last of it. “She still doesn’t talk about what she lived through. The testing, the experiments, the years of absolute hell Talbot put her through.”

“Fuck me,” Finn muttered.

“She ran away from him and found me, bringing her best friend Travis Gracen with her. They stayed for two years, and in that time, Oakley formed her own team of soldiers, as she calls them. A group of shifters she found and saved. They’ve been together for four years. They’re her family, the way all of you are family.”

Tony finally turned back to Murphy.

“I don’t know what you said or did, but you hurt her. She’ll be leaving in the next half hour, and if you let her go without you, you’ll never get her back.”

Tony nodded to the now silent room then turned and walked out. Murphy roared then followed Tony out of the house, ignoring the questions thrown at him. He jumped in the passenger side of the Jeep as Tony was pulling away. Neither

of them said anything. Tony had made his point. Murphy had tried to protect her and instead managed to fuck up royally. When Tony finally spoke again, his words cut Murphy deep.

“When I asked Oak why she didn’t want to stay with me, why she didn’t want to come here and live, she told me that everyone she loves leaves her eventually. She said it was lonely when I went away on missions. It’s easier for her if she walks away first. The only person who’s been a consistent part of her life is Trav, and for the last four years, her team. Eight male shifters who would lay down their lives for her without a second thought.”

Murphy growled.

Tony glared at him.

“Thought you might want to know what you’re walking in to.”

Chapter Six

Oakley stared at the door as her mate walked out, leaving her behind to rest. To rest? Was he fucking kidding her? He was going to see his brother, his pride, and he didn't want her to be a part of it. Of them. He'd left her. The mate who'd claimed her a hundred times with his continuous *mine, mine, mine*. He'd left her and gone to them. His family. Making her what? Definitely not one of them. Meaningless. She was meaningless.

Poor, little lioness with dirty, dirty blood. The hunters hate you because you're an animal. The shifters hate you because you're mine. Nowhere to belong. No one to love you. You're meaningless. To everyone but me. I have plans for you, my little kitty cat. Big, big plans.

Talbot's words would never leave her. They'd always be in her head, reminding her that she had no worth. No value to anyone. Except for him, and he was dead. She needed to see him. To see for herself he wouldn't pop up somewhere when she least expected it, when she was least prepared. She hurriedly dressed and headed out to find Tony.

"Where is he?"

Tony glanced up from where he was going over some paperwork.

"Your team should be here in the next thirty to forty minutes. They're bringing in the rest of the shifters you found with you mate."

"What mate?" Oakley asked then gave an exaggerated look around them. "Do you see a mate? I don't. Therefore, no mate."

"Oak, he went to see his family," Tony said softly.

"Yes, and I'm not part of them."

“Oak—”

“Just take me to see my family, Tony. Now.”

Tony stared at her for a long moment, but she ignored him. Finally, he stood, turning and walking down a hallway. He paused halfway down it and pushed a panel, creating a door for them to step through. She followed, a little lost in the past, but Murphy kept intruding, as well. The way he'd touched her. The way he'd made love to her then fucked her until she'd screamed herself hoarse. Then he'd walked away. Telling her to rest.

“You're growling,” Tony said as they moved into a larger space.

Oak bit down on her bottom lip to try to curb the animal urges running through her body. Suddenly, she had a better understanding of the words fighting or fucking, but she had no outlet for either. Yet.

“I'll be heading out with my team when they get here,” she told Tony. She'd find a fight soon enough.

“Oakley, you're mated.”

“No,” she countered. “I'm fucked. Very thoroughly. By a man who was too embarrassed by me to take me with him to meet his family. I won't be a secret. I won't be the dirty lie that gets set aside and only trotted out when my mate needs to fuck.”

“Oak.”

“I won't,” she snapped. “I'm giving you the courtesy of letting you know. Which is more than I'll give the man I spent the night with. Now, where is my *father*?”

Tony led them into a larger open space. A wall of windows looked into some type of lab, but that wasn't where Tony led her.

“This way.”

He paused before a large, steel door, and when he pushed it open, refrigerated air washed over her, bringing a chill to her skin. She stepped inside, pausing briefly as she

realized it was Tony's version of a morgue, complete with refrigerated drawers. Leave it to Tony to have this hidden within the walls of his house. He stepped forward and pulled open one of the doors, sliding out the drawer fully before reaching down to unzip the bag.

"Why are you keeping him here?"

Oakley asked then forgot when the zipper lowered and the monster's face appeared. It was relaxed. That was the first thing she noticed. No pinched anger. No cold laughter while he taunted her. He was silent and still. In her whole life, she couldn't remember a single time when she'd seen him that way.

"I'd like to be alone with him."

Maybe, it was how softly she spoke. Maybe, it was her expression or tone of voice. She didn't know, but something got through to Tony.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"I just need a moment alone."

"I've got something to do. I'll be back in thirty minutes. Don't leave until I get back, Oak. Promise me."

Another nod. She couldn't look away from Talbot's face.

"Words, Oak. I need them."

"Yes, I'll wait," she whispered.

"I'll be back as quickly as I can," Tony vowed then finally left her alone.

She heard the door close behind him but still didn't move. Her brain couldn't process what her eyes saw. He was dead. Tony's words from the night before echoed in her mind.

He can't hurt us anymore.

No, he couldn't, but the damage Talbot had inflicted would linger. Probably for the rest of her life. Even now, she

heard his voice in her head, telling her how she was an animal. How her mother couldn't have children, so he'd made her one. A daughter and a pet all in one. He hadn't beaten her. Hadn't vivisected her as he had other shifters. He'd run tests on her. Always taking her blood. Especially when she was shifted into her lion. He'd cage her then take as much blood as he could before she managed to dislodge the needle.

I have plans for you. Big plans. Going to build my own zoo.

Then he'd laugh and laugh and laugh. One time, she'd woken up stripped naked and tied down to a table. Talbot had three male shifters brought into the room. All three of them had been injected with a drug to make them *excited*. She'd been fourteen years old and terrified. Worse had been when he'd talked about their endowments and how they'd tear through her hymen and rut her until they were finished. Then he'd tell her the drugs could last for hours. Once she was crying and begging, terrified out of her mind about what her sperm donor, the man who should be her fucking father, had planned for her, he'd laughed and sent the shifters into another room. One where another female shifter had been tied down and violated while Oakley was forced to listen to her screams.

Then there were the times she angered him and he put her in his torture chamber. That was the most fun. Waking up to find she was in coffin below ground surrounded by cement. He'd keep her there for days. Her eyes glued to the clock that counted down how much oxygen she had available. He always let it run out, waited until she was fighting for breath, until she was sure that would be the time he let her die.

“I think I've always hated you. I imagine I felt it from my first breath when you ripped me out of my screaming mother and left her to die. All the times you told me I was created. Created by you. That I belonged to you. I could go outside when I was good, as long as I behaved and did the tests without complaint. Just a few skin cells, little cat. Blood. Hair. Waking up knowing you'd cut me open. Not knowing what you did.”

She paced away from him as the past rushed in to greet her.

“I was a child. Your child!” she screamed then shook her head furiously. “No, I was never your child, was I? Your creation. Your experiment. Your little lioness. Not human. A weapon to use when the time was right.”

She walked back to him and punched him. Hard. Then did it again.

“I deserved a father. I deserved a mother. I deserved to be more than an animal. I deserved more! I deserved more!”

She was screaming again, and she couldn't stop. She was hitting and screaming, and she couldn't stop doing either. She couldn't fucking stop. Then arms wrapped around her, tugging her back and away, and a familiar scent hit her senses.

“Trav. Oh, God, Trav. I can't... I can't...”

“Breathe, Oak. I'm here. I've got you.”

They were the words she wanted, but they were from the wrong man. The wrong man when Trav had never been the wrong anything for her. Before Murphy. Before the mate who was too embarrassed to introduce her to his family. She curled into Trav and clung to him while she sobbed. She should be celebrating Talbot's death. He couldn't hurt her anymore. Instead, she felt ripped apart and left empty. She felt...too much, and she didn't know how to stop. So, she clung to Trav and cried until she was drained. Until there was nothing left.

“I need to leave,” she whispered. “I can't be here.”

“What happened, Oak? What did your mate do?” Trav demanded.

“He's not my mate,” she whispered, and even saying the words tore at her heart, ripped at her soul, and had her animal howling in fury at her rejection.

“I'll kill him,” Trav swore.

“No.” She shook her head. “No.”

“He hurt you.”

A growl rumbled up Trav's throat, and she forced herself to push out of his arms.

"I'd have to care for him to give him that power."

"Oak..."

"Murphy Dockery isn't my mate. He's just the man who fucked me."

She pushed to her feet, wiped her face, and ignored the look of pity on Trav's face.

"I need to leave," she whispered again, wrapping her arms around herself. "I can't be here when he comes back."

If he came back.

Chapter Seven

Murphy jumped out of the Jeep and ran. She thought he was embarrassed by her! How could she think that? He'd been trying to take care of her. To make sure she had plenty of time to recover from what he'd put her through the night before. When he'd been insatiable and unable to keep reaching for her, over and over again.

"Where is she?" Murphy demanded, glancing at Tony as he joined him.

"When I left, she was viewing Talbot's body."

"Jesus Christ," Murphy snapped. "You left her there? Alone?"

"You don't know Oakley," Tony muttered and led the way inside.

They didn't have far to go. Murphy found his mate in the middle of the hallway wrapped in another man's arms. He roared before he could even think to exert control over his animal. Oakley's head lifted, and Murphy swore his heart missed a beat as he took in the tear ravaged face.

"Oakley."

He reached for her, and she took a step away from him. The man beside her moved to place his body between Murphy and his mate. A snarl ripped from his lips as he bared his canines at the male. Trav. That was what Oakley had called him. Tony had referred to him as Oakley's best friend, Travis Gracen.

"I'm leaving."

Murphy's head whipped back to Oakley as she spoke.

"My team is here. Your shifters have been delivered to your pride's medical center. Now, that we've delivered all of

you, we'll be heading back out.”

“Oakley.”

Her name was a rough growl. His animal was too close to the surface, and if Trav didn't get out of his way, he would be flying across the room in the next five seconds.

“Trav, make sure the guys are ready to go,” she murmured, going back to ignoring Murphy. “Tony, give me a direction.”

“Oakley, you're mated. No mated shifters in the field. You know the rules,” Tony snapped.

Oakley laughed.

“So Aleksy doesn't go in the field anymore. He stays at this little farmhouse of yours and does what? Knits? Mitch, too, right?”

“Not fucking likely,” Aleksy said, appearing in the hallway. From where, Murphy didn't know.

“Exactly. Besides, we've already had this conversation. I'm not mated. I just got fucked,” Oakley snarled.

Murphy was in her face in seconds, Trav flying aside just as Murphy had envisioned.

“You are mated, mate. Very thoroughly mated. Now, why the hell are you leaving?”

He roared his question at her, and every shifter in the room went silent and still. Several growls filled the air, and he was ready to challenge any of them who even thought to get between him and Oakley.

“Let's go,” he ordered Oakley and held out his hand.

She stared at it then glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. He leaned in closer, not bothering to whisper. They were in a room with several shifters so it wouldn't matter how quiet he tried to be. They'd all hear.

“We can have this conversation here in front of everyone, or we can go somewhere private. Your choice,

Oakley, but I'd advise you to choose carefully. I'm not sure you want everyone to hear what I'm going to say."

She shoved him. Hard. He didn't budge an inch.

"I don't care what you have to say. You made your choice. I've made mine. Now, get the fuck out of my way. I have a team to brief."

He let her walk away but stayed right on her heels. He'd seen the tremor go through her. Seen the brief flash of pain before she'd blinked it away. He'd hurt her. Tony had been clear on that, but Murphy had seen it for himself. He'd hurt his mate when he'd been trying to protect her.

"I should have taken you with me," he told her back, but she kept moving, pushing through the front door and striding down the front porch steps.

She headed toward the group of seven Murphy had seen on his way inside. The largest of them broke off and stood facing them, arms crossed as he stared down Murphy. One by one, the others all took a similar stance.

"Knock it off," Oakley warned.

It's easier for her if she walks away first. The only person who's been a consistent part of her life is Trav, and for the last four years, her team. Eight male shifters who would lay down their lives for her without a second thought.

Murphy growled as Travis brushed past him, shoulder checking him on the way. He strode confidently to Oakley.

"How soon do you want to leave?" Travis asked.

"What do you guys need before we go?" Oakley asked the rest of her team.

There were mumbles and grunts, and the camaraderie between them all was easy to see. They'd been together for four years. In situations that forged deep bonds. Situations that required a level of trust few ever achieved. He saw it in their faces. They would all die for his mate. They would put themselves between her and anything that threatened her.

Except for one thing. He stared each of them in the eyes, stopping on Travis and holding the other man's gaze.

"I made a mistake," he told them. "I was barely holding on when the group of you found us. Hanging by a thread when we arrived here. You told me..."

He broke off as Travis' face flushed. The other man knew what he was referring to. Oakley's virginity.

"I knew, and I couldn't stop. I lost all control."

His gaze zeroed in on his mate.

"This morning. I let my emotions get in the way, so I didn't see yours."

He reached out to cup her face, and surprisingly, she let him.

"I could never be embarrassed of you, lass. Never. I've waited a lifetime to find you."

He leaned in, placing his forehead against hers.

"I was hard on you. Rough. I needed you, and you were there. Every time. I wanted you to rest because you barely got any last night. I thought I was taking care of you. I thought I was doing the right thing, Oakley. I made a mistake, but I'll learn from it. Don't shut me out. Don't walk away. Not from me, because I promise you, no matter where you go, I'll be there. I will always be there."

"You hurt me," she muttered.

"I know."

"Don't do it again," she warned, and Murphy almost smiled.

"I'll try my best," he promised, and it was a vow he intended to keep. "Walk with me for a minute?"

He tugged at her hand, and she reluctantly let him lead her away. He paused, though and turn back to her team.

"I know she's important to each and every one of you. Though you may not realize it yet, I feel the same. She's my

mate. My other half. I want you to stand between her and danger.”

“I don’t need to be protected,” she growled.

He dropped a kiss atop her head.

“But if any of you ever step between me and my mate again, I’ll take you apart with my bare hands,” he warned, and his mate had the gall to laugh.

She laughed so hard she stumbled into him, her hand curling against his stomach. It took all of his control not to immediately sport wood. She didn’t straighten until she heard Finn.

“Well, I see she didn’t kill you or manage to sneak away while you were gone,” Finn observed.

Oakley stepped into Murphy.

“Your brother?”

“The taller, better-looking, younger brother,” Finn offered.

“With a very pregnant wife who would gut you if she thought you were flirting with another woman,” Murphy warned.

“My mate has nothing to worry about,” Finn told them. “I love that woman with every ounce of my being. And...I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet, but you’re an uncle, Murph. Laura gave birth to a little boy a few days ago. That’s why she wasn’t there this morning. I was going to take you to the med center to see them both after we were done at the main house.”

“You have a son,” Murphy whispered.

“Sean Murphy Dockery,” Finn said. “He’s perfect. Just like his mother. I want both of you to come meet them.”

“I was getting ready to leave—” Oakley began, but Murphy cut her off.

“*We’re* leaving, but we can take the time to see my brother’s mate and child. Can’t we?”

She stared at him for a quiet moment before slowly nodding.

“I’ll just let my team know.”

Murphy watched her walk away, his brother at his side.

“She’s going to keep you on your toes,” Finn warned, but he was grinning.

“I’m counting on it,” Murphy agreed.

“She’s seems young. Is she?” Finn asked.

Murphy sighed. “Too young. Way too young, but I’m already falling. And I don’t want to stop.”

Chapter Eight

Oakley watched Murphy hold the infant in his arms. Watched the way his face lit up as the baby waved his hand then latched his fingers around Murphy's finger. Finn's mate, Laura, was still crying, something she'd been doing since they'd walked into the room. First over Murphy, who she'd fawned over and frantically hugged. Then when Oakley had been introduced as Murphy's mate. Then when she'd handed her son to his uncle, a son who had Murphy as his middle name. Murphy was enthralled with his nephew. It made her ache for him.

"Come have a look, lass."

He glanced over to her then dropped that gorgeous green gaze back to the baby. Oakley walked toward him, but it wasn't the baby she looked at.

"Gorgeous."

"Why are they keeping you both here?" Murphy asked. "Is everything okay?"

"We're good," Laura assured them, sharing a look with her mate. "Finn wanted us to stay here until he got back."

"Got back from where?" Murphy asked, rocking the baby in his arms.

"We were putting together a team to go back to New Mexico and look for you," Finn admitted.

"I was only there for a few months. Talbot moved me a few times before he was captured and Blane took me."

"Murph!"

A tall man pushed through the doors to Laura's room. He had ebony skin that made his piercing, yellow eyes stand

out. He was tall, built, and one of the most beautiful men Oakley had ever seen.

“Zane!”

Murphy handed off his nephew to Oakley and turned to embrace the other man. It was easy to see the two were close. Easy to see their connection. Finn walked over to them, and Zane pulled him into the hug until the three of them were laughing and patting one another on the shoulders. Oakley took the baby back to his mother.

“He’s hungry.” Laura smiled as her son turned his head toward her chest and started rooting.

“You should...”

Oakley trailed off as Laura lowered the top she wore and helped her child latch onto her nipple. Oakley tried to look anywhere but at what the baby was doing. It was natural. Breastfeeding. That didn’t mean Oakley was comfortable watching a woman, who was virtually a stranger, nurse her child. Glancing around the room, she noted she was the only one uncomfortable. Story of her life.

Zane and Finn were deep in conversation with Murphy, telling him about someone named Griffin. They were worried about him. From the sound of it, they’d be talking for a bit. She’d just slip out of the room for a minute. Murphy wouldn’t know she was gone.

She stepped into the hallway, choosing a direction at random, and walked down the corridor then froze when the sound of two women talking reached her ears.

“Are you serious?”

“I overheard the alpha speaking with Professor Mueller. Talbot created a shifter. Used a petri dish. Shifter egg. Talbot’s sperm. He finally made the abomination they should be hunting.”

The women snickered.

“Good, now that the butcher is dead, maybe the hunters will go after her.”

“No, she’s one of us,” one of the women whispered.
“She’s a shifter.”

“She’s hunter spawn of the worst kind. She’s not one of us. Hell, if anyone deserves to be hunted down and killed, it’s whatever he created,” the other woman snapped back.

Poor, little lioness with dirty, dirty blood. The hunters hate you because you’re an animal. The shifters hate you because you’re mine. Nowhere to belong.

Talbot’s words would always remind her of her place, or lack thereof, in the world. Murphy was her mate, but would he really want her once he realized the full scope of problems she’d bring into his world? His pride? Would Murphy be put in the position of choosing between her and his pride? She couldn’t do that to him. He deserved a mate who would fit into his world not tear it apart.

She tore past the hallway where the speakers stood, refusing to even look toward them. She didn’t need to. She’d seen those looks all her life. For a little bit, she’d forgotten who she was. No, for a few hours, she’d been able to believe she could be someone else. She didn’t need the ghost of her abusive nonpaternal figure to remind her how stupid that was.

She finally made her way out of the medical center and at a run, headed in the direction she knew Tony’s house was. She ran and shut out everything else. Trav was the first one she saw.

“Load ‘em up. We’re heading out. Now.” She barked the orders at her team, ignoring Trav as best she could.

“Load up, boys!” Trav yelled then grabbed her as she made to move past him. “Got a minute?”

“Nope.”

“Yes, you do,” he snarled and pulled her away from the rest of them. “What the hell is going on, Oak?”

“Nothing. I told you earlier we were heading out.”

“I don’t see your mate. After that display earlier, I assumed he’d go with us,” Trav stated, giving her a look that

assured her he wasn't moving until he had an answer.

"He changed his mind after he saw his brother's mate and their baby. A little boy. Sean Murphy. Murphy. My Murph..." She paused, shaking her head. "He decided to stay for a bit. He needs time to heal. He'll join us when he's ready."

"That's the bullshit you plan to go with. He changed his mind? Really, Oak! No one on this team is stupid enough to believe that. You want to leave. Own it. Don't fucking lie to this team."

"Fine," she snapped. "I changed my mind. Okay! I changed my fucking mind."

"What happened?" Trave leaned in closer, cupped her chin and forced her gaze to meet his. "What really happened?"

"I forgot for a moment," she whispered and cursed the tear that slid down her cheek.

She wasn't a crier. She hadn't been in a long time, yet she'd sobbed like a baby earlier. Now, she had more tears slipping from her eyes. Weak. So weak. Something she couldn't afford to be. Something she didn't have time to be.

"Forgot what?" Trav demanded.

"Who I am."

"Oak—"

"I can't do this. I can't be what he needs me to be. I can't be what eventually destroys him, and you know I will. You know how they see me. I'll never be one of them, and I don't want to watch him choose them over me. I can't watch that."

"His brother seemed okay with you, earlier," Trav murmured. "Why don't you give them a chance? It could be different here. He could be different. He's your mate. You can't walk away from your mate."

She shook her head.

"No, he's not. I got wrapped up in the moment, and I forgot. For just a little bit, I pretended I was someone else."

What I said earlier stands. I need to leave. I can't be here. I can't. Now, please, let's load up and go."

Trav sighed, tugged her in and gave her a tight squeeze then shoved her away.

"Clean your face. Tears? Really? You want the guys to figure out, not only are your balls not bigger than theirs, but you don't actually have them?"

She snorted a laugh.

"My balls will always be the biggest on this team," she fired back.

"Let's go then," he growled and turned toward the vehicles, which looked stocked and ready to go. "Team comms only. I need to check security on phones. Put them in the box. I'll work while we travel."

The guys grumbled but did as Trav ordered. She would have kissed him if the others weren't around. Not that she hadn't done it in front of them, but they wouldn't understand why this time. She did, though. He was taking them off grid for a bit. No phones to track. No tracking devices on their vehicles. Trav was giving her the time she needed. Time to prepare herself for when Murphy came after her. She didn't doubt he would. He'd claimed her. Called her mate. All she had to do was figure out a way to show him how wrong his claim was.

"Time's ticking," Trav warned. "Get in the SUV, and let's go. Your mate's coming after you any minute. Tony's walking out of that house any minute. Stay or leave. I've got your back. Always. Tell me what you want."

She glanced back toward the medical center where Murphy was with his friends and family. Where he was snuggling a newborn and probably thinking of what it would feel like to hold a child of his own. She couldn't give him that. Ever. She'd made sure of that when she was still a teenager. It had been the first thing she'd done when she'd finally escaped Talbot. She'd had a complete hysterectomy. His blood would die with her.

No, she couldn't be the mate Murphy wanted. The mate he deserved. Mates were a soft place to land when things got hard. They brought calm and peace and all those great feelings. She couldn't do any of that. She'd bring chaos and anger and division. He'd find pleasure in her body, or at least, he had during the night they'd spent together. That wouldn't last, though. It couldn't once he understood exactly how taking her for a mate would affect his life. She wouldn't do that to him. Better to end things now before they got closer.

“We're going.”

She moved toward the main vehicle and climbed in the back. Bolts was behind the wheel. Trav got in the passenger seat, and Styles jumped in the back with her.

“Where we headed?” Styles asked, practically bouncing with energy.

“Wyoming,” Oakley decided. “I think we could use a good, long run.”

“Hell, yes!” Styles yelled. “We're going on a bear hunt.”

“Styles,” she reprimanded.

“Gonna catch a big one!” Styles continued.

Trav laughed. Bolts shook his head, and Oakley almost cried. It was normal. The banter, the camaraderie. It was just like any other road trip they took except for one thing. She was listening. Quietly. Watching. Feeling her heart break in two with every mile they put between her and Murphy. How had she fallen so quickly for a man she'd never met before a few days ago?

Her lion stretched inside her, giving Oakley a rub from the inside. That was why. Shifters felt a connection immediately. Animal instincts. She'd known Murphy was hers the moment she looked at him. Or that she wanted him to be hers. Then he'd called her his mate, and everything had lit up inside her. Now, everything was snuffed out. She was snuffed out. Empty. So fucking empty. In that moment, she wished she'd never met Murphy Dockery at all.

Chapter Nine

Murphy ducked into the room to see Vic. Oakley had slipped out of Laura's room earlier. He should have followed her then, but they were going to be leaving soon, so he wanted to take a few minutes to see a woman he considered family. He and Vic had spent years together in the Marines. Then they'd both shown up for Tah when Reno and Logan had put out a call for help.

"Murphy."

Gideon rose from the chair he sat in and glanced toward Murphy. His gaze immediately went back to his mate. Vic was still and quiet. Murphy couldn't remember any time he'd seen her that way. She was strong, fierce. She faced anything down. Without fear. That was Vic.

"She made herself the biggest target in the room," Gideon said. "Crazy woman. I was right there beside her. I was right there, and I couldn't protect her."

"Gideon."

The man shook his head.

"Every one of us from that attack is awake, is healed or healing. Except her. She won't open her eyes."

"I thought Tony gave her something," Murphy said, remembering the conversation at Tony's where they mentioned he and Tah having a confrontation over Tony giving Vic something without Tah's knowledge.

"He did. Two days ago, actually. He said she should be up and around in a few days. I've been monitoring her." Gideon squeezed his forehead between his fingers. "I just need her to wake up."

“Give her time,” Murphy encouraged as he moved closer to the other side of the bed and took her hand. “She’ll be up and around before you know it, raising hell and making everyone wish for the peace and quiet again.”

“I prefer her raising hell,” Gideon murmured.

Murphy knew Gideon did. He loved Vic. Watching the two of them get together had been entertaining as hell. They’d clashed from the start then gone at each other like sex addicts. Now, they were an inseparable unit. That was what Murphy desired with Oakley.

“I wanted to stop in and check on you guys before I head back out for a bit.”

“You just got here,” Gideon argued. “I can’t imagine Tah’s happy with you leaving again.”

“My mate has something she needs to take care of,” Murphy offered.

“You’re mated?” Gideon asked.

Murphy smiled. “Yeah, and already making mistake after mistake.”

Gideon actually laughed. “Overprotective, huh?”

“Maybe,” Murphy admitted.

“Don’t stop,” Gideon urged. “No matter what she says, don’t ever stop doing everything you can to protect her.”

“If Tony said she’ll wake up in a few days, then Vic will wake up, Gideon.”

Murphy might have just met Tony, but he had the impression the man didn’t give false hope. If anything, he was blunt to the point of rudeness.

“I’m going to have Tony check her again. See why she’s not responding as quickly as Professor Mueller did when Tony gave him the same injection. The professor has even more energy than he did before. I don’t care what Tah says. Tony’s helping her now.”

“Why wouldn’t Tah want Tony to continue watching her if he gave her something to help her wake up?” Murphy asked.

That made no sense to him. Tah was pure alpha, but he was also one of the most compassionate people Murphy knew. If their alpha was guilty of anything, it was caring too much.

Gideon snarled. “It made Daniel primal when Tony gave it to him. Daniel was losing his lion, and Tony brought it back. Now, Daniel will only see Tony for anything medical. Then Tony gave it to Professor Mueller. Jess was here with her alpha wolves, and she told Tony to give it to him. Have you seen him yet? He’s...different. I don’t know what it is yet. But there’s something different.”

“Nearly dying can do that to a man,” Murphy assured him, remembering all the times he’d knocked on that door.

“I don’t care what physiological changes might occur. She could grow a tail, and it wouldn’t matter. I just want her to open her eyes.”

“When she does, I’m totally letting her know you thought she might grow a tail,” Murphy said with a chuckle. “She won’t let you live that one down.”

Gideon shook his head.

“She can yell at me all she wants.” He leaned close to his mate. “Wake up and yell at me, wildcat. Please.”

The door flew open, and Gideon covered his mate with his body while Murphy readied himself to fly at whoever entered. Except it was Clara, and the look on her face was frantic.

“Gideon! Oh my God! Gideon. It’s Uncle Thomas.”

“What?” Gideon lifted his head, sliding off Vic until he stood beside her bed once again. “Thomas?”

“He’s here. Uncle Thomas was in the group with Murphy. He has a son, Gideon. I have a cousin, River. He’s... so young. He’s young, and oh God, I don’t know what to do or how to feel or... Gideon. Uncle Thomas is here.”

Gideon looked torn.

“Go,” Murphy urged. “I’ll sit with Vic until you get back.”

“Gideon, please,” Clara said again. “There’s something wrong with him.”

Gideon dropped a kiss on Vic’s lips.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Go, I’ve got her,” Murphy said again, and Gideon reluctantly left his mate’s side.

Murphy settled in on the side of Vic’s bed, reaching out and taking her hand with his, giving it a squeeze. This was Vic, a woman he’d known for years. It was easy to picture her making herself the biggest target in the room. That was her. She’d always put herself in front of those she loved.

“Shit, Vic. We’re going to have to talk about this saving the world thing you pulled. You’re going to get so much shit for it, so be prepared.” He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “I’ve got your back since I’d have done the same, but your mate’s going crazy without you. Sounds like Tah might be blaming himself. You know he’ll need your snappy conversation to remind him you make your own choices. Plus, I’m back, and you’re not here to hug me and tell me how much you missed me. Though, we both know it’s more likely you’d smack me and demand to know why I let myself get captured. Christ, Vic. I need that.

“I’m mated, too. She’s young. Too fucking young for a bastard like me. There’s no way I’m ever letting her walk away, which she seems hellbent on doing. She’s Talbot’s daughter. Or at least, that’s what she throws out, but I think it’s a shield to keep people away. He created her. Shifter egg with his sperm. She’s...complicated. We’re complicated, but I’m already falling for her. Nothing’s ever felt so perfect in my life as when I hold her in my arms.

“Shit. Listen to me getting all sappy. You definitely need to wake up and slap some sense into me. Besides, did you hear Clara? Thomas Walker is alive. How long have we thought about looking for him? I can’t believe that guy who was held

with me is Clara's uncle. Wasn't he supposed to be some type of genius? This guy isn't. Hell, I don't think he's even sane. He speaks in riddles and mutters to himself and basically comes across as batshit crazy. Fuck, who knows what they did to him? I don't even know how long they've had him. He was there when they moved me. He has a son, too. Or, at least, the boy says Thomas is his father. But the kid's young. Too young to be the baby Clara saw taken from Thomas' mate. Where did this kid come from?

“And what's going on with Griffin? Zane said he's showing signs of exhaustion, overworking, going out constantly to offer medical care to shifters who need it. Hell, Miles said he sometimes goes off by himself while Miles is somewhere else, so none in need have to go without care. He needs you, Vic. We all know Griffin idolizes Gideon, but he adores you. If you tell him to slow down, he'll do it. We all need you, Vic.

“Fuck. What are we going to do? This will never end. They hunt us no matter where we go. A lone shifter. A group of shifters. It doesn't matter. There's no place we can go. We thought coming here, banding together. We'd be safe. See them coming. But they got in here, too. They got in and shot you and Gideon and Professor Mueller. Shot Tah and Gabriel and even Abby was grazed. I heard Quinn took a bullet, too. The hell they put us through. But not just us. Look at Quinn. I heard everything she endured. That woman will never be the same. Amia. Her father tortured her. My mate, Oakley. Her father did the same to her. None of us are safe. Neither are the people who stand with us. Human. Shifter. None of it matters.”

“It matters.”

Murphy turned as Tony entered the room.

“Eventually, you follow the drones back to the hive, and you burn the whole thing down,” Tony added as he stepped to the bed and started examining Vic.

“Gideon called me earlier. Asked me to come over and check on Sleeping Beauty, here.”

“She’ll kick your ass for that one,” Murphy stated.
“Then she’ll thank you for the miracle drug you gave her.”

“Not a miracle,” Tony murmured as he pulled a vial and syringe from the pocket of the lab coat he wore. “This is a booster to go with the first injection I gave her. I don’t know if Gideon told you, but it’s a miracle she’s alive. Probably wouldn’t be if she didn’t have a shifter for a mate. The changes that occurred from mating Gideon managed to keep her alive. This should help her wake up and come back to him.”

He bypassed the IV attached to Vic’s arm and injected the drug directly into her vein.

“Just a micro-dose. I made sure to base the original off her height and weight. Plus, she has the advantage of being mated to a jaguar shifter. If everything goes well, she should wake up sometime tonight or tomorrow morning. Let Gideon know I’ll be back later to check on her again.”

Tony recapped the needle then walked over and put it inside a sharps container Murphy hadn’t even noticed.

“Why are you here, Murphy?” he asked.

“Oakley and I came to see my brother’s mate and son.”

“They were in here?” Tony questioned.

“You know they weren’t. Zane came into Laura’s room, and I mentioned Oakley and I were leaving. He urged me to come see Vic before I leave again. Then Clara came in here and told Gideon one of the shifters they brought back was her Uncle Thomas.”

“Wait.” Tony held his hand up. “Thomas Walker is here?”

“Looks like it. But he’s not exactly sane. I have no idea how long they had him or what they may have done to him. Sometimes, he comes across lucid. Most of the time not. Remember the riddle I shared about the shooting here?”

“That was him?” Tony asked.

Murphy nodded. “So, if you’re thinking you’ll be able to get any information from him, then don’t. You won’t be able to trust anything he says.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Tony agreed. “I planned to check on all of the shifters found with you since they were brought in by my team. I’ve had several of my men keeping an eye on them. The pride isn’t prepared to handle more than a few injured shifters at a time. There’s not enough of a medical team in place for bigger numbers of casualties. Tah will have to correct that. Soon. In the meantime, my team will step in as needed. Now, where is Oakley?”

“She stepped out earlier to get some air. I promised Gideon I’d sit with Vic while he’s gone. Once he gets back, I’ll go find her. She wants to leave later today.”

“Is that what she told you?” Tony asked, crossing his arms over his chest and from his stance and tone of voice, Murphy knew the other man was all too aware of where Oakley was. And that Murphy wasn’t.

“She said we were leaving. Had her team loading the vehicles before we headed over here with my brother.”

“You should have listened to me when I spoke to you earlier,” Tony offered with a shake of his head. “Or maybe taken a little more time to get to know the woman you say is your mate.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Murphy demanded.

“Oakley, *your mate*, left with her team twenty minutes ago,” Tony snarled at him.

“Where’s she going?”

“I don’t know. They’ve gone off grid which means your mate doesn’t want any of us to know where she and her team are going,” Tony answered. “I warned you this would happen. I warned you, and you let her walk away.”

“Fuck!” Murphy snapped.

“If anything happens to her, I hold you responsible,” Tony vowed. “Now, I have to go meet Jensen Holloway, who’s flying in to take care of the bear shifter we brought here. If we don’t hear from Oakley in the next forty-eight hours, I’ll send out a team to look for her.”

“I’ll find my mate,” Murphy snarled, and he wasn’t waiting forty-eight hours to do it.

Chapter Ten

Oakley jerked awake, blinking her eyes and glancing around. Where the hell were they, and how long had she been asleep?

“Word of advice, Oak,” Trav offered. “When your mate leaves you in bed and tells you to rest, maybe you should listen to him.”

She growled, rubbed her hands down her face, then focused on Trav.

“Where the hell are we?”

“One of the team houses outside of Denver. We’ll be in Wyoming tomorrow.”

Oakley gave another jaw-cracking yawn.

“Damnit, Oakley. You’re dead on your feet,” Trav grouched.

“Good thing I’m not on them yet, then,” She fired back, but he was right. She’d slept the entire car ride and planned to fall into bed as soon as she entered the house.

“What are we doing out here?” Trav asked. “And don’t try that bullshit about going for a run. It won’t fly much longer, so tell me what we’re doing other than running from your mate.”

“I’m not running,” she snapped.

“I’m pretty sure you’re trialing for the Olympics.”

She bit back a laugh then fought to lock down her emotions when the sound tried to turn into a sob.

“His pride won’t accept me, Trav. They might try. It might even work for a little bit. But we both know the blood in my veins will eventually turn them against me. I won’t let it

get to the point of making Murphy choose between me and his family.”

“Boo-fucking-hoo, Oak. Forget the Olympics; you’re running scared.”

“Fuck you, Trav!”

“Scared that when push comes to shove, your mate will walk away. Why don’t you walk first then, right? Why wait for the inevitable? You’re a coward.”

“The fuck I am,” she seethed.

“Good, I’m glad you said that,” Trav told her. “I also want to remind you that you love me, and I’m the best friend you’ll ever have in your life.”

Oakley narrowed her gaze on him.

“What did you do?”

“Where is she?”

Her gaze widened. That was Murphy’s voice.

“Why is he here? How is he here?” she demanded, but it wasn’t Trav who answered.

“How?” Murphy thundered as he jerked her seatbelt free then scooped her up in his arms. “Because at least one of you is smart.”

“And dead,” she said, glaring at Trav over Murphy’s shoulder. The bastard laughed.

“I assume you’ve already picked out a bedroom, so I’ll see both of you in the morning.”

With that parting comment, Trav strolled away to check in with the rest of the guys while Murphy carried her straight to the house. He was trembling.

“Am I too heavy?” she asked, thinking about what he’d been through and how much weight it appeared he’d lost while being held captive. “Put me down, Murphy.”

“Don’t be insulting, lass.”

“You’re trembling,” she murmured, glancing around to make sure no one was staring at them.

“That would be anger,” he growled.

“Oh.”

Oakley decided it might be in her best interest to ignore that.

“How’d you get here so fast?”

“Jensen Holloway flew in to pick up the bear shifter we rescued, Jasper Nielsen. I hitched a ride and had him drop me here, since Travis said this is where you’d be.”

“Murphy, I—”

“Not a word, lass. Not until we’re in our room alone.”

She opened her mouth then slammed her lips shut at the look he gave her. He wasn’t just angry. That was rage in his gaze, and it was directed at her.

“I had to leave,” she tried to explain.

“Not. A. Word,” he snarled.

She held her tongue until he’d carried her to the basement room Tony usually used when he stayed here.

“This is—”

He growled, lips pulling back so she got a good look at his canines, which reminded her of the bite she had on her shoulder, which then made her nipples go hard and her sex become a thirsty bitch.

He lowered her to her knees on the bed then immediately reached for the hem of her shirt and jerked it up and over her head. Before she could catch her breath, her bra followed suit. He gripped the snap of her jeans next.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as if she didn’t know exactly what he was doing.

“The only time you seem to accept me as your mate is when I’m buried in your tight heat, fucking us both into oblivion.”

He jerked her pants down to her thighs, taking her panties with them.

“Take them off,” he ordered and began stripping.

She thought about refusing, about hopping off the bed and pulling her clothes back on, but who would she be hurting the most if she did? Her because she wanted him like she wanted oxygen to breathe. When had that happened? How did she fall so fast for a man she still didn't completely know?

“Oakley.”

He barked her name, and she jerked her gaze to him. He'd stripped off his shirt. His fly was undone and the bulge of his sex was hidden by only a thin layer of cotton. He moved his hand down and squeezed his shaft through the material.

“If you want my cock, get your fucking clothes off.”

His growl hit her low in the belly. She flipped around to sit on the side of the bed, reaching down to take care of her shoes and socks before shimmying the rest of the way out of her jeans and panties. Before she could scoot to the middle of the bed, Murphy was there, shoving her thighs wide and burying his face between them, giving her sucking kisses along the seam of her sex.

“Oh, God,” she moaned as he used his tongue to slide up her folds and swirl around her clitoris.

Next thing she knew, she was flat on her back, his hands holding her thighs wide while he worshipped her with his mouth and tongue. She buried her hands in his hair and held him to her, undulating beneath him while she panted and moaned.

“So fucking delicious,” he muttered between tantalizing swipes of his tongue.

He pressed it over her clit, rubbing tight circles while he pushed a finger deep.

“Oh, my God!”

“Mmm,” Murphy moaned, adding another finger before devouring her.

She came with a scream, and Murphy kept going, keeping her locked in a state of pleasure that had her throat going raw until all she could make were animalistic growls. Her hands fell from his hair to clench in the sheets beneath her while she fought to pull oxygen into her lungs. Twinkling lights floated along the edges of her vision. She was going to pass out.

“No, you don’t, love.”

Murphy eased up her body, sliding her up the bed with him while he crooned to her, telling her how beautiful she was, how sexy she was, how he could feast on her for hours, for days. When he finally had them where he wanted them, she felt the firm stalk of his erection, the mushroomed head pressing at her opening.

“Look at me,” Murphy whispered, and Oakley forced her eyes open, meeting her mate’s piercing green gaze. “Don’t ever leave me again.”

“Murphy.”

He thrust hard and deep, burying himself fully inside her.

“You will not leave me again, mate. Never again.”

She moaned as he began moving.

“You get mad at me. We fight. We work it out. You don’t get to leave. I don’t get to leave. We’re mates. We don’t leave each other. I realize you might not know how mates work. Your father was a sadist. You’ve never seen how a relationship should work, but that’s okay. I have. My father worshipped my mother to the point he lost his mind when she was killed. I wasn’t there when my alpha fell for Abby, but a blind man could see Tah worships the ground his mate walks on. I was there for Reno and Amia, for Zane and Diane, for Vic and Gideon. I was there when my buddy, Holt, took a bear shifter as his mate. I know what it means to stick, to be there through everything life throws at you.”

“I’m Victor Talbot’s daughter,” Oakley said, tears streaming down her face. “I can’t change that. Hunters

consider me an abomination. Shifters consider me worse than that. I don't fit in, Murphy. Nowhere except with this group. With the team I've built."

"You fit with me, and I will go wherever you are," Murphy vowed, and the heart she'd worked so hard to lock tight cracked right back open.

Chapter Eleven

Murphy watched his mate sleep. He'd loved her on and off all through the night. He'd already let Travis know they wouldn't be leaving today. His mate needed rest, and so did he. He'd been through months of hell. He was learning his mate had been through a lifetime of it.

Though he didn't want to, he finally forced himself from the bed to track down food for her. She'd be hungry when she woke up. If she was receptive, he'd feed her then remind her how sexually compatible they were. He planned to build a solid foundation with her. One where she wouldn't question her place in his life or in the pride he was a member of. If he had to use her body's need for him as the building block they began on, then so be it. Eventually, he'd show her that he was more than a physical release. He was a man who loved deeply and committed without reserve to the woman who was his mate, the other half of his soul.

He wasn't surprised to see Travis in the kitchen along with Daniel and Ariel, who'd tagged along with him.

"Where's Oakley?" Travis asked.

"Sleeping. She needs her rest. I'm going to grab some food and head back."

Murphy moved toward the fridge but felt Travis' gaze on him the whole way.

"Spit it out," he ordered. "Whatever you're thinking."

"I'm her best friend," Travis said. "I get that you're her mate. I know you might not like my friendship with her."

"I'm going to stop you right there," Murphy said. "Oakley chooses her own friends. I won't change that. I don't know if you got the chance to meet Kenzie and her mate, Gabriel, since your stay at Tony's was so brief."

“I didn’t,” Travis replied.

“Kenzie is a good friend of mine, but her best friend is Holt Reynolds. They dated for a bit, decided it wouldn’t work out, and became the best of friends.”

“Oakley and I have never dated. Never,” Travis declared, and Murphy nodded, giving an internal sigh of relief, though he tried to convince himself he would have dealt with it if they had.

“I know that. My mate was a virgin, but it’s good to hear there was never anything but friendship between you two.”

The other male flushed at the mention of Oakley’s virginity, which Murphy found amusing since Travis was the one who’d brought it up first. Murphy continued.

“Kenzie and Gabriel had a rough start. He mated her then left, for reasons none of us understood at the time. Kenzie took off with Holt. He watched over and protected her, and when he needed to, he reached out to her mate. Kenzie is happily mated now, but Holt is still her best friend,” Murphy explained. “I’m not your enemy here. I’m her mate. I’m not going anywhere. I hope you and I can be friends, since I get that you’re not going anywhere, either. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes.”

“Good, now, what does my mate normally want for breakfast?”

“Eggs, bacon, toast,” Travis said and pointed to the oven. “It’s already in there. We’ve been keeping it warm.”

He shared a look with Daniel, and the other man nodded.

“I’m going to tell you something else,” Travis said. “When Oakley came back from the medical center, she was upset. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know if it was with you or someone else. I do know something was said or done to upset her enough that she couldn’t get out of there fast enough. She thinks she’ll never be accepted in your pride.”

“Bullshit,” Murphy snapped as he pulled the plates from the oven and set them on a tray.

“Regardless, that’s what she thinks because rejection is all she’s ever known,” Travis warned.

“Amia Blane is a treasured member of our pride. She’s the daughter of Marcus Blane,” Ariel offered.

“Marcus Blane is evil, but he’s no Victor Talbot. Talbot took Blane’s evil to a whole other level. He butchered countless shifters. Tortured them in ways too horrifying to imagine. He created the drugs that are used on shifters. He conducted the experiments. That’s something Oakley never forgets,” Travis warned.

“My mate is not like him,” Murphy snarled.

“She’s not a normal shifter,” Travis countered. “She knows that. She’s been told that her whole life. She’s one of the most hunted shifters alive. She’s also one of the most hated. By both sides in this war. My guess is someone either said something to her or about her that reinforced Talbot’s declaration she’ll never belong anywhere.”

That hit deep since his mate had said that to him earlier. He’d sworn to her that wasn’t true, and he still meant it.

“She belongs with me.” Murphy clenched his hands around the edge of the countertop as he fought with the rage building in him. Rage that had no outlet since the man behind it was already dead. Already dead but still manipulating and controlling the lives he’d worked to destroy.

“If you’re forced to choose?” Travis whispered.

“I would always choose her. Always. Without question. I have to know she’d choose me, too.”

Travis smiled.

“She is. In her head, the way to protect you is not to put you in the situation where you’d have to make that choice. So, she made it for you. She walked away so you didn’t have to.”

“That’s not a choice, and it’s definitely not trusting in her mate. While I appreciate your insight here, this is a

conversation I think should be kept between Oakley and me,” Murphy said.

Travis’ smile turned more genuine.

“Oakley needs you more than she realizes.”

“Same goes for me,” Murphy shared.

“How are you doing?” Daniel joined the conversation.

“I’m fine,” Murphy snapped then shook his head.

“Did you get any medical care while you were home,” Ariel asked. “In all the euphoria of having you back, did anyone check on you?”

“Tony took some blood, but I didn’t get a chance to see Diane or Professor Mueller.”

Daniel whistled. “That will go over well.”

“Tah absolutely hates that Daniel only sees Tony for his medical care now,” Ariel added. “They argue about it constantly.”

“Not constantly,” Daniel muttered. “Just when it comes up.”

“Constantly,” Ariel reiterated before leaning in and kissing her mate.

God, it was good to see them together. He and Daniel had traveled all over the damn country, putting distance between Daniel and his mate. They’d struggled from the first meeting when Daniel had said the exact wrong words to his mate who’d been a victim of hunter games and drugs. Murphy didn’t know how they’d found their way to each other, but he was glad they had. He’d find his path with Oakley, too.

“Rest up today,” he ordered. “I want everyone to meet in the main room this evening at seven. We’ve got to make some plans. Don’t be late.”

He grabbed the tray, the bottles of water, and headed back to the room where Oakley was hopefully still sleeping. He managed to wiggle the knob enough to open it then used his hip to push in the door, so he could enter.

“You’re back,” Oakley murmured, and he jerked his gaze to her.

She sat up against the headboard, long brown hair tumbling around her, sheet tucked under her arms, hiding the most delectable breasts he’d ever seen in his life.

“Hungry?” he asked, forcing his gaze back to hers.

“Starving.”

“Good. I have eggs, bacon, and toast.”

He sat the tray on the dresser and handed her a plate.

“Shit! I forgot utensils.”

Oakley laughed.

“No problem. I’ll use the toast to scoop up the eggs, and who needs a fork for bacon?”

She grabbed a piece and brought it to her mouth, snapping off a bite with her teeth and moaning as she chewed. It made him remember other things she’d used her mouth on and how good it had felt.

“Is that water for me?”

He grabbed a bottle and handed it to her, watching her throat work as she swallowed. God, he had it bad when he couldn’t even watch a woman drink water without getting erect.

“Sit. Eat,” Oakley ordered, patting the bed beside her. “When are we heading out today?”

“We’re not,” he said as he scooted in next to her.

“I’m fine, Murphy.”

“I know.” He ran a finger down her smooth cheek. “Tell me what your plan was when you headed this way.”

She blinked at him, and guilt filled her gaze.

“Other than running away from me,” he added.

“I wasn’t running,” she growled.

“Like a track star.”

“You sound like Travis,” she muttered.

“Smart guy, your best friend. Now, what were you planning to do when you left so quickly?”

She sighed. “I needed to leave, Murphy.”

She set her plate on her lap.

“You. Seeing...his body. Meeting some of your family. It was too much. I couldn’t...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“Let’s go after Blane.”

“What?” Oakley’s gaze locked with his.

“Let’s end this,” Murphy offered.

“There’s no ending this,” she whispered. “Not even by taking Blane out.”

“Blane is the head of the biggest organized group of hunters in the world. Cut the head off the snake and watch the rest of them scramble and fight amongst themselves to see who steps up.”

She nodded. “Maybe, but it’s still not an end.”

“It’s enough for now. Their whole organization rested on Blane and Talbot. Now, it’s Blane. Let’s hunt him down and take him out. Which means, tomorrow, we need to head back to Oklahoma and the pride.”

“What? Why?” Oakley demanded.

“Because we now have the keys to taking them down.”

“Oh, really? What keys?”

“You and Amia Blane.”

“I’m happy to help, but I’m not a part of your pride. I never will be.”

“Come back. Stay long enough for us to take out Blane. That’s all I’m asking for now, Oakley.”

Murphy squeezed her thigh, knowing he was asking her to do something she wasn’t ready for and would be completely

uncomfortable with. He leaned in and kissed her softly.

“You can do this, Oakley. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“They won’t accept me,” she warned. “No matter how hard they try. Blood will tell.”

“Have some faith, Oakley. If not in my pride, then in me. Please.”

She nodded, but Murphy had a feeling it would take very little to send her running again.

Chapter Twelve

Oakley stared out the window, though really she was watching Murphy's reflection in the glass. She was flying back with him, as well as Trav, Daniel and Ariel, who she'd met the night before. They were a great couple. Really nice. Neither acted as if they cared who her biological father was, but Oakley didn't expect that to last. Eventually, they would turn on her.

She kept reminding herself they were going to hunt down Blane. That's why she was going back with Murphy. She wouldn't stay. Not long term. Her mate would accept that or not. She growled. That made it sound as if she were going to give him an ultimatum. Her or his pride. That was exactly the decision she wanted to avoid him having to make.

Murphy squeezed her hand and pressed a kiss to her brow. Was it wrong for her to want to enjoy her mate while she could? To want to hold his hand and touch him and make love with him? Knowing that in the end, she'd walk away? She'd have to walk away.

The helicopter touched down with a bump and whirl of blades. Tony and Aleksy leaned against the waiting vehicles. Murphy caught her hand as soon as they hit the ground and held it as they made their way toward Tony. Her cousin looked mad as hell, legs spread wide, arms crossed over his chest. She couldn't see his eyes behind the shades he wore, but that was okay. She knew he was glaring. Felt it like a physical touch against her skin.

"Daniel, Ariel, Murphy, you're with Aleksy," Tony barked. "Trav and Oakley, you're with me."

"Oakley's with me," Murphy countered.

"Your alpha wants to see you. Appears he wasn't aware any of you were leaving. He wants the three of you in his

office as soon as you land. Aleksy will drive you.”

Murphy didn't budge. “Then Oakley will be going with me. She needs to meet Tah, anyway.”

“Oakley and Trav don't report to Tah. They report to me, which means they'll be going with me.” Tony ripped off his sunglasses. There was no missing that well-honed glare now. “We have things to discuss.”

“My mate stays with me,” Murphy growled.

“It's fine,” Oakley said, patting Murphy on the chest. “I'll find you when Tony's done yelling at me.”

“She'll be a while,” Tony snapped, putting his shades back on, crossing to the vehicle and getting behind the wheel.

Travis slid into the back seat, leaving her to ride shotgun. Cowardly bastard. Two could play that game.

“I'll find you once I placate Tony. I'm not going to leave, Murphy. I swear.”

She saw the worry in his gaze.

“I promise. Besides you don't want to be there for this. Tony's going to yell. I'm going to yell. Trav will act like he had no clue with Tony then tell me how he has my back.”

She paused and grinned. Good grief, she actually looked forward to arguing with Tony. It had been a long time since he'd let himself get mad at her. Not since she'd first left while he'd been on a mission with Aleksy. She'd slipped out with Travis. That was when they'd stumbled across Bolts. Tony and Aleksy had been back by the time they'd showed back up at the house, Bolts in tow. Tony had yelled and screamed, and she'd given it right back to him. She'd kept going out with her team until she had a unit of eight male shifters, willing to follow her on her quest to see Talbot and Blane dead.

At eighteen, she'd walked away with her team at her side and hadn't looked back. She'd declined every invite Tony offered to join him and his team, no matter where they called home at the time. She'd taken every assignment he threw her way, but she hadn't stayed with his group. Until now, with

Murphy. Then she'd run, but she'd be damned if she'd admit that aloud to anyone.

"Go deal with Tah, mellow him out before he meets me. Fair warning, mate. I yell back. Alpha or not, I yell back."

Murphy laughed. "He's going to love you."

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm young and cute, but I'm also Victor Talbot's daughter," she reminded him.

"He already knows that. It won't matter to him, Oakley. I know you don't believe that, but you'll find out. This pride will show you."

She shook her head and blew out a breath.

"Now, Oakley," Tony yelled, pulling her attention briefly.

"Here's the thing, Murphy. When I left Laura's room, I heard some members of this pride talking about me. About how I deserved to be hunted. It was a reminder that I don't belong. Not here. No matter how much you want me to be part of you. But I won't run. I'll find you. I'll say hello. I'll listen to your plan, and my team and I will help you find Marcus Blane."

"Oakley," Tony thundered.

"I have to go." She reached up and gave Murphy a quick kiss on the lips. "I'll see you later."

She shoved him toward the other vehicle then headed toward the one with Tony and Trav. She slid into the back next to Trav and caught the grin her best friend quickly tried to cover. Tony did a great impression of a shifter growl, then they were off. When they got to Tony's farmhouse, she took her time getting out and following him. Trav trailed behind her as he used to do when they were in the mansion Tony had once called home.

"You can go," Tony waved at Trav. "I need to speak with Oakley alone."

"And I'm out," Trav said, saluting her and turning away.

“Coward,” she yelled after him before turning to Tony.
“What’s going on?”

“Not here. Follow me.”

He led her down the hallway and through that secret doorway again.

“Are you taking me to see Talbot’s body?”

“Do you know how hard it was for me to keep him here day after day and not slit his throat or vivisect him or rip his organs from his body?” Tony snapped.

She paused in the open space Tony had led her to while he paced around.

“I kept him in there.”

He pointed toward the room that lay beyond the wall of windows.

“In a cage. Every time I walked in there, I wanted to kill him. Every time I walked in there, I saw...”

“My mother,” she filled in for him.

“You didn’t know her, but she was amazing. Kind, loving. I don’t know how she met Talbot. I’ve wished a thousand times she hadn’t. She fell for a devil, and he took everything from her. God, Oak. She would have loved you. She did love you. I know that. She probably counted the days until she could hold you in her arms, and he took that from both of you. He took it, and I wanted to kill him every day.”

“I know, Tony.”

“I’m so grateful my mother didn’t live long enough to see what her brother became. To see the monster he turned into.”

“I know,” Oakley said again.

“You escaped him. You got yourself out. Then you found me. Oakley, you found me, and I let you down.”

“You never let me down. You had things to do. People to save. I don’t fault you for that,” she tried to assure him.

“You should have been one of those people,” Tony countered.

“I saved myself. I did that, or Trav and I did that. I don’t begrudge you doing that for others.”

“You were sixteen. Sixteen and you found me, came to me, and I panicked. I left because I didn’t know what to do with a sixteen-year-old girl who’d been through what *he* put you through. I wasn’t there for you, and now, you don’t think anyone ever will be. I did that to you.”

“Stop.”

She held out her hand, palm up, when Tony opened his mouth again.

“Just stop. None of this is your fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not Murphy’s fault he found a mate who doesn’t stick or trust easily. One that most shifters hate on sight or at least, they do once they know I’m the spawn of Talbot. Which means no matter how much Murphy wants his pride to accept me, they won’t. In the end, they won’t.”

“They will,” Tony countered. “Stop running and give people a chance. You never give anyone a chance. Talbot got in your head better than he could have imagined.”

“You have no idea,” she murmured.

“But you’re not the only one who has negativity in their head. You’re not the only one people see and judge. I’m his nephew, a mad scientist in the eyes of some.”

“Brilliant in the eyes of those who matter,” she countered.

“I appreciate that. Now, have a seat. I want to talk to you about something.”

She took a seat at the small table Tony pointed to then watched as he crossed the room and picked up a file.

“What’s that?”

“I ran a few tests,” Tony said, and she immediately pushed to her feet.

“Oh my God! On Murphy? Is he okay? Did you find something?”

“Stop panicking. Your mate is fine. The drugs they injected the day you found him should be mostly out of his system within seventy-two hours. He’ll just be a little aggressive and...handsy, for lack of a better word.”

Oakley laughed at the expression on Tony’s face but sobered when he set the folder on the table and took a seat.

“What did you find, Tony?”

“These tests have nothing to do with Murphy,” he told her.

“They... What? Is something wrong with you? Are you sick?”

“No. Stop. Sit and listen. This is serious, Oak.”

“My mate or you being sick is serious,” she argued.

“This is about you.”

“Wait. I’m sick?” She shook her head. “You haven’t taken any blood from me in a few months. If I was sick, you would have told me immediately and used it to try to get me to move in here.”

“True,” Tony admitted. “You’re not sick. Now sit, zip your lips, and listen.”

She mimed locking her lips shut.

“We’ve discussed me searching for information on the lioness you were created from.”

“I thought you stopped,” Oakley said, bringing her hand up to rub her throat. “You couldn’t find records on the woman whose ovum you thought was used.”

“That’s true. The woman I suspected had two brothers. One was killed. The other’s been missing.”

“Been missing?”

It felt as if the world was spinning around her, as if someone had put their fingers on the edge of a globe and given

it a spin.

“One of them showed up recently. I got some blood. Ran some tests. Then talked to a friend and ran another test.”

Oakley gasped, putting a hand on her chest. “You have friends?”

Easier to joke. It was always easier to joke. It was another wall to put up between her and feelings.

“Ha ha ha.”

She waved her hand at him.

“I already know about Daniel Erikson, the lion shifter you helped reconnect with his lion. He and Murphy are close.”

“I’m not talking about Daniel. I’m talking about another shifter here. Kenzie Marshall. Well, actually Kenzie Erikson now. She’s mated to Daniel’s brother, Gabriel.”

“The liger you were talking about.” She nodded, but panic set in when she remembered the name Murphy had said when she’d found him. “Funny, when my mate first laid eyes on me, he called me Kenzie. Or, I think he did. He said Kenz then said I wasn’t her.”

“The two of you look alike in many ways,” Tony said.

“Short brunette with a fiery temper. I’m sure there’s more than two of us in the world,” Oakley offered with raised brows. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

Tony stared at her for a moment, and she swore she felt fingers trailing over her spine.

“Kenzie’s mom was taken by hunters and given to Talbot for his gestational trials. Kenzie was delivered, experimented on, and snuck out of the facility and into a family of cougars.”

“She’s a cougar shifter?” Oakley asked.

“No. She’s a lion shifter.”

Tony stared at her as if he could force his knowledge into her brain.

“Okay. Great for her. Lions rock.”

“She’s a lion shifter whose mother was held and experimented on by Talbot. One who looks a lot like you, Oak.”

She opened her mouth then snapped it shut. She shook her head then forced herself to remain still.

“What are you saying, Tony? Stop talking around it, and just spit it out. Please.”

“I’m saying you have more than a mate in this pride, Oak.” He pushed the folder over to her. “You have a sister.”

Chapter Thirteen

Murphy stepped into Tah's office and blinked as he took in the group waiting for him. Tah, of course, along with his mate, as well as Reno and Amia. Then there were Kenzie and Gabriel and surprisingly, Quinn Jensen and her mate, Mitch Rossi.

"Tony said you wanted to see us."

Murphy glanced around.

"Or maybe just me since I see Daniel and Ariel didn't follow me in here."

"They went home for the evening," Gabriel offered, holding his phone up.

"And I'm the one who wanted to see you," Kenzie said, rising and crossing to him to give him a tight squeeze.

"When Oakley rescued me, I thought it was you for a moment," he told her, squeezing gently in consideration of her pregnant belly.

Kenzie tugged free, and Murphy watched as glances were exchanged around the group.

"Now, would be a great time for someone to tell me what this is about," he ordered.

"Tony and I have become friends," Kenzie said, ignoring Gabriel's growl. "Good friends."

"As have I," Amia joined in.

"Same," Quinn added then stood and held her hand out to Murphy. "We haven't officially met, though I hear you saw my son. I'm Quinn Jensen."

Her mate cleared his throat.

“Jensen-Rossi,” she added on, giving her husband a side-eye. “Tony saved my life, several times actually. Then the three of us got close.”

She pointed to Kenzie and Amia.

“We’re kind of the misfit club,” Amia said.

“You’re not a fucking misfit,” Reno snapped, and Murphy had the distinct impression this wasn’t the first time they’d had this argument.

Amia ignored him.

“I hear your mate doesn’t think we’ll really accept her. Does she realize you have the daughter of Marcus Blane here?”

“She knows,” Murphy replied. He thought for a moment then continued. “She overheard some women talking about her while we were at the clinic. I wasn’t with her, and she didn’t look to see who they were, but their criticism of who she is was loud and clear. And for the record, my mate isn’t a misfit, either.”

“No, she’s not,” Abby agreed. “We’re going to make sure she knows that, and I’ll find out who said what.”

“There are a lot of new people here,” Reno offered. “With more coming in. Miles and Griffin have brought in several over the last few weeks. People they’ve provided care for who want to be part of the pride.”

“Anyone who doesn’t accept your mate will not be welcome in this pride,” Tah stated with a growl. “I promise you that.”

Murphy nodded then looked around again.

“I appreciate that, but none of you were aware of that before I mentioned it. That isn’t what this conversation is about. So, tell me why you wanted to see me.”

“It is about your mate, Murphy,” Tah answered.

“Look at me, Murphy,” Kenzie commanded and held her arms wide. “You said it yourself. When she walked into

where you were being held, you thought she was me.”

“I know she isn’t you, Kenz. Trust me. I like you, but I’m falling in love with my mate.”

He glanced toward Gabriel, remembering the issues the man had experienced with Kenzie’s best friend, Holt, when Gabriel had first mated Kenzie. The last thing Murphy wanted was to deal with a jealous liger.

“You’re falling for my sister,” Kenzie murmured, and Murphy gave his full attention to her once again.

“What?”

“Tony took some of Thomas’ blood,” Abby said. “Compared it to your mate’s. Then he asked Kenzie and Clara for samples.”

Kenzie took over the explanation.

“Tony thought we might possibly be related. Especially since he knew about my mother being part of Talbot’s gestational trials. Talbot inseminated the ovum of a lion shifter, Murphy. Tony suspected it was my mother, but he couldn’t get any DNA from her. She was gone, and there was never anything found when they took down hunter facilities. He had no way to get information from either of my uncles.”

“Considering the Blanes killed Clara’s father, and until you were found, we had no idea if Thomas was even alive,” Amia added. “There was nothing for Tony to use for comparison against Oakley.”

“Tony’s been here for a while. Since I was taken in Illinois. He’s had plenty of time to ask for DNA from Kenz or Clara,” Murphy argued.

“He’s doing his best not to piss off your alpha more than he does by existing in his proximity,” Mitch offered. “Any requests would have to be put to your alpha first, and they would have been denied. No point in asking.”

“They wouldn’t have been denied outright.” Tah’s voice rumbled with anger, and his mate rubbed a hand over his chest in a soothing manner.

“Tony and Tah clash, but my mate has the utmost respect for your boss and what he accomplishes,” Abby snapped, continuing to stroke Tah’s chest. “Tony’s an ass, but he’s a brilliant one. Regardless of what he and the rest of you think, we’re glad he’s here. He just needs to learn how to be a team player, which means sharing information. We would have gladly shared our bloodwork if you were willing to share yours. What do you say, Mr. Rossi. Feel like giving us a sample?”

“Tony’s my doctor,” Mitch stated quietly.

“*Team* player,” Abby reiterated. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to check on new arrivals and make sure word is spread that Oakley is a valued and trusted member of this pride and its inner circle.”

She leaned up to kiss Tah, and Murphy almost laughed at how heated it became between the two of them. That was one thing about shifters. When they found mates, it was for life. He and Oakley would be for life, which meant he needed to get the conversation back on track. Abby paused beside him and wrapped him in a hug.

“I’m glad you’re back. Please, don’t put us through that again.”

She pulled back, wiping a tear from her cheek.

“I’ll do my best,” he vowed and got another squeeze from her before she walked away.

“She’ll know who made the comments and have apologies to your mate by end of day,” Tah assured him.

Murphy nodded, but he immediately focused on Kenzie again. He saw the similarities. Not just the height, hair, and eye color. He knew the truth before he asked, but he needed the confirmation verbalized.

“What did Tony’s tests show? Is Oakley your sister, Kenz?”

“I gave Tony a sample as soon as he told me what he suspected. Oakley and I share DNA from one parent. She’s my

sister. One who didn't escape the labs until she was sixteen years old."

Tah rumbled, but Kenzie continued.

"I didn't know she existed, Murphy. My sister. Held by that monster, and I didn't even know."

Gabriel stepped over and wrapped his arm around Kenzie. When she pulled away, she turned to her mate, burying her head in his chest as she dealt with her emotions. Murphy understood them. This new revelation would rock Oakley. He was still searching for solid ground with her, working to get her to accept he was her mate and not going anywhere. How would she react to a sister? A cousin in Clara? That she had an uncle alive?

"What about the boy? River?" Murphy asked.

Tah shook his head. "He's not Thomas' biological son. We think Talbot might have given the boy to Thomas as leverage to use against him."

God, that made sense, but how would River react to that news?

"Does he know?"

"No," Kenzie answered, turning in her mate's arms and looking at Murphy again. "He has no DNA in common with any of my family, but he needs Thomas right now as much as Thomas needs him."

The newest revelations were taking a toll on Kenzie. Murphy saw the stress in her gaze. He remembered Clara running into Vic's room when he'd been there. She'd been frantic about her uncle being found. Had begged Gideon to go with her to see Thomas. Chaos and heartbreak. That was what Talbot, Blane, and their hunting society had brought shifters.

"Look, this is a lot to take in. I get that it is for you, too, Kenz, but I need to speak with Oakley. She won't expect any of this."

Mitch cleared his throat, and Murphy jerked his gaze toward him. He was one of Tony's men.

“Wait. Is Tony talking to Oakley about this right now?”

“Yes,” Mitch answered.

“Then I need to head that way,” Murphy stated and started to turn for the door.

“I’d like to come, too,” Kenzie said, reaching out to grab his arm. “I was hoping you’d introduce me to her. Maybe, tell her how awesome I am.”

“I can do that,” Gabriel offered. “I won’t even have to lie.”

“Ha!” She smacked him even as he kissed her.

“I’m coming, too,” Amia announced.

“Me, too,” Quinn jumped in then laughed when Murphy stared at her. “I have to. I live there.”

“We do,” Mitch agreed.

“Look, I don’t want to overwhelm her. Let me talk to her, and I’ll bring her by to meet everyone tomorrow. We were planning to anyway.” Murphy glance around the room. “I talked her into coming back here. I promised we’d come up with a plan to go after Blane.”

“Not without me,” Amia growled, doing a good job of sounding like her husband.

“Well, fuck!” Kenzie snarled. “Of course, you choose to go after him when I’m this close to delivery.”

“Now’s the best time to do it,” Murphy countered.

“He’s on the run.”

He whipped around at the sound of his mate’s voice. Tony stood at her side.

“What makes you think that?” Tah asked.

“Oak.”

Murphy held out his hand. She came to stand at his side but ignored the hand. He took hers instead.

“Incoming information,” Tony answered. “Labs are being closed down. Large-scale casualties. He’s shutting things down. In a hurry.”

“Oakley?” Kenzie stepped forward, pausing directly in front of her sister.

“You must be Kenzie. I’d say it’s nice to meet you, but I haven’t decided that yet. I’ll be honest and say it’s weird. I don’t know what to think.”

Hurt briefly crossed Kenzie’s face, but she did a good job of trying to hide it. No one would have known except they were all staring at the two women.

“Sorry. I don’t do relationships well,” Oakley offered, and Murphy gave her hand a squeeze.

“You’re mated to Murphy,” Tah stated.

“And I’ve already left him once.”

Murphy growled, and she used her free hand to pat his chest. A gesture similar to what Abby did with Tah to soothe him. He’d seen Amia do it with Reno. He’d seen all the women do it with their mates. Except Vic. She was one to hit her mate with the flat of her hand and growl back.

“You have Tony,” Tah pointed toward Oakley’s cousin.

“Tony is Tony,” was her reply.

“Tony is definitely in a class all by himself, but mates grow on you,” Quinn offered. “I’m Quinn, by the way.”

“I owe you my thanks,” Oakley said. “For killing Talbot.”

“I did that for me,” Quinn stated firmly, and Murphy knew there was one hell of a story behind her eyes.

“She did that for all of us,” Amia interjected.

“Amia Blane,” Oakley said then stared at her for a long moment.

“In the flesh,” Amia agreed. “Have we met?”

“No, but I’ve heard of you. The daughters of monsters,” she murmured. “Out of all the plans Talbot and Blane had for us, I bet they never foresaw this.”

Amia laughed.

“I guarantee that, Oakley,” she agreed. “Welcome to the group.”

“Group?” Oakley questioned. “Don’t you call yourselves a pride?”

“Oh, we’re a pride, but I was welcoming you to our little group of misfit toys,” Amia said as she pointed between her, Kenzie, and Quinn.

“For God’s sake, Amia, you’re not a misfit,” Reno snapped. “None of you are.”

Oakley ignored him as did the trio.

“Yes, we are,” Kenzie said, and Gabriel sighed.

“Definitely,” Quinn agreed, and Mitch merely smiled.

“Well, if I’m joining, I get to be president,” Oakley announced. “Trust me, no one is more of misfit than me.”

Murphy forced down the comment he wanted to make, letting the women’s jokes and laughter wash over him instead. He didn’t think Oakley was a misfit any more than any of the other men thought their mates were. But Oakley, like the other three, saw herself that way. He wouldn’t change her mind on that, no matter how much he argued, so he appreciated what Kenzie, Amia, and Quinn had done. In inviting Oakley to join their club, these three women had managed to show her she belonged, that she was no different from them. He’d spend every day for the rest of his life reminding her of that.

Chapter Fourteen

Oakley's mind reeled. She engaged and joked and acted as if it was just another day, another group she'd pass through and move on from. But it wasn't another day with another group. It was her mate's pride. It was her sister. Holy hell, she had a sister! She didn't know what to think of that. She didn't want to think about it. She wanted to push everything away. She couldn't. Not as she watched Kenzie Marshall Erikson walk toward her.

They were in a roomful of people, but Oakley felt the tension and knew all eyes were on the two of them. Murphy stood beside her. Tony behind her. Yet, she felt completely isolated as Kenzie finally stopped in front of her.

“Do you think we can talk?” the other woman asked softly.

Not that it mattered. There were no private conversations in a roomful of shifters.

“I...”

Oakley paused as an automatic denial wanted to leave her lips. Tony had told her about Kenzie. About the woman who was her sister and what she'd been through both before and since being mated. There was anger and resentment for what the two of them had been denied, the bond they could have forged, and Oakley accepted it was all toward Talbot. That didn't mean the vitriol Oakley felt wouldn't spill out on Kenzie if Oakley felt cornered or pushed. Her emotions were all over the place, and she knew she wasn't fully in control. Then there was the fact her sister was pregnant. This might not be the best time for them to talk, but it was the hand they'd been dealt.

“I could use some air,” Oakley found herself saying. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

“I could use some air,” Kenzie agreed.

Oakley could tell that Amia and Quinn wanted to come along but weren't going to invite themselves, so she took care of that for them.

“Why don't the three of you show me around?” she offered. “Fill me in on what I need to know?”

Quinn and Amia would be a good buffer for her and Kenzie. Oakley had a feeling they might need that right now.

“I'll go with you,” Murphy offered, but Oakley shook her head.

“No, this is misfits only,” she murmured, and several growls filled the air.

Quinn took the lead, linking arms with Oakley.

“Let's go then. Between the three of us, we'll spill all the tea.”

Amia linked arms with Kenzie, and with all eyes on the four of them, they made their way out of the room and out the front door.

“Damn, I needed air,” Kenzie said as soon as they stepped away from the house.

“You okay?” Amia asked, and Oakley felt guilty she hadn't been the one to ask.

“Yes. No. I...” Kenzie blew out a puff of air. “I don't know.”

“Here, here,” Oakley agreed with a laugh.

“Let's go somewhere and talk,” Quinn said then shared a look with Amia who nodded.

Oakley wasn't surprised when they took a Jeep back to Tony's house. No one said anything when the foursome entered. Jonah nodded and pouted as Quinn paused to take her son from him, but he didn't say a word as they continued down the hallway and through the hidden entrance. Oakley glanced toward the refrigerated area where Talbot's body was,

but Amia pushed a button and opened the door to the room where Tony said he'd held Talbot.

"They told him I was dead. That my son and I were dead," Quinn said as she sat on the floor, back against the wall while she cradled her son close. "Talbot went ballistic. Asked them to take him to me. Said he could bring me back."

"His arrogance knew no bounds," Oakley offered as she walked around the room, pausing before a cage.

"Tony kept him in there," Amia offered as she sat beside Quinn.

Kenzie paced the room, one hand on her belly, rubbing circles.

"Are you okay?" Oakley asked then shook her head. "Stupid question. Of course, you're not okay."

"I should be asking you that," Kenzie said. "And giving the same answer. At least, I've had longer to process things. You just heard everything today."

Oakley took that in.

"How long have you known?"

"About twenty-four hours."

Oakley laughed. "Not that much longer then. It's a lot to process."

"I never knew my mom," Kenzie said, moving around the room again. "Our mom, I guess. I can't tell you anything about her. Clara, she's Logan's mate and our cousin, never met her, but she can tell you about our uncles, her father and Thomas, about what Thomas was like...before."

"Thomas?" Oakley asked.

"You rescued him along with Murphy."

Oakley shook her head, she'd process all of this later. Uncles and a cousin, and it was too much. She'd focus on Kenzie for now and what information she could share.

“He took your mom when she was pregnant with you?” Oakley asked, not because she didn’t know, but because she wanted to hear what Kenzie had to say.

“He was doing trials on pregnant women. Wanted to see what they could withstand without putting their unborn at risk. When he was done playing, he cut me from her belly and left her to bleed out on the table. At that point, he focused on me. He managed to do something to repress my lion.”

“A drug?” Oakley asked.

“Yes. I was snuck out of the lab and placed with a family of cougars. I didn’t display the qualities of a shifter, though, so I was placed in foster care. I was the freak there, as I had the enhanced senses of a shifter. I didn’t belong anywhere.”

“A misfit,” Oakley murmured.

“Exactly,” Kenzie agreed. “Then I met my mate, and after a few encounters, he walked away. Left me. I was always being abandoned. At least, that was my perspective at the time.”

“You and your mate seem okay now,” Oakley offered, though she was reeling from Kenzie’s comment about feeling abandoned. Wasn’t that how she felt? Everyone walked away from her eventually. It was weird enough discovering a sister she hadn’t known existed. To discover they experienced similar issues was unsettling in ways she couldn’t explain.

“We worked through it,” Kenzie offered.

“He proved himself worthy of her,” Amia countered.

“He did,” Kenzie agreed. “But the insecurity is still there. Not with him. Not anymore. But some nights, I still wake up in a cold sweat. Feeling that needle in my skin. Feeling my lion falling away from me again.”

“You can’t shift?” Oakley asked.

“No. My lioness awoke when I mated Gabriel, but Talbot managed to use another shifter to get close to me. He drugged me again.”

“Drugged, hell!” Amia jumped in. “He almost took you off this ranch, Kenz. If not for Gabriel’s father, he would have.”

“Your mate’s father saved you?”

“Don’t imagine him to be a good person, Oakley,” Kenzie warned. “He wasn’t. Far from it.”

Kenzie glanced toward Quinn, who shrugged.

“Isaac Erikson was the one who persuaded me to join a group of hunters after my mother was attacked and killed by a group of them. I was young and angry, blamed my father, and Isaac used that to his advantage. Talbot knew who I was, though. I became his pet. Went everywhere he did.”

“He replaced me with you,” Oakley said, and Quinn nodded.

“He sometimes called me by your name. I never knew if he’d killed you or if you’d gotten away. I’m glad it was the latter.”

“He replaced me with you,” Kenzie told them, gaze on Oakley. “He harvested my mother’s eggs and used one to create you. I’m sorry. I want to say I wish it had been me, but that would be a lie.”

“He fucked us all up,” Oakley finally admitted as she sat across the room from Amia and Quinn. “None of us have anything to feel guilty about. Yet, here we are.”

“The misfits,” Kenzie murmured as she lowered herself to sit by Oakley. She was careful to keep distance between them.

“I know you’re Blane’s daughter,” Oakley said to Amia. “Which means Talbot did things to you, too, I’m sure.”

Amia nodded, waving her finger that was held in the tight grasp of Quinn’s son.

“He managed to sterilize me through a drug my father injected me with every time I was captured. Talbot said it would wear off eventually, but he wasn’t exactly sane at the end.”

“You want children?” Oakley tried to keep her emotions out of her voice as she posed that question to the only other person in the room who might see herself in the same way as Oakley saw herself.

“I want Reno’s children,” Amia admitted then reached up and swiped away a tear. “For the longest time, I felt like I wasn’t worthy to have his child. That the hands of fate were denying me because I didn’t deserve him.”

“Amia,” Kenzie said, with a shake of her head. “You deserve everything.”

“They fucked us up better than they expected,” Oakley said. “Even knowing he’s dead, I still hear his voice in my head, reminding me I don’t belong anywhere.”

“That’s bullshit,” Kenzie growled. “You have Murphy, and whether you want me or not, you have me. You have Tony. You have all of us. This whole pride. You belong. I wish that bastard was still alive, so I could kill him. Choke the life out of him with my bare hands.”

“Me, too,” Oakley agreed.

“We have to learn to put him behind us,” Quinn said. “He hurt all of us. More than us. There are no amends we need to make. No matter our connection to Talbot, his evil deeds are not ours to atone for. None of ours.”

“Tell me about the pride,” Oakley asked, glancing toward Kenzie, her sister. Going with instinct, she reached out and laced their fingers together. “Tell me every embarrassing detail you can share about my mate.”

Kenzie grinned. “Murphy is the best of us. The absolute best.”

Chapter Fifteen

“She’s fine,” Tony told Murphy when he glanced toward the door again. “She needs this time. She needs to know she has more than you here. More than me.”

Murphy nodded. He knew Tony was right, but that didn’t make it any easier to watch her walk away and leave him behind, no matter that she was with people he trusted. Oakley had been hit with something unexpected. A sister. He wanted to be there for his mate, to help her in any way he could. Which at the moment, meant letting her have time with Kenzie, Amia, and Quinn. Tony had already shared with him that she didn’t have any female friends. She had Travis and the rest of her team, and that was all.

Murphy understood it. For the longest time, it had been him and Finn. Then they’d joined the Marines and included Tah, Reno, Logan, Zane, Holt, Kenzie, and Vic in that group. Now, they had an entire pride of people. He wanted to see Oakley embrace that, as well.

Reno and Gabriel were chatting with Tah, while Mitch stood with Tony and Murphy. That was when Travis and the one Oakley called Bolts walked in. The others glanced over, but Travis headed straight for Murphy.

“She’s fine. They’re all fine. Came to the house; went downstairs. Jonah’s keeping an eye on them,” Travis said.

Murphy knew from speaking with Mitch and Tony that Jonah was Mitch’s righthand and best friend.

“I should have known they’d take her there,” Tony whispered.

“Where?” Murphy asked.

“Where Quinn killed Talbot,” Mitch answered.

“Tony was locked in the room with them at the time,” Reno said as they walked over. “I about lost my mind when Amia slipped in behind Quinn and hit the knob to lock them down in there.”

Gabriel nodded. “They were in there for hours. Drove us all nuts.”

“I found it amusing,” Mitch offered. “Especially watching Tony react to having three weepy women clinging to him while Reno and Gabriel contemplated ways to kill him while they waited to get inside.”

“You would find it funny,” Tony grumbled.

“New faces,” Tah said, taking in Travis and Bolts.

“The alpha, I presume,” Travis said and held his hand out to Tah. “Nice to meet you. I’m Travis Gracen. Oakley’s second. This is Bolts. He’s my righthand.”

“Shifters. You’re with Oakley. Tony mentioned she had a group of shifters she works with.”

It was a statement, not a question, but Trav answered Tah anyway.

“Tiger shifter. Bolts is a lion. There are six other male shifters on Oakley’s team.”

“Welcome to the pride then,” Tah offered.

“We have a pride,” Bolts growled in his deep voice. “We’re Oakley’s pride. She’s our alpha.”

Tony laughed, enjoying this far more than he should.

“Alpha?” Murphy asked. He hadn’t picked up alpha vibes from her.

“Started building her own pride at sixteen,” Tony reminded them, repeating what he’d said the first time he’d come over and warned Murphy he’d hurt her. “Had her team by the time she was eighteen, and they’ve all been together since.”

“She’s the alpha we chose,” Travis clarified. “The one we follow. That doesn’t change just because she’s mated.”

He glanced at Murphy as if to gauge his response.

“I’m not breaking up her team. As long as you don’t get between her and me, we’re all good,” Murphy said.

Travis nodded. “Then what’s the plan to go after Blane?”

“What?” Reno asked.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk about that yet,” Murphy offered.

“The whole sister thing is a big curveball,” Travis agreed.

“Did you know?” Bolts asked, gaze narrowed on Murphy. For whatever reason, the lion shifter was incredibly protective of Oakley.

“No. I wouldn’t keep something like that from my mate,” Murphy answered with a snarl.

“You’re planning to go after Blane?” Tah asked, bringing them back to Travis’ earlier question.

“Yes. It’s past time we did. It’s the only way to stop him.” Murphy believed his words wholeheartedly.

“As long as you’re not expecting to use my mate as bait for that bastard, I’m in,” Reno stated. “Have to admit, it would be nice to finally get my hands on him. Make him pay for all the nightmares he gave Amia.”

“I don’t like the idea of sending a group out to hunt him, no matter how much relief it would bring to get our hands on him,” Tah admitted. “We have issues here that need to be addressed.”

“What issues?” Murphy demanded.

“We believe someone here could be providing information to Blane or those under him,” Mitch answered. “There were several attacks here. We didn’t see the pattern at first, but it was there.”

“They were testing our boundaries,” Reno stated. “Testing our response times.”

“They knew how to get to the medical center and were able to get there with no resistance,” Tah added. “They took us by surprise. Infiltrated the center and got into a room where seven of us were gathered like ducks in a row. Abby and me, Quinn, Gabriel, Gideon, Vic, and Professor Mueller. They could have killed all of us. Definitely tried. We can’t allow that to ever happen again.”

Growls spilled from Tah’s throat as he fought against whatever raged inside him. Murphy had heard about what had happened, but Tah had lived it. Had used his body as a shield to protect his mate, as well as Quinn. He’d seen Vic go down. The professor. Gideon and Gabriel.

“You think someone here helped that happen?” Travis questioned.

“We can’t not think it,” Reno said. “It was too well planned. Too easy for them to get as far as they did.”

“Are the attacks still happening?” Bolts demanded. “Is Oakley in danger here?”

Murphy turned to the other male.

“I’ll protect my mate,” he snarled.

“No offense, but you’re not in tiptop shape right now,” Bolts countered, ignoring the rumble of anger that spilled from Murphy. “And as her team, her pride, it’s our job to protect our alpha and her mate.”

“I don’t need anyone to protect me.” Murphy was insulted.

“You were captured,” Bolts replied. “I heard the story. Your teammate at the time led you into a dangerous situation and almost got both of you killed.”

Gabriel growled at the mention of his brother, but as much as it stung, Bolts was right. Daniel had put both of them in a dangerous situation, and neither of them had walked away afterward. Daniel had nearly died, and Murphy had been captured.

“We’ve been in dangerous situations, but we’re a team,” Travis added. “We work like one.”

“And we all guard our alpha,” Bolts added. “Each of us would die for her.”

“She inspires loyalty,” Tah murmured.

“Is the house ready?” Travis asked, and Tony nodded.

“I have a cabin,” Murphy told them but stopped when Travis shook his head.

“The house was built for Oakley and her team,” Tony shared.

“We guard our alpha,” Bolts stated firmly.

“It sounds like it’s even more important that we go after Blane now,” Murphy said. He wouldn’t argue with Travis and Bolts. Bottom line was, he wanted Oakley protected, and he had no qualms about allowing them to help. “It can just be me, Oakley, and her team. Everyone else can stay here and focus on finding his source of information.”

“We just got you back,” Tah snarled. “Did you not hear my mate before she left? Don’t put us in that situation again.”

“We’re all in this situation as long as he’s out there,” Murphy countered.

“Ending him, won’t be the end of the fight. Hunters won’t go away just because Blane’s not there to lead them,” Gabriel warned. “Someone else will step up.”

“No one else has his power,” Reno countered, surprising Murphy. “He’s the leader every group turns to. They won’t be as organized. They’ve lost their mad doctor. They won’t recover quickly if we take Blane, as well.”

“There’s got to be something else we can do,” Tah argued. “We need to stick together, not split our forces and spread ourselves thin.”

“Holy shit!” Tony exclaimed, and Murphy practically saw the wheels spinning in his head. “He’s not on the run.”

“What?” Murphy asked.

“He’s gathering his forces. He’s closing things down, leaving no survivors even though we all know how much he loves the games and torture. No survivors means he doesn’t need anyone to watch them.” Tony glanced at all of them, but it was Tah’s gaze he held.

“He’s coming here,” Tah said.

“He’s coming here,” Tony agreed. “And we better be ready for him when he arrives.”

Chapter Sixteen

Oakley was exhausted. Not just physically but mentally and emotionally. Especially emotionally. One moment had led to other moments and had her life in a state of upheaval. She couldn't get her feet beneath her. The world was spinning and spinning, and she was afraid she'd fly off at any moment.

She barely blinked when strong arms scooped her up against a solid chest. Murphy's scent wrapped around her as securely as his arms did. She tilted her head to glance around the room as the other men picked up their mates, murmuring things to them as they headed out.

"We fell asleep," Oakley murmured.

"Aye, lass. You did."

"I'll see you in the morning," Kenzie called as Gabriel carried her out the door. Whatever he said had her giggling.

"I'm a misfit," Oakley offered and smiled when Murphy's chest vibrated with a growl.

She leaned up and kissed him. Funny how she found her feet when she was in her mate's arms.

"Take me to bed, and make love to me."

Murphy paused, glancing down at her. He dropped a soft kiss on her lips then trailed over to her ear.

"All night long," he promised.

"Just the first time," she amended. "After that, I want you to fuck me. Hard."

"God, you are the perfect woman."

"I'll remind you of that next time you're mad at me," she promised.

He laughed, ducking into the hallway then heading back to the room they'd stayed in the first time they'd arrived.

"I thought you had a cabin."

"Too far," he murmured. "Get the door."

She grabbed the knob, turned it and pushed the door open then closed as he strode across the room and dropped her on the bed. Her shirt was up and over her head quickly. She was still processing that when she felt him tugging off her shoes then socks.

"Bra. Off. Now."

His command had her reaching behind her to undo the hooks on her bra. She shrugged it off and tossed it to the side just in time for him to jerk her pants, knocking her flat against the mattress. She laughed at his urgency, but the sound morphed into a moan as he began kissing his way up the inside of her legs, spreading them wide with his hands as he did.

"Murphy."

"God, you taste sweet. Decadent. Your skin is a tantalizing feast for a hungry man, and I'm way past starving."

"Oh, God."

She clenched her fingers in his hair and held tight while he moved that wicked mouth to the juncture of her thighs and slid his tongue along her folds. He flicked, teased, and traced patterns before sucking on her. He took her up, higher and higher, getting her right to the edge then backing off, only to work her up again.

"Please. Oh, God! Please, Murphy. Make me come. I want to come. Murphy! Please."

He chuckled, and the vibration was almost enough to send her flying. Almost. He added a finger, slowly working it in to the first knuckle before easing it back out.

"You like that, baby?"

"Yes."

"My finger."

In and out.

“Or my tongue.”

A slow, lap around her clitoris.

“Yes!”

“Which one?”

He did them both again, and she was out of her mind with need.

“Murphy!”

Another chuckle before he caved. One finger became two. He pumped them deep, picking up his rhythm as he latched his lips over her clit and sucked. She wove her fingers back through his hair and held tight, riding his face as she worked her way toward that elusive orgasm.

“Don’t stop. Harder. Please. Yes! Oh, God!”

He had her back at that edge, so close.

“Make me fly, Murphy! Please!”

She screamed as he followed her plea, shooting her into a floating weightlessness that had every part of her body tingling. Colors exploded behind eyelids she hadn’t even realized she’d squeezed closed. She was still somewhere on the ceiling when he rose over her, catching the back of her knees over his elbows and plunging deep. He rode her hard. She tried to catch her breath even as he stole it. Then he was moving, turning her to her stomach.

“Knees.”

He tapped her hip and helped steady her as she got her knees beneath her, spreading them wide while he moved into place and thrust deep again.

“So tight, Oakley. Like a glove made just for me.”

He groaned, slowing his pace, taking his time.

“Do you know how much it turns me on to know my cock is the only one to ever feel the squeeze of these walls?”

A slow, easy glide followed by a hard, deep thrust.

“Knowing I’m the only man you’ve ever known this intimately. God, woman. You’re so young, so innocent. I want to take you in ways that would shock you.”

“Shock me then,” she urged. “I’m young but far from innocent. Shock me, Murphy. Show me what it means to be your mate.”

“Oh, lass.”

He pounded into her, bringing her to another screaming orgasm before switching positions again, then again. Cum dripped from her sex, hers, his, theirs. It ran down her thighs, coating them both along with their sweat. Their bodies slid together. They touched and kissed, took and gave, and kept coming together for more. She lost herself in him. There was nothing outside of him and what they were together. He made her stop thinking, stop obsessing, stop everything but feeling all he did. He flooded her senses, so all she felt, heard, saw, tasted, and smelled was him. He was everything.

She was back under him, legs wrapped around his waist, arms holding his shoulders as he eased in and out of her.

“I’m not right for you.”

He paused at her words then began moving again.

“I’m all wrong,” she continued. “I’m the daughter of the man, who kept you and made your life hell while you were captured. I know that. You know that.”

“It—”

“Doesn’t matter to you.”

She tightened her legs, holding him deep.

“Why doesn’t it matter to you?”

“Because you’re my mate.”

“I’m your mate. I’m Talbot’s daughter.”

“One doesn’t negate the other, Oakley.”

He thrust, pushing his cock even deeper and making her catch her breath.

“Do you really want to talk about this now?” he demanded.

She smiled.

“I want to hear you admit it.”

“Admit what, lass? Tell me what you want to hear, and I’ll say it.”

“Who I am doesn’t matter to you. Why is that, Murphy?”

“Who you are matters,” he countered. “You’re my mate. My other half. The piece of my soul I’ve been lost without. You matter. To me, you’re everything.”

His words echoed her earlier thoughts.

“Say the words, Murphy. Give them to me. Please.”

He held her gaze. He ran his fingers down her cheek, brushing her hair behind her ear.

“I love you, Oakley. I know it’s sudden, but there it is.”

“I never expected to find a mate,” she admitted. “All my life, I’ve known I was created in a lab, that I was an experiment for the man who made me. I didn’t belong anywhere. Not with shifters. Not with Talbot’s blood in my veins. I didn’t belong with humans, not with a lion inside me. A beautiful, ferocious lion, who’s felt as lonely as I have. Even surrounded by people, I’m alone.”

“Oakley—”

“Shh, Murphy. Let me finish. All my life, I’ve wanted one thing. To belong. To feel like I belong.”

He wiped a tear from her cheek with his lips. She cradled his face, holding it as she opened her heart.

“You were another rescue. That was all you were, all you could be. But you weren’t. You’re my mate. I have a mate.”

“Yes,” he agreed, dropping a soft kiss on her lips.

“It is sudden. It’s warp speed, but...” She took a breath. “I love you. I’ve never said those words to another person. Never. I love you, Murphy. I can’t say you’re the other part of my soul because there are days I convince myself I don’t have one. But I can tell you that you’re home. To me, you’re home. I’ve searched my whole life for someplace to belong, but I had it all wrong. It wasn’t a place. It was a person. It’s you. I love you, Murphy. God help me, I don’t want to, but it’s there, inside me, and I can’t stop.”

“Don’t stop, Oakley. Love me. I promise I’ll love you just as hard.”

He held her, made love to her, and she knew, no matter what all the tomorrows held, she would never walk away from him again.

Chapter Seventeen

Murphy woke to an empty bed. He was on his feet, heading toward the door, when it opened. Oakley stepped in, juggling two cups of coffee. Using her hip, she shut the door behind her. She grinned when she saw him.

“I see you’re up.”

Her gaze skimmed below his waist and lingered between his legs.

“All of you.”

“How hot’s the coffee?” he asked as she set both mugs on the dresser.

“They’ll heat.”

She came at him, pushing him back onto the bed as she stripped. She was naked and over him in seconds. He was ready until she lowered her head to his lap and gulped him down.

“Fuck!” he cried, fisting his hands into the sheets beneath his hips.

She moved her mouth up and down his shaft, her tongue slipping along his length before she took the head into her throat. Christ, he was going to blow.

“Oakley.”

She moaned and kept going, sucking his cock as if it were her life’s mission. If she didn’t stop, their morning sex would be over before she got any pleasure from it. He forced his hands to move, wrapping his fingers in her hair and tugging her off him.

“No,” she whispered. “I want to taste you.”

“Next time,” he vowed, jerking her up his body then flipping them over so she was under him.

He kned her legs wide then thrust home. Oakley clawed at his shoulders, her legs wrapping around his waist. Her mouth was on his neck, his chest, and with her first orgasm, she pierced his skin, biting deep and marking him the way he’d marked her. He growled and sank his teeth into her as he came.

“Quick, fast...” She ran her thumb over the bite mark she’d placed on his left pectoral. “And dirty.”

He was sprawled on his back, one arm behind his head, the other running up and down her spine where she cuddled against him.

“I aim to please.”

“You did,” she purred. “And then some. What’s the plan for today?”

“I guess we can’t stay in bed all day,” he muttered.

“No.”

She gave him a quick kiss, bounced out of bed, grabbed the coffees, then brought them back, handing him one before she slid onto the bed beside him.

“I saw Trav while I was in the kitchen. He told me what you guys discussed yesterday while I was with the misfit club.”

Murphy growled, both at her calling herself a misfit again and the fact Travis had spoken to her before he could.

“I was coming to tell you last night. We got sidetracked.”

“Sidetracked was great,” she assured him.

She set aside her empty mug and stretched, drawing his gaze to her ample chest.

“But now, we need a plan. How are you thinking to draw out Blane’s spy?”

“We’re supposed to meet at the big house for breakfast this morning. Tah and Abby want to introduce you to everyone. Then Abby wants to walk you around and introduce you to all the new people. Amia and Quinn will be with you. Abby wants to see if anyone looks familiar or if anyone reacts in an odd way to you.”

“Odd how?” Oakley asked. “They’ll all hate me and wish me dead. What one of you sees as odd will probably look like a normal reaction for me.”

“Someone who shows too much attention or an over-the-top reaction,” Murphy tried to explain.

“Again, that would depend on our definitions of over-the-top.”

Oakley took his cup, finished the last bit of coffee, and set it aside.

“Let’s get dressed and head out. Walking around with Abby and the others will help me get a better lay of the land and see just how many shifters are here.”

She was a whirlwind of energy, bustling around the room, grabbing clothes then rummaging through his bag and tossing some garments onto the bed for him. He grinned as he watched her. He wasn’t sure what had changed between her leaving and them coming back, but there was definitely a change. She wasn’t running.

“I think I know most of the big players. Tony, Aleksy, Mitch, Jonah. I haven’t had a chance to meet Aleksy’s mate yet, but I’m looking forward to it. I hear she’s amazing. God, she must be to put up with those two.”

“Those two?” Murphy wasn’t sure what Oakley meant. “Lyra’s mated to Aleksy.”

“Yes, which means she gets Tony by default. The same way you get Trav by default.”

He couldn’t hold back the growl that rumbled from his chest.

“There’s no default with Travis. He’s not a part of our relationship.”

“Of course, he is,” Oakley countered as she stepped into a pair of black panties then pulled on a matching bra. “He’s my best friend. Our relationship doesn’t change my relationship with him. Ergo, you get him, too. It’s the same for Lyra. Tony and Aleksy are brothers in all the ways that matter. Mating him means she gets Tony, too.”

“That’s family, Oakley. That’s how it works. As my mate you get Finn. He can be an overprotective pain in the ass, but he’s my brother. I’m the same with him. Plus, Finn and I share a unique bond.”

“How unique?”

She tugged up her jeans, and he almost sighed as she covered up all the soft skin he wanted to run his hands over again.

“Murphy, how unique?”

He glanced up, gaze snagging on those perfect breasts before moving higher.

“We’ve always had a bond that allows us to speak to one another with our minds. Like the bond you and I are forming.”

“That’s interesting. What about his mate? Laura? Do you have that bond with her?”

“Only through Finn,” Murphy tried to explain.

“But not me.”

“What?”

“The three of you have a bond, but I’m not a part of it.”

Murphy was on his feet in an instant. She took a step back, but he snagged her waist and hauled her close.

“It’s not like that. When I was captured, I shut down the bond I had with Finn. I shut it down to protect him. Now, I can’t get it back. Maybe, it won’t come back, but if it does, I

need you to be aware, since it will include you. Every part of me includes you.”

“Why were you protecting him?”

“You’re a part of me, Oakley. The best part. You understand that, right?”

She nodded, but he still saw the uncertainty in her eyes. He’d keep working to make sure she understood he meant what he said. She was used to people walking away. He’d prove he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Why were you protecting him?” she asked again.

“When Amia joined us, she had a tracker in her shoulder. She thought it was a bullet that’d been left inside her. Diane cut it out. We were in Colorado at the time. Finn took it and disappeared. He waited until he was far enough away to turn it on and lead Blane in another direction. They caught up to him, tortured him.”

Murphy closed his eyes as he relived that moment.

“I went after him with Zane. I felt my brother fading. Through our bond, I felt it. There was cold, and he was slipping away. I knew we were losing him. Then Zane and I found him, and I didn’t think we’d make it back. They... Jesus! I don’t know how he survived. It was bad. Then what they did to me. There were days I wasn’t sure I’d survive. Days I didn’t want to. But I never looked as bad as Finn did the day I found him.”

“I’m sorry. You found him, though. He’s alive and mated and has a beautiful, baby boy,” Oakley reminded him.

“Finn had a rough time for a while. Professor Mueller gave him a drug he’d been working on that brought Finn’s shifter side awake with a vengeance. It also took most of his memory.”

“That’s some drug.”

Oakley passed him his shirt, and he realized he’d been getting dressed while they talked.

“Turns out he met Laura during that time. Thought she’d left him to die. Long story.” He waved his hand. “They found their way, but I refused to let him relive any part of the hell he went through. He didn’t need to go through it all again with me. I shut him out, and now, I can’t get him back.”

“You’ll find a way. You don’t strike me as a man who gives up easily.”

“I don’t,” he assured her, hauling her close again. “You’ll be a part of this. My connection with him and Laura and a part of this pride. Maybe, we can help Tah and Tony get along better.”

“Tony has a rule about no mated shifters in the field,” she murmured. “Does Tah share that belief?”

Murphy grinned. “No. That’s our choice. You want to save people. We go save them. As long as we’re together. That’s all that matters.”

“Maybe, I’ll like this pride thing.”

She gave him a quick kiss then continued.

“First, we need to get ready for Blane. I told Trav to introduce himself around. Him and the rest of the team. Spread out, get the lay of the land. Look for areas of weakness. We’ll meet later tonight to go over everything. Are you good with meeting here?”

Murphy nodded. “I have a cabin, though. We don’t need to stay at Tony’s house. Your team can have the cabin built for all of you.”

Oakley shrugged. “I like being close to my team, but we can go to your cabin, if you’d like.”

“I’ll show it to you. If you’re uncomfortable, we’ll come back here or join your team instead. Promise.”

“No, we should be alone tonight. Talk. There are things we need to learn about each other.”

He felt a sense of foreboding at her words but didn’t say anything. Instead, he took her hand, linked their fingers, and led her toward the door.

Chapter Eighteen

The pride put out a big breakfast. Which was important since there was quite the crowd. Oakley sat at the end of the table by Reno and Amia. Kenzie and Gabriel sat across from her and Murphy. There was laughing and joking, as well as dinner plan discussions that thankfully, Murphy opted them out of for now. She kept staring across the table at Kenzie, at how she was with her mate, watching the way he palmed her belly even when he wasn't looking at her. The way he dropped kisses on her as if it wasn't even a thought but an intrinsic part of him.

She saw it with Reno and Amia. The casual touches, the way they sat so close, their bodies were touching. The way she'd pick at food on his plate even though there was plenty on her own. The way he casually fed her and leaned in to whisper things to her that made her blush.

It seemed to be the norm for all the couples at the table with them. Zane and Diane, who she'd been introduced to upon arrival. Tah and Abby, who she'd also officially met. Abby had hugged her, welcomed her to the family, and told her she'd fill her in on everything after breakfast. Oakley had also met Logan and Clara, who'd thanked her not just for finding Murphy but also her Uncle Thomas. Finn and Laura sat on the other side of Murphy, and Ariel and Daniel sat down from Kenzie and Gabriel.

She'd met Calloway, a cougar shifter, and Darby, his mate. They had twin boys who were with Professor Mueller, who also had both Abby and Diane's daughters. Apparently, Zane's Uncle Orsai was with him. The two men were enjoying the four children, soaking up the joy, according to Abby. From what Oakley had learned, Professor Mueller was like a father figure to most of the pride, especially Abby, who was best

friends with Mueller's actual daughter, who was mated to not just one but all four alpha wolves.

They also knew the Holloways, a den of bear shifters, and were close friends with the alpha of the Coyote den. Coyotes who were known to prefer going it alone instead of joining forces. Yet, they'd joined forces with this pride. Were a big part of it. The more she saw, the more she understood why. There was something about the alpha, about all of the people surrounding her, shifter and human, that gave a sense of belonging or wanting to belong. Hell, she'd warned Murphy she wouldn't belong, didn't belong anywhere, but she wanted to. With him, with this pride.

"You okay?"

Murphy leaned close, his palm warm on her thigh, his breath at her ear just before he pressed his lips to the skin right under her earlobe.

"Mm-hmm," she murmured, turning toward him.

His lips met hers then his tongue slipped inside, and the rest of the room fell away.

"Breakfast, bro. Not the boudoir."

Finn's voice broke in and had her pushing away from Murphy, face filling with heat when she caught the grins on the faces around them. Then the joking started.

"Some of us are trying to eat, Murph," Zane teased.

"Never stopped you," his pretty wife countered, shooting a smile toward Oakley as she stood. "I need to head to the clinic. I promised Vic I'd bring her food this morning."

"Vic's awake?" Murphy sat up straighter beside Oakley.

"Yes, awake and demanding to be up and about," Diane grumbled then grinned. "She's back. Gideon hasn't left her room. She was yelling at him last night when I was leaving, telling him to stop coddling her. It was fantastic."

"They were fighting, and it was fantastic?" Oakley asked Murphy.

“Yes,” Ariel answered. “Vic is a force to be reckoned with. You’ll love her. From what I hear, she’s the human version of you.”

“Ariel.” There was warning in Kenzie’s voice.

“What do you mean by that?” Oakley asked.

“Vic was in the Marines with half of these guys, including your mate. They’re her team. She trusts them; they trust her. The same way your team is with you. She had a shitty childhood, not your level of shitty, but shitty nonetheless. Now, she doesn’t take shit from anyone. She protects those she loves. She’s a warrior. Fierce. Strong.” Ariel bounced out of her seat. “I’ll help you take breakfast over. Gideon will need food, too.”

“We’ll both go,” Daniel said, standing beside his mate.

“Me, too,” Zane offered. “I want to check on Thomas, River, and the others.”

“We’ll stop by later this morning,” Abby said as most of the table got up, taking plates to the kitchen on their way out.

“Let’s move this into the office,” Tah said as he and Abby both stood.

Oakley carried her empty plate along with the rest of them, noticing Logan and Clara were in the kitchen, cleaning up.

“You’re lucky,” Kenzie said, coming up beside Oakley and linking arms. “Logan cooked today. He’s amazing. Most of us do okay. Some are hopeless, which means pizza.”

Kenzie rubbed her belly.

“You okay?” Oakley asked.

“Yes.”

Kenzie grinned, grabbed Oakley’s hand, and pressed it against her belly. Oakley felt the firm kick against her palm.

“Does the baby do that often?”

“All the time,” Kenzie said with a grin. “It’s the most incredible feeling. That and when they roll. It’s like a whole flock of butterflies being set loose inside me. Just wait until you and Murphy have a little one. Feeling them grow. It’s—”

“Oh, no. That’s...” She stumbled over her words, unsure what to say, worried everyone was listening to them. She changed the subject as quickly as she could. “What are we headed to the office for? Did something happen?”

“Laying everything out for the day,” Tah said as he herded them over to the sitting area in the office.

“Ladies, have a seat.”

Tah waved his hand toward the two couches. Kenzie tugged Oakley to sit beside her. Amia joined them, taking a seat on Oakley’s other side.

“All we need is Quinn,” Amia joked.

“You know I’m offended,” Abby told them when she took a sit across from them.

Tah growled, but Abby waved him off as Logan and Clara stepped into the room, pulling the door shut behind them. Clara moved to sit by Abby while the men stood watching.

“Why are you offended?” Clara demanded, shooting a glare at the room in general.

“I’m a misfit, yet no one asked me to join.”

“What?” Clara asked just as Tah roared.

“You’re not a fucking misfit!”

“I am,” Abby countered. “Please. Girl genius. Eidetic memory. I never made friends until I met Jess, who happens to be a lot like me. I never fit in anywhere until here. Until him and this pride. I’m a misfit, and I’m offended none of you invited me into your little club.”

“Well, hell,” Clara groused. “I wasn’t invited, either. Out of all of us, I’m the biggest misfit. Hell, none of you liked me when I got here.”

“Beg to differ,” Logan said, dropping beside his mate on the couch and pulling her into his lap. “I liked you.” He pressed a kiss against her neck. “I more than liked you.”

Clara laughed, batting him away when he kept trailing kisses along her neck.

“I mean it. Amia slapped me.”

“That’s low,” Amia said then laughed. “I totally did.”

“That was awful!” Abby reprimanded. “You two could have torn apart this pride at the seams.”

Clara and Amia shared a look and started laughing.

“That was never going to happen,” Tah stated. “And none of you are misfits. You’re all being ridiculous. Now, let’s focus and plan.”

“Fine.” Abby waved her hand at her mate. “I’m taking Oakley around to meet the newer groups of shifters. Those that arrived around the time Quinn got here. Amia will be with us, and Quinn’s going to meet us.”

“The trifacta,” Amia murmured then shrugged at her mate’s growl. “What? Blane’s daughter, Talbot’s daughter, and Talbot’s monster. Trifacta.”

“You’re doing it again,” Abby warned. “Not including me.”

“You don’t want to be part of this,” Oakley fired back.

“I am a part of this. We all are. That’s the thing. I’m as hated as any of you, simply because I’m his mate. Because they hate my mate and everything he stands for. When we were attacked in that room, he was the main target. Him. Their exact words were, *Oh, I’m going to enjoy killing you, Utah Pearce, alpha of this pride. What a fucking joke. No such things as alphas. Isn’t that what they say now? Alphas are just a made up romanticism. Gives me a good chuckle. Means you don’t exist, cat boy. Something I can get behind. Let’s make sure we get a picture of his body and send it. Blane can frame it and hang it above his fireplace. In fact, everyone aim at the alpha. His blood spills first. His. Blood. Spills. First.*”

“Abby.”

Tah was there in an instant, scooping his mate into his arms and holding her tight against his chest while her sobs filled the room. Gabriel got the door for him, and the alpha carried his mate from the room.

“She still has nightmares,” Reno murmured as he sat beside Amia, cuddling her close. “Wakes up screaming for him. Afraid he’s dead in a pool of blood.”

“God,” Oakley murmured.

“They’ve taken enough from us. Put us through hell. It’s past time we ended this,” Gabriel stated, glancing at his pregnant mate. “Reno, you and I should meet with Tony and Mitch. Work out logistics for when an attack takes place here. If Blane is coming, we need to be prepared.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Reno agreed with a nod. “Murphy, you meet with Travis and the rest of Oakley’s team. Show them the lay of the land and make sure they have everything they need.”

“Looks like I’m on sweep,” Logan said.

“Sweep?” Oakley asked.

“I’ll be escorting you and Amia around, checking in on the new groups.”

“I’m coming with you,” Clara told them. “Another set of eyes won’t hurt.”

Logan nodded.

“What about me?” Kenzie demanded.

“Get with Darby and have her reach out to her dad to see if he’s heard anything more about Blane and what he plans,” Reno ordered. “We need as much information as we can get. Gabriel’s right. They’ve taken enough. We need to end this. Now.”

Oakley agreed. For a woman who tried to avoid attachments, she was adding them up fast. First Trav, then Tony. Her team. Murphy, her mate. A sister. Amia and Quinn.

Now, she wanted to fight to the death for a woman and pride she swore would never accept her. They did, though, and it terrified her. Now, she had everything to lose.

Chapter Nineteen

Murphy was exhausted as he made his way back to Tony's house at the end of the day. He'd walked the entire property with Travis, Bolts, and the rest of the team. It had been nice to get a feel for the group's dynamics. He'd even introduced them to Adrian, the alpha of the coyotes, and a few of his pack who were keeping watch around the perimeter of the pride's land.

"She's settling in."

Travis' words had him jerking his head to the side. The other male had been so quiet Murphy had almost forgotten he was still with him. The rest of the team had split off, going to the cabin they had on Tony's property. Now, her team took advantage of all that space. Murphy had plans of his own. Taking his mate to the seclusion of his cabin. Where it would be only the two of them. For the whole night.

"She's not settling in," he countered, finally replying to Travis.

"You don't see it."

Murphy growled, but Travis ignored him.

"I see it. Trust me. She's not going to run."

"What?" Murphy demanded when Travis stopped and stared at him.

"She's changing. You're changing her."

"I'm not changing a fucking thing," Murphy denied. He didn't want to change her. He wanted her, just as she was. Exactly as she was.

"It's a good thing," Travis stated then held his hands wide when Murphy growled again. "She wants to stay. I saw it this morning when we chatted. She's not running, Murphy.

That's you. She wouldn't stay for Tony, not for me, but for you. I think she'll stick for you. Stick with you."

Murphy took the time to really look at Travis.

"She brought you out with her."

Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? He wasn't that much older than Oakley which meant he'd either been born or created in those labs too or captured as a child. Had anyone other than Oakley ever asked how he was? Had anyone ever done that for a single member of her team? Somehow, he didn't think so. It gave him a greater understanding of what this team meant, of why any one of them would die to protect her. Because she was the only one who really saw them.

"You belong, too, Travis. All of you. You're her team, her family. None of that changes. Mating me doesn't alter what she has with you."

"It does," Travis argued then held his hand up again before Murphy could say anything. "It should. She'll go to you now when she needs to bounce ideas or work through things. She should go to you. You're mates."

"You're still her best friend. She'll still need you, and she'll kick your ass if you even think about leaving without her. Don't do anything stupid," he warned.

Travis smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"See that you don't," Murphy fired back. "Because if she has to go after you, she won't be going alone. I have no qualms about spilling your blood."

Travis laughed then. A genuine one. Murphy decided then and there he'd learn the other man's story. He'd learn all of their stories. He'd share his. Starting tonight. With his mate.

"Team's at the house," Tony called from the front porch of his farmhouse. He held a mug in his hand. Coffee, Murphy noted as the scent hit him. He didn't pause when Tony reached back and grabbed a second cup, holding it out.

Travis waved as he walked away. Murphy moved forward, taking a seat on one of the chairs Tony had on his porch.

“She inside?”

He took a sip and exhaled. Tony nodded.

“With Quinn, Amia, Kenzie, and Clara. They’ve been in there for about an hour. Chatting.”

Tony shook his head, rubbing a palm over the back of his neck.

“She’s making friends. Female friends.”

Murphy laughed at the look on Tony’s face.

“Scared?”

“Never,” Tony swore, and there was something in his gaze that gave Murphy pause. When he stepped off the porch, Murphy stood and followed.

“I tried to find her,” he murmured. “When that bastard left my aunt for my father and me to find. I knew what he’d done. The placenta was still inside her.”

Tony paced, fury in every step, but Murphy knew Tony needed to get it off his chest.

“Sixteen years, Murph.”

He noted the way Tony shortened his name, the way those close to him shortened his name.

“He kept her and did God knows what to her for sixteen years. She got herself out. All my money, my connections, my men and capabilities. None of it mattered when I needed it the most. Every search ended in failure until I came home one day and she was there. This powerhouse lion shifter who had everyone jumping at her commands. You haven’t seen that side of her yet. Just wait. She’ll take your breath.”

“She already does,” Murphy admitted.

“Because she’s your mate. To me, to her team, she’s so much more. She’s the glue that holds them together. She’s the

person who brought me back from the edge, from a darkness I wouldn't have come back from. She saved me from that.”

“Tony, I'm not taking her from you.”

“She's your mate,” Tony snapped.

“And your cousin. Kenzie's sister. Travis' best friend. And apparently, the alpha of a great group of shifters. She matters. To all of us. I'm not taking her away, Tony. I'm here. This is my pride. You're obviously staying here. It's our home. Mine, yours, Oakley's.”

“She keeps a wall up. Keeps secrets. Even from Travis. Tear down those walls, Murph. Make her let you in. She won't heal until she does. Not fully. Don't let her keep you out,” Tony urged, and Murphy nodded.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Murphy said again.

Tony nodded. Murphy was torn between wanting to find his mate and sticking around to make sure Tony was okay. Aleksy's mate settled that for him when she stepped outside, her gaze zeroing in on Tony. She headed their way, and Tony turned as if he'd felt her, as if he were a shifter.

“What's wrong? Where's Aleksy?” Tony asked.

Lyra shrugged then linked her arm with Tony's.

“I need you.”

Her voice was whisper quiet, and Murphy remembered someone saying she'd been deaf or partially deaf before she'd met her mate. Looking at her was like seeing a softer, smaller, feminine version of Reno. Murphy hadn't taken the time to really talk to Reno, either. To see how he was handling having a sister he'd never known about.

Murphy wasn't surprised when Tony gave all his attention to Lyra.

“Are you okay?”

Lyra smacked his hands away when he tried to run them over her arms and torso. She leaned in and somehow managed to do the impossible. She said something to Tony that Murphy

couldn't pick up on, though he stood mere feet away. Whatever it was had Tony turning, blocking Murphy's view of her.

"I'll see you later, Murphy. Have a good evening."

The two walked away, and Murphy was completely clueless as to what had happened there. He turned and headed toward the house instead and walked in to laughter. Oakley's settled beneath his skin and warmed him from the inside out, but walking around the corner and seeing her sitting on the floor at Kenzie's feet with Quinn's baby in her arms, blowing raspberries on his belly while the baby cooed stopped Murphy in his tracks. She hadn't been that way with his nephew. She hadn't been able to give back Sean Murphy quickly enough.

"Hey, Murph," Amia called, pushing to her feet. "That's our cue to go, ladies. Except for Quinn, at least."

"I know I've been gone for a while, but I'm a 'that' now?" Murphy fired back.

He bent to plant a kiss atop Amia's head then held out his hand for Kenzie when she went to stand.

"How much longer?" he asked.

Kenzie rubbed a hand over her belly.

"Two weeks. Maybe less. Think Blane will hold off that long?"

"I hope not," Clara muttered then glanced at Kenzie. "No offense, Kenz."

"He won't wait," Amia stated. "At least, not any longer than it takes to get everyone gathered." She paced away, arms wrapped around her waist. "I should be out there, hunting him."

"Amia."

Clara went to her while Oakley pushed to her feet and passed the baby to Quinn.

"He's not just shutting labs down. He's killing people. Our people." Amia held up her hands. "So much blood."

“That blood isn’t on your hands, any more than it’s on mine” Oakley said, reaching out and taking Amia’s fingers in hers. “We’re not them. We are not Marcus Blane or Victor Talbot. We didn’t cause their hatred, didn’t send them on a path to see the complete eradication of shifters. Their trail of carnage doesn’t lead back to us.”

“Damn right,” Clara agreed, wrapping her arm around Amia.

“Thinking that it does misplaces the responsibility and blame for the lives they took and allows Blane and Talbot to strike a final blow. Against the children who did everything they could to protect those in danger,” Quinn added as she walked over with her son. “Those bastards don’t get to win.”

“But we should be doing something,” Murphy said, bringing all their attention to him. “Amia’s right. They’re getting rid of people and history.”

“What?” Oakley asked.

“Son of a bitch!” Murphy growled as it hit him. “He’s doing more than killing shifters. He’s erasing us. All the things done to us while captured. Procedures. Drugs. Anything endured by those who managed to escape or were helped. Your records, Oakley. Kenzie’s. Quinn’s. He’d getting rid of all of it.”

“That’s not a concern,” Oakley countered.

“Of course, it is,” Quinn argued. “All of Emery’s information. His father’s. It’ll all be gone. We have to stop them.”

“Talbot kept his own records, separate from the labs and Blane. I can access all of his records.”

“What?” Quinn asked. “How?”

“I made sure I had access to everything before I left,” Oakley admitted with a glance at Murphy.

He noted the way she pulled free of the group of women. Stepping back. Stepping away. Distancing herself, so she stood alone. He wouldn’t allow that. He moved to her,

wrapped his arm around her waist and tugged her back against his chest. She held herself rigid in front of him for a moment, but as he rubbed his fingers over her abdomen, she gradually relaxed.

“That’s incredible news,” Quinn replied. “Will you check for records on me? On Emery? And his father? I’ll give you his name. If you could get those to Tony for me? Please?”

Oakley nodded. “I’ll get access to Tony, as well as Tah and the pride.”

Except for her records. He didn’t need that caveat from her to know she wouldn’t share those with anyone. It made him wonder what she hid.

Chapter Twenty

Oakley entered the cabin and took a look around. Someone in the pride had obviously taken care of it while Murphy was gone. His brother maybe, though Finn hadn't struck her as the domestic type. There was a sitting area to the right as they walked in. Kitchen to the left. There was a hallway that led to the back of the house where she suspected the bedroom or bedrooms and bathroom were. She figured Murphy would show her soon.

"Water?" Murphy called from the kitchen as he pulled two bottles from the fridge.

"Thanks." She took one of the bottles and took a long swallow while he stood and stared at her. "What?"

"Talk to me. Let me in, lass."

She opened her mouth then shut it. Made to move around him, but he caught her to him. Held her close. Dropped his head, so his lips brushed her ear. Breathed her in and somehow, she found herself clinging to him.

"Talk to me, Oak. Please."

"I can't," she whispered.

"You can trust me. I won't ever let you down."

"It's not that," she said, caught between the need for distance and the need to burrow under his skin and become a part of him. "I...tucked it all away. Shoved it down. I can't go back there. Not even in my head."

"Then tell me what you can, what you're comfortable with."

She shook her head against his chest, pressing her fist against her mouth.

“I’ll share first,” Murphy offered. “I was a boy when I was forced to leave Ireland.”

She pushed away from his chest and stared up at him.

“My mother was murdered by a group of hunters. My...” He paused briefly, swallowing before he continued. “My father blamed me. I was the only one of us who ever shifted at the time. He figured it had to be my fault because I couldn’t control myself. He and my two older brothers beat the hell out of me. Almost killed me.”

“Oh, God. Murphy.”

He didn’t look at her. His gaze was unfocused, and she knew he was lost in the memory.

“Finn tried to help. They held him down. Broke his leg when he wouldn’t stop trying to intervene. We were barely walking when they loaded us on a plane and sent us to America with strict orders never to return.”

“They can’t do that. Surely, you know that. Haven’t you ever been back?” she demanded, hating the rest of his family, without ever meeting them.

“We can’t.”

“Murphy.”

“If we step a foot back in Ireland, he’ll kill our sister, Finn’s twin.”

“I don’t... What?”

“He kept Brenna when he sent us away. I always thought it was to protect her. She looks so much like Mom. Finn, Brenna, and I do. Our two oldest brothers look like our father. I never thought much about that until a few years ago when Finn brought it up. How did two human parents give birth to a shifter. Two of us, actually.”

“They didn’t. They couldn’t. It’s not physically possible. One of them must have had a repressed animal.”

“My mother,” Murphy said. “I had a friend look into it for me. My mother was pregnant with Finn and Brenna when

she met him. I was just a baby.”

“He isn’t your father.”

“No. Finn put the thought in my head, and I can’t get it out. I made some calls. Touched base with a few people I’m still in contact with in Ireland. I finally got some answers right before Daniel and I headed to Illinois.”

“Before you were captured.” Oakley pieced together. “Have you had a chance to talk with Finn about it.”

“Briefly,” Murphy told her. “We’re both adamant it’s past time to find Brenna.”

“Find her?”

“My sister disappeared from Ireland last year. I’d already started putting out feelers then. Nothing. It’s like she vanished into thin air,” Murphy admitted.

“I’ll help find her. My whole team will,” Oakley offered.

“After we take care of Blane. Let’s focus on that first.”

She nodded, turning and heading toward the sitting area, walking around the couch and chair positioned in front of the fireplace. He didn’t say a word as he joined her and took a seat on the couch, water bottle held loosely in his fingers. He simply sat and waited.

“My earliest memory is from when I was three. Talbot kept me in a kennel in his office.”

She ignored Murphy’s growl and kept pacing in circles.

“He wanted me on hand. There was constant testing. Blood, saliva, spinal fluid. He checked my lungs, my kidneys, my heart, my liver, my ovaries. I had a surgery once a month, so he could explore. Sometimes, he’d leave my incisions open, so he could go back in. I was six when I found Travis.”

Murphy sat up straighter.

“He’s two years older than me. I made the mistake of claiming him as my friend.”

“Talbot used that against you.”

Not a question. Murphy knew. Most shifters understood that. It didn't stop them from making friends, from taking a mate, from having children.

“Anytime I didn't follow his orders immediately, Travis suffered. I learned to be very obedient, very quickly.”

She paused by the window, looking out but seeing nothing but the past.

“When I was a teenager, fourteen, I woke up strapped to a bed. Naked and surrounded by three male shifters who'd been drugged.”

“Jesus Christ!” Murphy snarled.

“They didn't touch me. You know they didn't touch me.”

“Physically.” He snarled again, but she knew it wasn't at her. “You were fourteen! Fourteen! That fucking bastard.”

“He threatened me with what would happen, then had them taken into another room and made me listen to the screams of another woman.”

Murphy wrapped her softly in his arms and cuddled her against his chest.

“You were a girl, Oakley. Not a woman. A young girl who endured what no young child or girl should ever experience in their life.”

“I'm a shifter,” she reminded him. “I've never met one of us who's made it through unscathed.”

“That doesn't make it okay.”

She curled into him, gripping his shirt with one hand, desperate to get her thoughts all out before her vocal chords simply seized from the fear of the next memories locked inside her.

“That was the year he started burying me alive.”

Murphy's chest rumbled, but he held her just as gently, one palm stroking up and down her back.

"By the time I was fifteen, Travis and I were always being lowered in that coffin. Talbot had a clock installed that showed how much oxygen was left. His favorite pastime was to put me in and see how long I could last once the air ran out. He'd wait until I was clawing at my throat, desperate to breathe, then he'd ask me if I'd be a good girl."

Shivers coursed over her body, but Murphy never stopped the stroke of his palm.

"I'd always come back to consciousness to the sound of his voice, the feel of his hands."

"Oakley."

She shook her head against his chest. She had to finish, or she never would.

"He killed Travis."

"What?"

"He put him in and refused to bring him up. The oxygen ran out, and he wouldn't bring him up. I...I destroyed everything in the room. I threw him out of the room and killed every hunter who tried to stop me. When I finally got Travis up, I couldn't get him to wake up. I breathed into his mouth. I thumped his chest to try to get him breathing again. I screamed. My throat was raw. Talbot got back in. He shoved me aside and stabbed a needle straight into his chest. Travis woke with a roar. We..."

She paused. Every breath was a raspy pull. She was back in that room, watching Travis, knowing if they didn't get away, the next time, her best friend wouldn't survive.

"We escaped three days later."

"I've got you, Oakley. Talbot can't hurt you anymore. You or Travis. You're both safe. You both got away."

"I have to... I did something. Once I was at Tony's... I..."

“It doesn’t matter,” Murphy swore, swinging her up into his arms.

“It does,” she whispered as he carried her down the hallway.

Two bedrooms, she noted. He pushed through the door of one, placed her on the bed then sat beside her. She had to finish. Tell him everything.

“The first time Tony left, I made an appointment. I was recovered by the time he got back. I found a doctor. A shifter doctor. He understood. He did what I needed. He understood.”

She was rocking. She was rocking and couldn’t stop. She was back in the coffin, encased in cement with one small hose of oxygen between her and death. She was pulling Travis out. So pale. Unmoving.

“He understood. He did what I wanted.”

“What did he do?”

Murphy’s voice was soft, soothing. If he’d been there. If she’d known he existed. If she’d only known.

“I had a hysterectomy. I can’t let him live. Not through me. He ends with me. Talbot ends with me.”

She glanced up at him, feeling like that small child again. The one seeking any form of love and affection that she could get.

“I can’t... I can’t give you children. I can’t be who you need.”

“Oakley.”

“I saw you. With your nephew. I saw how good you’d be as a father. I can’t give you that.”

“I see you, Oakley. I see what we can have together, what we *do* have, and you’re all I need. You’re all I’ll ever need.”

She wanted to believe that. Desperately. But first, she had to breathe.

Chapter Twenty-One

Murphy held Oakley while she slept. His heart broke for her. What she'd survived. It made him want to revive Talbot, so he could kill him all over again. It made him want to go back in time and try to find her, save her. She hadn't needed him to, though. She'd saved herself. It also made him worry more about Brenna. What had she suffered at their father's hands after he'd booted out Murphy and Finn, kept them away with threats of death, threats they'd never wanted to put to the test.

“Hey.”

Oakley stretched beside him, arms going high over her head, breasts thrust out, tempting him and reminding him it had been far too long since he'd made love to his mate.

“Morning,” he said instead, using all his willpower to keep his hands off her. “How are you feeling?”

“Like an idiot.” Oakley groaned. “I'm sorry for emotionally dumping on you last night.”

“That's not what you did,” he countered. “I'm glad you shared with me. I'm glad you let me do the same. That's what mates do.”

“Are you sure you want me as your mate? Now that you know I can't have children.”

“I said it last night, but I have no problem saying it again. You're all I need.”

He leaned in, taking her mouth under his and losing himself in her taste. When she tunneled her hands into his hair and gripped tightly, he moved over her. They made quick work of stripping clothes and tossing them aside before he slipped between her thighs and moved his fingers down to touch her.

She moaned into his mouth, arching under him, moving her hips into the thrust of his fingers. He swallowed every cry, using his fingers to take her to the edge then send her flying. She came apart under him, wrapping her legs around his waist when he replaced his digits with his shaft. He rocked deep, filling her completely, and she moaned into his neck then bit down.

Their hands were everywhere. Palms caressing, fingers grazing, mouths and tongues tasting. She wrapped around him, held him, and it was the closest to heaven he'd ever been.

"Yes. So good," she panted into his neck, licking his skin then sucking on it before scraping it with her teeth.

"You feel good, lass."

He moaned as she savored him, growled as his shaft pushed inside her tight passage repeatedly. She came again, her breath catching in her throat as she whimpered, her sex tightening like a vise around him. Still, he couldn't stop. He gripped her calves, sliding down to wrap his fingers around her ankles and guide them over his shoulders. Deep. God, he was so deep inside her. She cried out, cresting again with a yell that he matched as he joined her, pouring himself inside her.

She groaned when he collapsed atop her, and he quickly pushed up and slid her legs off his shoulders. Then, with a groan of his own, he dropped to her side, throwing an arm over her abdomen and pulling her to him. They lay silently for long moments while they each caught their breaths.

"What's the plan for today?" Oakley asked, turning her face, so she gazed up at him.

"Breakfast with the pride. Planning. Hunting for a traitor."

"I need to meet with Trav and the team today," Oakley told him. "Blane will head this way soon. I want to be ready for him."

"He'll draw out as many of us as he can," Murphy warned. "He'll spread out his men, attack in waves from

different access points, and do his best to spread our defenses thin. I spoke with Tah, Reno, Tony, Mitch, and Jonah. They believe someone here is reporting to Blane. Possibly more than one. Whatever we decide to do, we need to play it very close to the chest.”

Oakley sat up beside him.

“We need to make plans to draw him in then. Make him strike where and when we want. Give him access to exactly what he wants.”

“If access involves you or Amia and the word bait, it’s a not going to happen,” Murphy warned.

“It contains what we want it to,” Oakley replied. “But we all know what, or more precisely, who Blane wouldn’t be able to resist. We just need to dangle the carrot in front of him. Taunt him with the possibility of getting his hands on exactly what he wants. He’ll play right into our hands for a change.”

Murphy nodded. Oakley made valid points, but still...

“Tah won’t agree to it,” he warned. “He’d never put any of the mates at risk. And Reno. Fuck, he’ll lose his mind if he knows she’s in danger.”

“We’re all in danger. Every day of our lives as long as Blane and his ilk live. Reno has to understand that. He doesn’t strike me as a stupid man.”

Murphy couldn’t argue that.

“Perceived danger is different from knowingly putting her in the line of fire. Reno will die before he lets Blane get his hands on Amia.”

“Reno knows what she did. For years, she saved shifters from her father, from the Blanes. He has to know she’s more than capable of fighting to protect herself,” Oakley argued.

“Reno was the last shifter she saved,” Murphy told her. “He was captured while doing reconnaissance for the pride. They captured him, almost killed him. Amia saved him.”

“I know this. Amia told me all about it,” Oakley said. “And the choice isn’t his any more than it would be yours

when it involves me.”

“Not to sound like a controlling prick here, but I’ll fight tooth and nail against putting you in that scenario also. It’s instinctive. You can’t ask a male shifter not to do everything in his power to protect his mate.”

“I’ll give that to Reno because Amia is human, but for you, that doesn’t wash. I’m a shifter. I can and have taken care of myself. I’ve never been captured. Not since the moment I escaped. No matter how many times they came after me.”

She moved closer, climbing into his lap and straddling him.

“You want to protect me. I get it, Murphy. I feel the same. It would kill me if anything happened to you, but we don’t lock each other away. That’s no way to live.”

She paused, looking at him, cupping his face, and dropping a soft kiss on his mouth.

“For the longest time, I didn’t care what happened to me. I got out. I got Travis out. We survived. Now, I’m realizing that’s all we were doing—surviving. That’s why Tony pushed me so hard. He wanted me to see there’s more to life than survival and revenge and putting myself on the line, putting my team on the line.”

“Oakley.”

“Shh, let me finish. I realize what I was doing now. I want more. I want you and with you, a life. I wish...I wish I’d waited to make certain choices, but I can’t take that back. All I can do is promise to make each day count, each moment count. But I won’t hide, Murphy. I will never hide, and I expect you to understand that.”

“I get it. As long as you promise me to protect yourself at all costs.” He leaned in, rested his forehead against hers. “I just found you, Oakley. I can’t lose you. Hell, there are times I still feel like I’m crawling out of my skin.”

“What?” She jerked back, running her gaze over him. “You haven’t said anything. Does Tony know? Did you have him check you to make sure everything’s okay?”

“I’m fine, and no, Tony isn’t my doctor. Diane is. Besides, all I need is you. As long as I can see you, breathe you in, I’m fine. My lynx is fine. I think I need to go for a run today. I haven’t shifted since I was captured. My animal needs to stretch as much as I do,” he admitted.

“Then let’s do that.”

She hopped off the bed, turning around to scan the bedroom and giving Murphy a great view of her amazing ass.

“It can wait.”

He snagged her around the waist and pulled her back to the bed, tossing her onto her back beside him. Then he was over her, in her. She gasped into his mouth then wrapped her arms and legs around him, meeting him thrust for thrust. They devoured one another.

“This is what I need,” he moaned between licks along her skin. “You. Any way I can have you. Every way I can have you.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Don’t stop!”

He stopped only long enough to help her roll onto her hands and knees. Then he thrust deep again, loving the way she tightened around his shaft. He held her hips while he rode, taking them both to the edge until she was screaming his name as she came around him. Three more thrusts and he joined her with a bellow of his own. Then they were once more flat on the bed, breathless.

“I love you,” she slurred, sounding drunk on pleasure.

“I love you,” he whispered back.

“Need to catch my breath,” she murmured, burrowing into his side, eyes closed. “Then we can run.”

“How about a nap first?” he suggested. “Then we can go to the main house for food. Then we can run.”

“Mm-hmm,” she agreed then yawned as she put one hand on his chest, just over his heart.

He reached down, snagging the sheet and jerked it up and over them, tucking her in closer. She'd opened up and let him in. She'd admitted she wanted to be with him, that she loved him. She'd asked him to understand her need not to hide, and he did. He really did, but that didn't mean it wouldn't have his animal on edge at the mere thought of her being used as bait for a madman, who led an organization whose sole goal was the extinction of not just Oakley, in particular, but their entire species. Every species of shifter.

He tugged his mate closer, so close he felt the beat of her heart against him. A heart he planned to make sure beat for a long time. A mate he planned to trust without reservation. Whatever path the immediate future held for them, he would stand beside her. He knew she wouldn't take unnecessary risks. Not anymore. She'd protect herself as hard as she protected those around her. For him. For both of them and the future they were building.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Oakley sent two texts on the way to the pride's main house with Murphy. One to Tony and one to Trav. Both had the same message.

Meet me at Tah's.

The kitchen was empty when they entered, but Murphy made himself at home, pulling stuff out of the fridge and heating them plates of something delicious. They were just sitting down to eat when an older man walked in.

"Professor," Murphy greeted, coming to his feet. "You look incredible."

Oakley knew who Professor Mueller was. She'd expected him to be older, rounder. This guy was short but incredibly fit, with salt-and-pepper hair and piercing eyes.

"It's good to see you, Murphy. Diane said she hasn't seen you yet. Are you planning to stop into the clinic today?"

Professor Mueller moved to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water.

"I gave Tony some blood when I first arrived. He didn't see anything to worry him. I feel fine."

Oakley waited for the other male to say something against Tony, but he didn't.

"If Tony isn't worried, then there's no reason for concern," Mueller responded.

She'd forgotten Tony had saved Professor Mueller's life. After the shooting. She'd heard the full story from Quinn.

"You must be Oakley."

He walked to her, visually scanning her from head to toe, and she wanted to ask what he saw, wondered if it was

more than she'd seen.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he squeezed, giving her a soft smile. "Welcome to the family."

He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Now, she understood why he was considered the father of the pride, why all the shifters respected and loved him. There was something about him that inspired trust. And hope. Looking into his eyes, she thought he might be able to right all the wrongs in her life or at least, make her not care as much about them.

"You two sit. Finish eating," he ordered then moved to Murphy, patting him on the shoulder. "I have two little girls waiting for me and a phone call with my daughter later."

"I heard she was here recently. She and her husbands."

Professor Mueller smiled. "She was. I'll be going to stay with her and those wolves in another month or so."

"You're leaving the pride?" Murphy asked.

"No," the professor answered. "Just a visit. A nice long one. Tony's man, Jonah, will take me when the time is right."

"You know Jonah?" Oakley asked.

"I know most of Tony's men. Good men. All of them. Mitch and Jonah, Drake, and the rest of their team hold a special place in my heart. They saved my daughter's mates and in doing so, saved her life. Amazing men. Come see me when you feel up to it," he invite Oakley. "I'd like to hear your stories about the mad doctor, who created you."

"Professor."

There was a warning in Murphy's growl, but Professor Mueller never moved his gaze from her.

"You don't strike me as a person who hides. Not from anything. We can dissect and run tests, but his body will never be able to tell us what you can."

“You’re working with Tony on Talbot’s body?” Oakley asked, surprised that Tony would allow that.

“I am. Tony is brilliant, but he has demons of his own, running through his mind. The least of which is the fear he might be anything like his mother’s brother. But he’s no Victor Talbot,” Mueller said.

“No, he’s not,” Oakley agreed.

“And neither are you,” the professor told her before patting her on the shoulder. “Come see me when you have time. We’ll talk. About anything and everything. Murphy.”

He nodded, gave Murphy’s shoulder a squeeze, then left the kitchen.

“He’s...” She paused. “An interesting man. Not what I pictured at all.”

“He gets that a lot,” Murphy replied. “He looked good, though. Better than the last time I saw him. Makes me wonder what was in that shot Tony gave him.”

“Good stuff.”

Oakley knew what was in Tony’s shots. Not because he’d ever told her but because she’d come across his records and snooped further until she knew all about the serum he’d created and used to enhance his soldiers, giving them shifter-like abilities. Less than those of shifters but greater than that of a human spouse. But the soldier’s DNA would never show a hint they were anything other than human. That was what was in the shot Tony had given to Professor Mueller, Murphy’s friend Vic and the lion shifter, Daniel.

“I feel like we should discuss what you know, Oakley,” Murphy warned.

She shook her head.

“Not my place. You’ll have to wait and talk to Tony. Or the professor.”

“You think Professor Mueller knows?”

“He knows,” she assured him. “Now, let’s finish eating, so we can find Tah and have a conversation.”

“You need me?” Tah entered with a little girl in his arms. She looked like a mini version of him. “The professor said you were both in here.”

“We came to eat then wanted to talk to you,” Murphy answered, his plate almost empty anyway. How had he managed to eat so quickly? “Oakley has an idea about dealing with Blane.”

Tah stared at her, but she ignored him as she kept eating, taking her time with every bite.

“I see. Is this between us, or should I make some calls?” Tah asked.

“I’d like to keep it small,” Oakley finally said. “There are two more on the way. They should be here soon.”

“Six and we’re already here.”

She glanced up as Tony entered the kitchen with Trav, Bolts, Mitch, and Jonah.

“I count five, oh brilliant one,” Murphy groused, and Oakley found herself laughing.

Tony gave them a funny look.

“Aleksy is with Reno, Logan, and Gabriel in the office. We were together when I got the text from Oak.”

“Let’s head in there,” Tah advised and turned to herd Tony and the others toward his office.

“I only sent a message to Tony and Trav,” Oakley told Murphy as they rinsed their dishes quickly and loaded them in the dishwasher.

“But you had a feeling all six of them would show up.”

It wasn’t a question, but Oakley wouldn’t lie to her mate.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

He took her hand and led her to the office. There were more people there than Oakley had expected. The mates had joined the meeting. Abby, Amia, Kenzie, Clara, and Quinn. It felt right. Perfect even.

“I’m glad you’re all here. It saves me from having to discuss this twice,” Oakley told them.

“You called us here,” Tah said.

“I called them here.” Oakley gestured to Tony and his group. “The other three were with them.”

She pointed to Reno, Logan, and Gabriel.

“Council members,” Tah said then nodded toward Murphy. “He is, too.”

Abby crossed her arms over her chest. “I am, also. Only the professor and Vic aren’t here.”

“That’s okay. We don’t need everyone,” Oakley said. “But I’m glad my misfits are here.”

Several mates growled, and Oakley barely bit off a laugh. The ladies all grinned at her.

“Does that mean I’m a member now?” Abby demanded.

“Yes,” Oakley answered. “As self-proclaimed president of this misfit group, you’re officially a member.”

Tah growled, but Abby ignored him.

“Good. Now, tell us what you’re thinking.”

Oakley glanced around at everyone.

“Murphy filled me in on the conversations. About the timed attacks here. The potential of one or more of Blane’s people in here, feeding information to him and his teams.”

“The attacks when I arrived were strategic,” Quinn stated. “They wanted to test response times to different areas, see how close they could get, and how quickly the different teams responded. They kept trying until they made it all the way to the medical center, and everyone here is aware of what happened there.”

No one said anything, but Abby leaned into her mate, and Tah wrapped an arm around her waist, locking her against him.

“What are you thinking, Oak?” Tony asked.

“I’m thinking we use all of that to our advantage.”

“How?” Tah fired off.

“By controlling the narrative.”

Oakley glanced around the room, knowing she would get one hell of a reaction from everyone.

“The misfit club. Everyone knows about it. I saw that when I did my whole tour thing with Logan and Clara. Everyone stared at us. Me and Amia. Quinn. The trifecta.”

“We’re not using the three of you as bait,” Tah stated firmly.

“Hell, no,” Reno surged to his feet.

“Let her speak.” Murphy’s voice rose over the others, and silence fell once more.

“How do we use what we know to our advantage?” Oakley asked. “We control the narrative. We use his spies against him. Logan paraded us all over. I think it’s important they see us together. We need to establish a routine. One we want, with precautions in place. We present him with what looks like the perfect time and place then wait for him to take the bait. None of us will ever be in danger.”

“I don’t want you out in the open. The possibility of long-range weapons isn’t a risk I’m willing to take,” Tah fired off.

“Agreed,” Tony piped in.

“Kenzie’s out,” Gabriel barked, making Kenzie growl even as she waved him off.

“I’m not stupid, mate. I won’t do anything to harm our baby.”

“I’m part of the this,” Abby demanded. “As Tah’s mate, I’m just as much a target as Oakley, Amia, and Quinn.”

“Everyone in this room is a target,” Murphy said. “Yes, Blane wants to get his hands on Amia, Oakley, and Quinn, but he won’t stop until he’s killed all of us. Every shifter. We all know he’s coming here. Oakley’s right. We need to make sure we’re in control of what happens when he gets here.”

“Then let’s start planning,” Tah said, and Oakley knew if she had the alpha on board, everyone else would fall in line.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The days dragged on as they waited. It drove Murphy insane, but they developed a pattern anyone could trace. Oakley was always with Amia and Quinn. Sometimes, Abby was with them. Sometimes, Clara. On rare occasions, Kenzie joined, but during those times, Gabriel, Daniel, or one of the other mates was with them. They'd created discernable patterns for the last week, and every night, Murphy tumbled Oakley into their bed and made love to his mate. They'd gone on several runs, letting their animals engage. Her lion, his lynx. Those had been great runs. If not for the constant threat of Blane, Murphy would be the happiest he'd been in his life.

"Murph!"

Murphy turned as Daniel called his name.

"Ride into town with me?"

"Sure." He glanced around.

"She's with her team. She and Amia both. By this time, I'm sure Quinn's joined them," Daniel told him. "I understand if you don't want to go, though. I just wanted the chance to really talk. We haven't done that since you've been back."

"Why are we headed into town?" Murphy asked as they got into Daniel's car.

"I need to check in at the sheriff's office. Plus, Ariel wants me to pick up some things at the house. We've been staying in one of the cabins on the ranch since the attacks started. Then the shooting. We haven't left. She's been after me for a week, but we've been busy."

"It's good to see you two finally together. How did that happen?"

Daniel waited until they'd passed through the gate, the coyote's guarding the perimeter opening and closing it behind them.

"After Illinois, they brought me back here. You'd texted that you were going after Blane."

Murphy shook his head.

"Never sent that text. Don't even know what happened to my phone. Blane had me before he left the woods outside of wherever we were in Illinois," Murphy admitted. "Hell, they shot you down, and all hell broke loose in those woods. I lost you in the chaos, saw Blane and went after him. What I didn't see was the guy who took me down. Three darts in the back. Lights out. I woke up in a hole in the ground. Literally. Second time I woke up, I was chained on a wall, and they were beating the hell out of me."

"Christ, Murphy. I'm so sorry. If I could go back, I swear—"

"There's no going back," Murphy said, glancing out the window. "And no need to apologize. Besides, as far as I can tell, several good things came out of that."

"Like what?" Daniel demanded.

"Like you and Ariel finding your way back to each other. Reno discovering he has a sister. Us meeting Tony, and him coming here."

"He saved my life," Daniel agreed.

"From what I've heard, he's stepped in, stepped up, and saved a lot of lives," Murphy agreed. "And on another note, had I not been taken, I might have never met my mate."

"I guess those are some good things, but if we could have some of that without the damn suffering first, I'd be a happy man," Daniel growled.

"Same," Murphy agreed. "Now, don't apologize to me. I'd say we both came out on the winning end in this one."

"Yeah," Daniel agreed then glanced in the rearview mirror.

“What’s wrong?” Murphy asked, picking up on the sudden tension in Daniel’s frame and turning to look behind them.

“Eyes forward,” Daniel ordered softly. “We had three trucks pass us. All three of them are now behind us.”

“Doesn’t seem like Blane’s style,” Murphy muttered, grabbing his phone from his pocket and pulling up Tah.

“Hey, slacker, where the hell are you?” Reno answered after two rings.

“I’m with Daniel in his car. We’re headed to town,” Murphy began, putting the phone on speaker.

“What’s wrong?” Reno asked immediately, any humor leaving his voice.

“We’ve got three trucks on our tails,” Daniel answered. “Put in a call to the station and have them send help.”

“How far out?” Reno demanded. “We’re loading up now.”

“Negative,” Murphy commanded. “This could be a setup to draw us out. Send help from town.”

“Damn it!” Reno yelled. “How far out? Jonah already has a team loaded and out the gate. How far to get to you?”

“We’re halfway to town. About fifteen miles from the ranch,” Daniel yelled. “Two of the trucks are black F-150s. One has a winch on the front. Third one is a white—”

The crunch of twisting metal slammed Murphy forward as Daniel fought the wheel. Murphy did his best to hold on as they were struck again, sending them into a spin. Murphy fumbled with his phone, desperate not to lose his grip on it as things went completely to shit around them.

“Daniel?” Tah’s voice filled the phone. “Ariel’s in town. She left a few hours ago with Logan and Clara. She said she needed to pick some things up from the house. He’s on the other line. They’re close to you guys.”

“No!” Daniel yelled as they took another hard hit from behind. At this point, Murphy wasn’t sure how the car was still drivable. “Don’t bring her here. Do. Not. Bring. Her. Into. This.”

“Murphy,” Reno called. “Jonah’s ten minutes out.”

“Brace!” Daniel yelled as both trucks struck at once, and they went airborne.

The phone dropped as Murphy slammed against the roof of the car. They landed with a screech of metal on asphalt then flipped. Daniel cried out then went silent. Murphy felt his wrist snap. His head bashed against the window twice and things went fuzzy. He blacked out. Someone screamed. A woman. Who?

“Oakley?”

He wasn’t sure if he spoke aloud or only in his head. Then...gunfire? Was that gunfire? Another yell. Definitely feminine. A roar. Tah. Tah? He’d been on the phone.

“Murphy!”

Not Oakley. Who was it? Who was calling him?

“Daniel.”

That was Ariel. Murphy recognized her voice instantly. Another roar. Not Tah. Daniel. Primal. He was a primal lion.

“Ariel,” Murphy murmured.

Another roar rocked the car as a lion burst free beside Murphy, taking up too much of the car, but he slammed against the windshield until it cracked and buckled. Daniel stepped through and roared again, glancing over his shoulder at Murphy. It would hurt like hell if he shifted while his body was so beaten, especially with a broken wrist and what felt like several broken ribs. The hit he’d taken to the head had definitely rung his bell, but he didn’t think he had a concussion. He’d had enough of them to be a pretty good judge.

Daniel snarled in his face before going through the exit he’d made.

“They’re gone, but I’m sure they’ll be back with more guns than we have,” Logan warned as he ducked in. “We need to get you out of here and into the SUV. Now! Clara, get over here and help me get Murphy! Don’t shift. It’ll be a while before Daniel settles enough to switch back from his lion, and there’s no way we can fit both of you in the SUV in your fur and claws.”

“Hey, Murph,” Clara said as she joined Logan. “Let’s get you out of here and get back to the house.”

They all jerked at the squeal of tires until Ariel called out, “Jonah’s here!”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Jonah ducked down with Travis beside him. “Logan, load up and get them out of here. We’ve got Murphy. We’ll be on your heels in five.”

“We’ll leave together,” Logan stated firmly. “Not leaving Murphy behind.”

“No one gets left,” Travis jumped in as he jerked the rest of the windshield out of the way. “Whole team is here. We won’t let anything happen to Oakley’s mate.”

Murphy laughed, actually laughed even though it hurt his ribs.

“How’s Oak’s mate?” someone called, then Styles head appeared. “Hey, there, Mr. Oakley. Why’s everyone standing around staring? Get him out. Logan, alpha says move your ass now. He wants you back at the ranch ten minutes ago.”

“Mr. Oakley?” Jonah asked then snickered.

“Incoming!” Bolts’ voice carried loud and clear. “In the SUV. Now! Lock and load, boys. Cover Alpha Two. Move people! Move!”

Alpha Two? What the hell was that?

Several sets of feet came into view. Jonah and Travis reached in, caught him under the arms and pulled. He clenched his jaw against the pain that went through his body. He heard yelling all around him.

“Logan!” Clara screamed her mate’s name, and Murphy heard doors slam.

“That stupid son-of-a-bitch won’t leave until we have him loaded up,” Styles called. “Get him out. Trucks approaching fast. Guns up, boys.”

Murphy cleared the windshield and stood between Travis and Jonah. Styles stepped up and assessed him.

“Fractured wrist. Inhalations look shallow. Broken ribs?”

Murphy nodded.

“Cut on your thigh but doesn’t seem to be bleeding too badly, right now. Nothing that needs immediate triage. We can take care of the wrist on our way back.”

Jonah stepped out of the way, and Styles took his place.

“Trucks coming fast!” Bolts hollered. “Move! Move!”

Murphy glanced up. It was definitely one of the trucks, but it was swerving all over the road as if the driver were having serious issues.

“Something isn’t right,” Murphy said, watching as the truck got closer. “Nobody fire.”

“Is that an order, Alpha Two?” Bolts demanded.

“Alpha Two?” Murphy finally questioned.

“Is that an order?” Bolts asked again.

“Yes.”

“Oakley’s Alpha One,” Travis offered as they all watched the truck.

The truck swerved until it set sideways across the highway about five hundred feet from where they stood. The door opened, and someone shoved something out. No, not something. Someone. And they weren’t moving. The truck tore out, heading back the way it came. Whoever was on that pavement wasn’t moving.

“What the hell are they doing?” Murphy snarled, fighting the pull to go toward whoever lay on the asphalt.

“I’ll check it out,” Jonah offered.

“It could be a trap!” Murphy snarled.

“It’s definitely a trap,” Jonah agreed as he took off, Styles following on his heels.

One glance and Jonah was bending, scooping that lump into his arms and heading back with Styles right at his side.

“She’s hurt. Badly,” Styles muttered. “Load up. We need to get her to Tony or Drake stat.”

“A hunter?” Bolts asked with a growl.

“She’s one of us,” Styles snapped. “Let’s go before they come back for her.”

Murphy peeked at her as Jonah passed by, but her face was tucked against Jonah’s chest, so all he saw was hair matted with blood. He wasn’t sure where it was coming from, but he hoped the rest of her wasn’t as bad. At least, until they found out if she was team shifter or team hunter spy.

“She’s with me,” Jonah ordered. “Styles, let’s go. You’re with me.”

Travis and Bolts guided Murphy to one of the vehicles. He ducked inside then kept going until he found himself between the two of them in the back seat.

“Alpha Two.”

He shook his head then groaned.

“Concussion?” Travis asked.

“Just a few bumps and bruises,” Murphy said while Bolts took his wrist, felt around then grabbed a splint he’d pulled from somewhere and began wrapping it.

“Hold the bone in place while it heals. You should be able to take it off in a few hours,” Bolts assured him.

“Go with a concussion,” Travis said, and Murphy turned back toward him.

“What?”

“Trust me. You have a concussion.”

“I know a concussion,” Murphy growled.

“And I know your mate. She’ll be waiting, and once she sees you’re in one piece, she’s going to rip you apart. Concussion.”

Murphy glanced at Travis and barely stopped the urge to shake his head again.

“I’m not faking a concussion to my mate. She’ll be fine, Travis.”

He watched the guys share looks then laughter filled the vehicle. He refused to let them make him nervous. Oakley was his mate. She’d be fine.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Oakley did her best to hide the anger that coursed through her, but she could tell by the expressions around her that she was doing a piss-poor job. Murphy had left. Gotten in a vehicle and driven away without a word to her. He expected her to stay, to communicate with him if she were going anywhere, but obviously, didn't think he was held to the same standard. That was about to change. He would learn exactly who he was mated to.

"Travis says he's hurt," Tony said, his avid gaze probably reading more from her body language than she wanted him to.

She growled. She was saving all of her words for Murphy.

"There was a woman thrown out, as well. Jonah grabbed her. Said she's seriously hurt. Hair matted to her head with blood. Face swollen so badly it's hard to tell what she actually looks like. He took Styles with him to try to stabilize her before they get here," Tony continued.

"Then my mate isn't hurt that badly, is he?" she muttered.

Reno and Tah both glanced toward her, but she ignored them. Finn, thankfully, looked just as pissed as Oakley was.

"Travis said he has a concussion," Tony added.

Oakley snorted. Oh, she knew how they liked to claim "concussion". Fucking cowards. Guess, this would tell her what Murphy was made of when it came to the two of them.

"Oakley, they were ambushed," Tah reminded her.

It was the same thing he'd said when she and Tony had arrived. They'd been going over some of the medical charts

she'd stolen from Talbot. Tony had looked as if he were experiencing his idea of a perfect Christmas morning. They'd even been laughing as they scanned documents. Then they hadn't been.

"And he called you," Oakley muttered.

"I'm the alpha." Tah's voice was hard, a tone he'd probably honed as a military leader she suspected. Unfortunately for him, it didn't work on her.

"I'm his mate!" she fired back as she whirled around. "His first call should have been to me."

"Oakley—"

"No!" She sliced her hand through the air as she cut off Tony. "Mate. He did that. I walked away. I left. He came after me. Pulled me back. Promised..."

She stopped, realizing her emotions were spilling from her tongue in ways she didn't allow.

"At least, Jonah was smart enough to grab my team, but don't think they won't catch the sharp end of my tongue when they get back here."

She paced away, so on edge, so filled with rage. Filled with fear. Fear that something might have happened to Murphy when she'd just let him in. Fear that she'd lose him when they'd only just begun. Fear that if Blane got his hands on her mate again, there wouldn't be anything left of him for her to rescue.

Drake ran out of the farmhouse, drawing her attention away from the rest of them.

"They're coming through the gates," he told them. "I'll take her when they get here."

"Take her?" Tah questioned. "She needs to be taken to the medical center."

"Not until we know who and what she is," Tony countered. "Drake will take her downstairs. We'll treat her here."

“You’re going to cage her in that room?” Reno snapped while Amia jerked her gaze up.

“I’m going to keep her someplace where she can be cared for and monitored around the clock while also ensuring she can’t slip away for some nefarious purpose we aren’t aware of,” Tony countered. “She has no scent. It was the first thing Jonah picked up on. No scent at all.”

“Jonah picked up on that?” Tah asked, arms folded over his chest.

Tony didn’t reply.

“That’s a heavy weight you carry.” Tah’s voice was soft despite the tension Oakley saw in his frame. “All those secrets you carry. I can be a damn good ally, Tony. Imagine the force we’d command if we actually learned to work together.”

“Enough,” Oakley cut in. “They’re here.”

Four vehicles pulled up, and people began spilling out of them. Reno and Tah turned toward one, and Tony walked with them as a lion’s roar lit the air. Jonah passed her with a woman in his arms. He and Drake moved quickly toward the house. She ignored them. Her gaze was locked on one vehicle as she waited for one man to make his appearance. Bolts slid out first. Travis came around and headed for her as she watched Murphy step out. His gaze immediately locked with hers.

“Car was a mess, Oakley. He’s banged up. Bruised. Conc—”

“Don’t.”

She snapped the order to her second as Murphy approached. She ran her gaze over him. He was in better shape than the first time she’d seen him.

“I’m fine,” Murphy said as he stopped in front of her. “Daniel asked me to ride into town with him. We got hit halfway there.”

She stared at him. Now that he was in front of her, all her anger faded as she drank him in. His red hair showed gold

in places now that he'd been exposed to sunlight again. His skin was growing tan, setting off his green eyes perfectly. The sensual swell of his bottom lip always seemed to beg for her touch. Even now, his strong, capable hands reached out to cup her hips and tug her closer. Her mate. The man she'd once sworn would never exist for her. The man she'd tried to deny, to walk away from. They were so entangled inside her it was as if they were one person.

"No concussion?" she asked him.

Murphy grunted, shooting a glance at Travis before gazing back to her.

"No. Banged up a bit but sound. My lynx is already healing me."

He tugged her closer, tilted her chin up and kissed her softly.

"I'm fine, Oakley."

She let him hold her, soaking in the feel of him against her. When he nudged her to lift her head again, she was the one who reached for his lips, the one who took the kiss deeper. Those strong hands slid around to cup her buttocks and lift her into the bulge of his cock. She rubbed against him like a cat in heat, which was what she felt like. No one in her life had ever made her feel as free as her mate did. Free to be a woman. Not an animal. Not a leader. Not a pawn in some game she'd never had a choice in. A woman. One worthy of the love and affection he automatically showered her with.

"Let's go to the cabin," he whispered as he skimmed his lips down her throat.

"Too far," she argued, trying to climb him like a tree.

He hissed a breath as she squeezed his side, and she pulled away.

"You're hurt."

Of course, he was hurt. Tony had told her. So had Travis.

“I’m fine,” Murphy said again as he tugged her close again. “I need you, lass. You’re all I need.”

He’d said that before. Several times actually.

“Let’s find Styles and have him check you over,” she said, realizing everyone had slipped away while they’d been holding each other.

“I’m fine. The only one I want checking me over is you.” He leaned down and kissed her. “As thoroughly as you’d like.”

She didn’t ask again as he tugged her behind him into Tony’s house, down the hallway toward that room they’d shared. His shirt had cleared his head before the door even snicked closed behind them. She growled, dropping to her knees in front of him as she took in the bruising over his left side.

“Got tossed around a bit when the car flipped.”

She painted the area with soft kisses, reaching for his belt as she did and slipping it free of the loops on his jeans.

“Oakley.”

There was a growl in Murphy’s voice, and she wasn’t sure if he was warning her to stop or urging her to keep going. She chose the latter, trailing her lips down to the rise of denim, making swift work of releasing the button while her tongue trailed over skin stretched taut over flexing muscle. She tugged down the zipper, spreading the material wide and nuzzling the hard staff revealed beneath.

“Oakley.”

This time, her name was a whispered moan. Definitely encouragement then. She gripped the edges, jerking down until he popped free, long and thick with a bead of fluid glistening on the tip. One swipe and his taste exploded on her tongue. Not enough. She needed more. She sucked him between her lips, took him deep, then deeper as she struggled to taste every inch. She moaned around his flesh, fingers digging into the back of his thighs as she bobbed around that stalk of flesh.

“Mmm, fuck, lass. Feels so good. Just like that. Mmm,” he groaned again.

She glanced up his body, those green eyes holding her stare as she worked him with her mouth and hands. There was power in the way he watched her, and it was all hers. She helped him work his jeans down his legs then released his cock only long enough to help with shoes, socks, and finally the worn denim slid free and was kicked aside. She ran her hands over his strong thighs, caressing the bulge of muscles while his cock jerked toward his stomach as his body clenched beneath her touch.

He'd recovered. Somehow, in the time since his rescue, he'd regained muscle.

“Take your shirt off,” he ordered before she could take him back into her mouth then barked another order when she started to rise. “Stay on your knees.”

Oh, that power had shifted now, and he had every bit of it. She tossed aside her shirt and reached behind to undo her bra.

“Leave it for now. I like you in lace. Can you take off the rest without standing?”

She nodded, not wanting to break the mood he set, then worked as quickly as she could, with fumbling fingers, to remove everything but her panties.

“Those, too,” he crooned.

“I thought you liked me in lace,” she murmured as she left them on, moving so she sat with her legs folded beneath her, bottom resting by her heels. She placed her palms on her thighs.

“I like the way your nipples push against the lace, begging for me to free them. My mouth waters to take them between my lips and suck.”

She moaned and rose up onto her knees before him again.

“Suck it,” he demanded. “Just the way you were.”

She enclosed him again, taking him into her throat, then drew back to his tip and sucked. Hard.

“God, yes. Just like that, Oakley.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair and massaged her scalp, holding her head in place while he rolled his hips, riding between her lips, slow and easy. Shallow. He kept each stroke smooth, going to top of her throat and no farther. Teasing her while he moaned and moved those fingers. Every time he withdrew, she caught the head and ran her tongue around it before he thrust forward again. Two more strokes then he pulled free, stepping back from her.

“Get on the bed. On your back.”

His hand wrapped around his thick cock, fingers working it from root to tip. She watched him as she followed his direction. The heat in his gaze seared her, building an ache between her thighs that only he could soothe.

“Oakley.”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to fuck you. Hard.”

“Yes,” she practically moaned.

“But first, I’m going to taste every inch of you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Murphy watched his mate as she reclined on the bed, spreading her legs so he had a perfect view of her damp panties. She was wet and ready for him, and he was more than ready for her. But first, he had to taste her.

He'd never been so grateful for shifter DNA as he crawled onto the bed and moved over her. His wrist was mostly healed, with just a slight twinge. Ribs, head, and the rest of him were well into the mending process. He'd missed this unity with his animal when he'd been captured and that side of him had been locked away. He had Oakley to thank for it, and he planned to thank her. Well into the night.

He took her lips first. Let her wrap her delicious body around his, rubbing her cloth-covered pussy over his shaft. She was perfection. Sheer perfection in every way that mattered.

“Murphy.”

“Shh,” he hushed as he trailed his lips down her neck, across her chest, then sucked her nipple through the lace.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered against her skin as he moved lower, licking and nipping along every inch of skin along the way. “For not letting you know I was leaving with Daniel.”

“You don't—”

“Shh,” he hushed again. “I do. The same way I'd expect you to let me know if you're going somewhere off this property when we both know Blane is out there, watching and waiting. I'm sorry, Oakley. It won't happen again.”

“You called Tah.”

He heard the break in her voice, and he felt it in his heart.

“There’s no way I’d call you and bring you into danger, and you don’t get to ask me to any more than I’d get to make that demand of you. We put each other first. I get that. You showed me that when you tried to walk away, thinking you were doing what was best for me. I forgive you for that.”

“How magnanimous of you,” Oakley grouched then moaned as he turned his head and nipped the inside of her thigh.

“Accept my apology, Oakley.” He followed up that command by sucking her sex through the gusset of her panties.

“Yes! God, yes! I accept.”

He chuckled then used two fingers to tug aside the material, so he could taste her unencumbered. He traced his tongue along the seam of her plumped lips before dipping inside to trace a circle around her clitoris. They both moaned, then as he sucked on her, he pumped his fingers inside her while he worked that tight bundle of nerves with his mouth.

“Murphy, please.”

He pulled back long enough to rip off her panties then he gorged on her, bringing her to a quick orgasm. Then he was up, over her, thrusting into her as they both tore at the lace still covering her breasts until they were skin-to-skin. She clung to him, and after giving her another orgasm, he rolled, so she sat astride him.

“Ride me.”

She rose over him, hands running up her body until she gripped her long brown hair and ran her fingers through it like a woman in the throes of ecstasy. God, she was gorgeous. She lifted her hips, not stopping until she was poised, midair, with only the tip of his shaft inside her. Graceful. Elegant. She was every fantasy he’d been too afraid to have. She was the woman he would treasure every day for the rest of his life. The woman he’d...

“I love you.”

She glanced down at him, smiled, then leaned over him, changing the angle of her hips as she took his mouth. He ran

his fingers through her hair, holding onto her as she took them both to the summit. He swallowed her groan of pleasure even as he spilled inside her.

“I love you,” she whispered as she lay nestled on his chest. “I was so mad when I found out you’d left with Daniel. That you were hurt. That Jonah and my team had gone after you, but no one had reached out to me.”

“I didn’t tell them not to,” Murphy swore. “Daniel asked me if I’d ride along with him. He had some stuff to pick up at the sheriff’s office, then he wanted to go by his and Ariel’s place in town to grab some of their things.”

“What did he need at that office? Wait. They have a house in town?”

Oakley went to move off him, but Murphy held her tight.

“Once upon a time Daniel was the sheriff. He bought a house in town and spent most of his time there.”

“He was the sheriff?”

“Damn good one from what I hear. He and Ariel usually stayed at their house in town. They only relocated to one of the houses on the compound when the attacks began,” Murphy explained.

“Okay.”

“He wanted to talk. He feels guilty for what happened, no matter how many times I tell him not to. So I went. We were hit halfway to town. Three trucks.”

“And you called Tah.”

“I called Tah. I’m sorry.”

She nodded against his chest then bit down. Hard. She laughed as he growled, flipping them over on the bed and thrusting inside her again.

“You make me insatiable,” he swore.

They didn’t leave the bedroom all night long. He finally eased away in the early hours of the morning. Oakley was still

curled in bed. He'd exhausted her. No, they'd exhausted each other. This time, he left her a note, telling her exactly where he'd be so she could find him when she woke up.

"Living dangerously if you're walking out of this house without your mate," Tony warned as Murphy walked through the kitchen.

Tony sat with a laptop open in front of him. A cup of coffee sat at his right hand. He nodded toward the machine on the counter.

"It's ready. Just push the button. Then grab a seat. I've got some info you can take when you meet with Tah and the others."

Murphy headed to the coffeepot.

"You could come with me. Team player and all that."

He'd expected a quick quip, but Tony merely sighed and rubbed his head.

"One of the many things I'm good at is keeping secrets."

"That sounds ominous," Murphy said as he leaned back against the counter, sipping at his coffee.

"Sometimes, it feels that way," Tony murmured.

"Have you been up all night?"

Tony nodded. "There's too much to do. No time for sleep."

"I get the impression you're a main player here, Tony. That means people need you. One of them is my mate. You have to take care of yourself."

Tony smiled. "I've always wanted her with me, but she's pigheaded and stubborn and won't listen."

"Must be a family trait," Murphy offered then took another sip.

"You're good for her," Tony replied.

Murphy waited another moment.

“Am I supposed to ask questions to get this information you wanted to share or what?”

“Waiting for one more person,” Tony murmured. “He’s here.”

Murphy went on alert when his brother joined them. Why had Tony called Finn?

“What the hell, Murph?”

Finn grabbed him and squeezed him close.

“I meant to touch base with you, but I got a bit distracted with my mate.”

Finn huffed but released him.

“I understand. Laura and I have been sleeping when we can. Sean has no idea of the difference between day and night.” Finn turned to Tony. “What’s up?”

“I’d like you both to come downstairs with me.”

Tony closed his laptop and stood, bracing his hands on the table.

“What’s this about?” Murphy asked. “Was there something wrong with my blood?”

“No, it’s something else.”

Tony glanced between them then led the way toward that hidden panel in the hallway that opened into a passageway that led to his underground lair. Logan had told Murphy it was in the house when Tony bought the land. That was why he’d kept the place even though the farmhouse wasn’t really his vibe. Tony gave off more of a gothic mansion aesthetic, complete with butler who called him Mr. Sandoval.

“I want to start by saying she’ll get all the care she needs here, so don’t worry.”

“She?” Finn asked.

“The woman thrown out of the truck,” Murphy whispered.

“She’s currently sedated. She was panicked when she came to, and fair warning, she’s attached herself to Jonah.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Murphy asked, but Finn was already walking and the look on his face had Murphy on his brother’s heels.

As they got closer, Finn broke into a run. He charged into a room where a bed had been set up. Not a hospital one either. This was a queen that was currently dominated by Jonah, who had a bundle on his chest. Not a bundle. A woman. As Finn stepped into the room and growled, it hit Murphy.

Her head lifted, and though her hair was dark, her face had healed. He knew those eyes, though the last time he’d seen them they’d been drenched in tears as his sister had begged for him and Finn to stay, then begged to go with them. Now, they held only terror as she tried to crawl inside the man holding her.

“Take your hands off my sister,” Finn snapped, but Murphy reached out and snagged him before he could get any closer. “Brenna.”

She hid her face in Jonah’s neck while he did his best to soothe her, glaring at them the entire time.

“I just got her settled,” Jonah snarled softly. “Get them out of here.”

“What did they do to her?” Murphy whispered.

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “But I’m going to find out.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Oakley walked into the pride's main house and stepped into a yelling match. Murphy stood on one side of the room with his brother, Tah, Reno, and several other members of the pride. Tony and Mitch stood on the other side. That was when she realized the only one yelling was Finn.

"What's going on?"

She walked to Tony and Mitch, joining them as she glanced back and forth.

"I want her moved to the clinic and under Diane's care," Finn demanded. "Now."

"No." Tony's reply was soft but firm, and he never raised his voice. She got the impression it wasn't the first time Tony had said the word.

"Her?" she inquired.

"My sister, Brenna," Murphy answered as he walked over to stand by her.

"Brenna? You found your sister?"

"More like she was delivered," Mitch offered.

"She's my twin," Finn snarled. "That makes her a part of this pride."

"Right now, she's barely functioning," Tony offered softly. "She's terrified of everything. There are so many drugs in her blood that I'll take all the help I can get in figuring out what all they pumped into her system. Despite your opinion of me, I'm not trying to be a prick here. She's attached herself to Jonah. She won't leave him. She barely tolerates me, and you saw how she was when I took you down to see her. She won't leave the room she's in, and I won't allow anyone to force her."

“You won’t allow?” Finn snarled.

“She’s fragile.” Tony kept his tone calm. “I know you saw that, and I know you’re scared. We can’t move her right now, and as mad as you are that she’s attached to Jonah, we can’t separate them. He’s the only person she trusts.”

“Like Quinn when she first got here,” Abby said, stepping in to join them with Professor Mueller at her side. “She attached to Mitch. It took time to gain her trust.”

“Did I hear you say something about needing help with some bloodwork?” Professor Mueller asked, his gaze firmly on Tony.

“Yes,” Tony answered. “Would you be willing to lend a hand?”

“Of course,” Mueller offered. “As Finn and Murphy’s sister, she’s family. She’ll be my top priority.”

“I don’t want her in that room,” Finn swore, pacing away from the group, and it dawned on Oakley what part of his issue was.

“It’s where Talbot was kept,” she stated. “I’m sorry, Finn.”

“There are no traces of him left in there,” Tony vowed.

“No, there’s a bed where she’ll sleep every night with a man she doesn’t know,” Finn snapped.

“I’m going to stop you right there before you say something you can’t take back,” Mitch warned. “I slept in a bed with Quinn every night from the day she arrived until we moved to Tony’s. Not a damn one of you said a word. I held her, made her feel protected at a time when she felt anything but safe. Jonah is the best man I’ve ever known. If you think he’s doing anything other than watching over and protecting your sister, then you’re wrong.”

“We haven’t seen Brenna since we were all kids,” Murphy told the group. “My last memory of her is of her crying and screaming while Finn and I were tossed into a vehicle. She thought we were dead or would be. Last night, I

saw fear. No, it was terror in her eyes. If Jonah lessens that for her, then I'm grateful."

He walked to Finn, reached out, and gripped the back of his brother's neck, resting his forehead against his.

"She's here, Finn. We do whatever it takes to help her. Anything."

Finn finally nodded, and both brothers had tears spilling when they finally stepped apart.

"I don't think we're seeing the whole picture," Oakley murmured. Something teased the back of her mind. Something she wasn't seeing.

"It was a well-orchestrated hit," Murphy agreed. "Three trucks. They took us out, lingered only long enough to see who arrived, then took off. No reinforcements showed up for them. They had the numbers but didn't finish us."

"That truck drove for you with no fear even though Jonah and Oakley's team were there, fully armed." Tony seemed to be thinking aloud. "Why?"

"Why was she dropped on the road for us to find?" Tah finished. "We've been discussing that since last night. Before we even knew who the woman was."

"A distraction," Reno offered. "To switch our focus to her and away from Blane and whatever he has planned."

"No, an implosion," Tony countered, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Aleksy first saw Lyra when she worked at a bar in Chicago. She disappeared out the back when Blane took her. Aleksy and...a friend...tried to follow her out the back. A woman stabbed him. She had no scent. Nor did the blade she wielded."

"He thinks it was Brenna?" Murphy asked.

"He thinks that's what they *want him* to think," Tony admitted. "But the height is different. The eyes are different. I think they were banking on him not getting a good enough look at his assailant or the drug kicking in faster than it did. They were banking on her causing civil war."

“Even more reason to get her out of your house,” Finn said. “What if he decides he’s wrong? That Brenna was the woman who stabbed him and kept him from getting to Lyra before she was taken and almost killed by Blane?”

“He knows she’s not, and that remark is insulting as hell,” Tony fumed, voice finally rising. “Not a single man under my command would ever hurt a woman. Ever. You’ve accused Jonah, and now, you dare accuse Aleksy?”

“Aleksy won’t hurt her,” Reno agreed, perhaps to remind the room the man suddenly in question was mated to Reno’s sister. “She’s probably safer there than she is anywhere else. We all know they’ve been able to send in parties to infiltrate our land, and getting to the med center was barely a challenge. They won’t get to her at Tony’s.”

“No, they won’t,” Tony agreed. “Jonah won’t hurt her, Finn. Hell, he may be the only way we get through to her.”

“This is the implosion you were referring to,” Tah added, and Tony nodded.

“Splitting focus and causing strife between my team and your shifters,” Tony agreed. “Divide and conquer.”

“We’re not dividing,” Mitch said, and when he gazed at Tony, her cousin nodded.

“It’s time,” Professor Mueller offered his agreement, and Oakley remembered Tony had given the professor a dose of the serum he’d created for his soldiers.

“Years ago, when Aleksy and I were still in our teens, I started experimenting with his blood, his saliva, every unique marker that made him different. Not just a shifter but a primal one,” Tony admitted then paused and looked around.

“You’re not Talbot,” Tah said before anyone else could say anything. “We all know it. If anything, you were searching for a way to save your best friend’s life if you needed to.”

“When I needed to,” Tony said. “Over the years, I kept working until I developed something that would give Aleksy a boost, a way to heal even quicker. It’s what I gave to Daniel. I

hadn't used it on another shifter until that point. I didn't know it would make Daniel primal, as well."

"You saved his life," Abby stated. "Everyone in this room knows it. Just as we know you saved the professor."

"The man's brilliant," Professor Mueller took up again. "The tests I was running, answers I was searching for, he'd already done them, found them. He didn't just save my life, he gave me a new lease on it. Vic, too."

"All of your men have been given it, as well?" Tah asked.

"Not all of them," Tony amended.

"Alpha team," Mitch answered then glanced at Tony. "If we're staying here, if we're to truly blend and be a unified team, then we hold nothing back."

"Alpha team, Daniel, the professor, Vic, Quinn, and myself," Tony admitted.

"It's a much more refined version of what I gave Finn when Zane and Murphy brought him back. He was barely alive," Professor Mueller said, and Oakley remembered Murphy telling her that he'd blocked his connection with Finn, so his brother wouldn't be reminded of the hell he'd suffered.

"We're working on a booster version for shifters that won't cause the primal variant to attach to the shifter DNA," Tony offered.

"We're close," the professor added. "Now that everything is in the open, I'd love to have Abby working with us. Perhaps Gabriel."

"I'd love to," Abby offered. "Gideon and Vic haven't left the medical center yet. Between them and Clara, someone is always with Thomas. His condition is worsening. River has attached himself to Vic since she awoke. He rarely leaves her side."

"She's good with him," Logan said. "Never saw her as a mother, but hell, I never thought a man existed who'd be her equal until I saw her and Gideon together."

“Gideon is good with River, too,” Professor Mueller told them. “Seeing them together...”

He stopped, shaking his head without finishing whatever thought was behind those three words. “I’d ask Griffin to work with us, but I’m worried about him. He’s losing weight, unfocused, tired.”

“His condition is worsening?” Tah asked. “Has anyone checked in with him today?”

“Ariel’s been trying to keep an eye on him. I do as I can. Something’s off. Can’t place my finger on it, but his scent...” Professor Mueller paused, glancing around the room.

“What about his scent?” Tah asked.

“It’s different.”

“That’s some booster you created, Tony,” Reno offered. “I’ll check in on Griffin. See what I can tell.”

“Or Daniel,” Tah stated. “Griffin would be more comfortable with him, and Daniel would be able to pick up on it. Why hasn’t he picked up on anything?”

“Ariel mentioned Griffin’s been avoiding dinners with them. If he’s not out and about with Miles, then he’s isolated in the labs somewhere, avoiding everyone,” Mueller offered.

“We’ll figure it out,” Abby offered. “He’s not alone. We’ve got him, Professor. I promise.”

Mueller nodded, then everyone turned as someone ran down the hallway. Gabriel ducked in, drawing everyone’s attention. He looked more rattled than Oakley had ever seen him.

“Kenzie’s in labor,” he told them then turned toward her. “Oakley, she’s asking for you.”

“What? Why?” Oakley was utterly lost. Why would Kenzie want her there?

“You’re her sister,” Murphy reminded her.

“Tony, Tah,” Gabriel continued, barely pausing. “Two hours ago, the Holloways were attacked. Holt thinks their goal

was to get to Laramie's pregnant mate. She was the only one they cared about taking alive."

"Laramie is the alpha of the Holloways," Murphy said. "A Kodiak grizzly bear mated to a Kodiak grizzly bear. Of course, Blane wanted to get his hands on her."

"Do they need help? I can have a chopper in the air in ten minutes?" Tony offered.

"No, they took care of it. They're assessing damage now. Jensen Holloway and his team are handling injuries to their people. They're circling tight. Holt called to warn us to do the same. Pull Adrian and his full pack in. Tell him not to leave anyone behind. Get them here, Tah. Oakley?"

"I'm right behind you," Oakley promised then turned to her mate as Gabriel left. "Why does she want me there? I won't be any good at helping her."

"You're her sister, Oakley. The closest thing she has to having her mother there with her," Abby told her before Murphy could reply. "Would you like me to go with you?"

Murphy squeezed her hand, and as much as she wanted to focus on Blane and what he planned, her sister needed her.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"I'll join you for the walk over," Professor Mueller said. "Seems like a good time to check in on Griffin."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“What did Laramie say?” Murphy asked as Tah hung up the phone.

“He thinks it was a final attempt to get to his mate. Emersyn isn’t just the last female Kodiak, she’s mated to a Kodiak and pregnant. Laramie was still enraged when we spoke. He thinks Blane knows his time is running out and warned me to be ready for anything.”

Tah paced, rubbing at the back of his neck as he did.

“I called Adrian,” Reno shared. “He said they’d be fine, but he’d send some of his men to help.”

“Damn it. I was afraid of that,” Murphy muttered.

“If Adrian says they’ll be fine, then believe him,” Daniel said as he entered. “Just got here. Ariel’s headed to the medical center to be with Kenzie. I told Gabriel I’d meet him there in a bit. I wanted to check in first.”

“Good to see you,” Murphy said, moving to his friend. “You okay?”

“I’m good. Took a bit to burn off the adrenaline flooding my system. I hear you might have had a similar reaction.” Daniel grinned.

“I didn’t...” Murphy broke off when he realized Daniel was talking about the sexual marathon he and Oakley had. Seemed he and his mate hadn’t been the only ones.

“Anyway,” Daniel continued. “Coyotes are resourceful. They’ll be fine. I want to talk about the ambush on our way into town. Some things about it keep bothering me.”

“They were waiting for us,” Murphy mused. “Who knew you were headed into town?”

Daniel shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Ariel left first, with Logan and Clara. They didn’t go after them. They were waiting for you. Who knew Murphy was going with you?” Reno questioned.

“No one. I asked last minute.”

Murphy nodded. “I didn’t even know I was going.”

“Then they planned for Daniel and adjusted when they found Murphy with him. Adjusted again when Ariel, Logan, and Clara showed up, then again when Jonah and the team did. Then they attacked the Holloways today. He knows we have Murphy. He knows we have Thomas and that one of the missing members of the Holloway den was discovered and transported back to them. How? Who’s feeding him all this?” Tah shook his head, frustration clear on his face.

“He made strategic attacks here,” Reno continued. “They planned a wave of attacks and sent in a group to take out Quinn and her baby at the medical center. They knew where it was and what room she’d be in.”

“It’s someone who isn’t in the inner circle but close enough to be privy to information to appease Blane,” Murphy mused aloud.

“Who?” Daniel asked.

“Not inner circle but close,” Reno repeated. “Who’s on that list?”

“Calloway and Darby,” Daniel said, but he shook his head. “No, I can’t see that. Calloway would never put his mate and twins in jeopardy. Never.”

“No, I can’t see that either,” Reno agreed. “There’s Narda. She arrived when we were in Illinois. Brought a group here.”

“She’s at the medical center, so she would have access to some things. Quinn’s location for one,” Tah agreed. “I hate to think of her being behind this, but I can’t fully count her out. Tell me this, though. How would she have gotten messages out? She hasn’t left once since she’s been here. And calls are monitored. It has to be someone who has free rein.

Someone who can come and go without triggering any concerns.”

“Between Aleksy, Mitch, Jonah, and me, we did another deep dive on all my men,” Tony shared. “It’s not any of them. I don’t have a leak, but there’s one somewhere.”

“Who do we trust to come and go as they need to?” Tah mused.

“Orsai,” Murphy tossed out, “but we all know Zane’s uncle would never betray this pride or any shifter.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Tah agreed.

“You can’t suspect Miles Jensen,” Daniel argued. “He’s Quinn’s father. The man blames himself for everything that happened to her, despite the fact my father was the one behind it. Miles wouldn’t do this.”

“I agree. So, who does that leave?” Tah asked, and everyone got quiet.

“This will kill Gideon,” Reno said, obviously on the same page with Tah. Both men stared at Daniel. That’s when it clicked for Murphy.

“Griffin? You think Griffin is the one betraying the pride?” Murphy asked.

“No,” Daniel argued. “There’s no way Griffin would do that to Gideon. To Ariel. He’d never endanger them. The professor was shot. Griffin is always on his heels, unless he’s traveling with Miles. He... He’s been bringing in people. He brought in a couple of shifters two days ago. Hell, he brought in two others last week. Has anyone checked on them? Do we know who they are?”

“Diane did,” Reno answered. “Names, medical assessment, and assigned them housing since none were injured enough to require medical care.”

“Does she know what Blane looks like?” Tony asked.

Reno and Tah shared a look.

“No,” Tah said. “Not many of us have seen him, and the pictures we’ve found are at least twenty years old.”

“I would know him,” Murphy said. “Oakley, Amia, Quinn. Gideon.”

“Clara,” Reno added. “Calloway, Lyra, and Aleksy.”

“Me,” Daniel interjected, with a glance at Murphy.

“Me, Mitch, Jonah, and most of alpha team,” Tony said. “As well as Travis and all of Oakley’s team. Going forward, we need to have a better system when it comes to checking in new shifters. We need people who know who to watch for. The enemy isn’t only human. Some are shifters.”

“Fuck,” Reno swore.

“We forgot about Dillon,” Tah murmured. “We forgot about Nix.”

“Shifters who betrayed you,” Tony said then shrugged when they all looked at him. “I did my homework before I came here.”

“Griffin?” Murphy asked. “You really think Griffin is working with Blane and his hunters?”

“We need to talk to Ariel and Gideon,” Tah said. “Need to find out as much as we can as quickly as we can. He’s never shared anything personal, and that should have raised all kinds of flags.”

“He fits in, doesn’t rock the boat, is helpful without drawing attention. He blends, and he’s made real relationships. Ariel, Gideon, Professor Mueller, Diane. Hell, Miles took him under his wing and treated him like family. If Griffin is the one who helped direct the attacks on Quinn...” Reno shook his head. “Weight loss, exhaustion, forgetfulness. Something’s going on with him.

“He knew I was heading into town.”

Daniel didn’t look happy about his revelation.

“He teased me about still not getting Ariel’s things from the house. I told him I was on my way out. He knew I was

leaving, but he didn't know Murphy was going with me.”

“Did you notice anything off?”

Daniel gave Tah a funny look. “Reno just listed what I've noticed.”

“What about his scent?” Tah pressed.

“He was in the lab. He smelled...sterile.” Daniel shook his head. “Why? What does his scent have to do with him betraying us? That's what you think. He betrayed us.”

“Daniel, we all trusted him. Hell, things I never thought of are making sense now. Gideon said Griffin begged to go with him when he went after Ariel back when they were all still with Thomas at Walker Post. When they got back, Thomas was gone. The lab was destroyed, and the coordinates for where we were in Colorado had been left,” Logan shared.

“Those coordinates were left by Lydia,” Daniel argued.

“Lydia was drugged. Fed paranoia by Dillon,” Murphy added. “He kept telling us to look closer, though he tried to blame Thomas. And Griffin's the one who asked to trade spots with Ariel on the drive to Oklahoma. He asked to be with Professor Mueller, said he'd have more to talk to him about. Hell, Amia was in that truck.”

Reno growled. Murphy felt like growling himself. Griffin was quiet, shy, nice. How the hell were they thinking him capable of betraying them?

“Ariel brought a picture back for him,” Daniel said. “When she left and went back to the post and found Quinn. She sifted through some of the stuff there. Found the picture. She said it was him and his brother. In all my conversations with Griffin, he's never mentioned his brother to me. I was going to ask about the picture. I forgot.”

“We need to speak with Miles,” Tony said. “See if anyone has shown an interest in Griffin while they've been out. We need to take a closer look at the shifters he brought in over the last two weeks.”

“What are you thinking?” Tah asked.

“Murphy said it. Lydia was drugged. It made her more malleable. She was expendable.”

“You think someone is drugging him?” Murphy asked.

“We can’t rule it out,” Tony said. “Not without some bloodwork. We should be able to compare it to what you took from Lydia, as well as what I got from Talbot.”

“I...” Daniel stopped, shaking his head. “Ariel checks on him all the time. Makes sure he’s eaten. That he’s slept. He’s... God, she said he looks like he’s burning the candle at both ends. She’s... This is going to devastate her. She’ll blame herself for not knowing he was being drugged. She talks to him every day. This will destroy her, and I just got her back.”

“She’s stronger than that,” Tah admonished. “She loves you. She’s strong and fierce, and this, Griffin, drugged or not, will not break her. Besides, there’s enough blame to go around for all of us.”

“He’s been right under our noses this entire time, feeding Blane bits and pieces of information, willingly or not,” Reno said. “If he’s been drugged and used, this will devastate him. Could kill him.”

“If we lose him, he might not be the only one we lose,” Daniel warned.

“Where’s he at currently?” Murphy asked. “I know the professor was heading to the medical center to check on him, but are we even sure he’s there? What’s the schedule for Miles and Griffin? Are they in the field today?”

“I don’t know,” Reno said, looking mad as hell that he didn’t. “We need to find out. Miles is in more danger than any of us if Griffin is being drugged right under his nose.”

Tony’s phone blared an alarm. His fingers flew as he pulled something up.

“Fuck!” he roared. “The bastards are here. We’re under attack.”

“Where?” Tah demanded.

“Everywhere. They’ve triggered every alarm we’ve put out. Looks like Blane’s coming in with all guns blazing.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Oakley was completely out of her comfort zone, and that was saying a lot. She'd expected to walk in and already find her sister with a baby in her arms. Kenzie was in labor, but according to Diane it was still early yet. She'd encouraged Kenzie to walk, to move around, while she still could.

"How long does this usually take?" Oakley whispered to Abby. "Do you think I have time to go do a few things then come back?"

"No," Kenzie said, making Oakley remember her sister was a shifter even though her animal was still recessed, at the moment. "You're going to stay with me. All of you."

Ariel had been in the room when Oakley and Abby had arrived. Oakley had forgotten Ariel was Kenzie's sister-in-law. Amia had arrived shortly after with Quinn, saying the misfit club couldn't miss out on the big birth. Then Clara had strolled in with Diane. Gabriel had hovered until Kenzie had sent him to check on Vic for her, telling him she wanted Vic to know she was in labor.

"Walk with me."

Kenzie grabbed Oakley's arm and pulled her along, making circles around the room.

"They have corridors outside," Oakley said. "I walked through them to get here."

Kenzie laughed.

"If I walk out of this room and my mate comes back to find me gone..." She shook her head. "We don't want that. Trust me."

"Circles it is," Oakley said. "How's Daniel doing?"

“Recovered,” Ariel offered with a grin. “We had an early night. Burnt off some of that adrenaline he had flooding his system.”

Oakley grinned while she recalled having a similar night with Murphy.

“Adrenaline can be a good thing,” she admitted.

“Adrenaline can get you walking around a room with a belly as big as a barn, waiting on a baby to make an appearance,” Kenzie warned.

“But it’s fun getter there,” Abby agreed.

“And worth it when you hold that beautiful baby in your arms,” Diane added.

“I never asked,” Oakley said to her sister. “Are you having a boy or a girl?”

“We’re having a baby,” Kenzie said. “We decide we didn’t want to know until this little one made their arrival.”

“I know,” Diane offered. “But I’ve been sworn to silence.”

She mimed zipping her lips.

“We just want a healthy baby,” Kenzie offered. “Do you think you’ll want to know when you and Murphy have a baby?”

“We won’t,” Oakley said.

“I always thought Murphy would be one to want to know,” Kenzie admitted.

“No, I mean we won’t be having children. I had a hysterectomy when I was younger,” Oakley told them, and the room went silent.

“Why would you do that?” Abby asked softly.

“So, he wouldn’t live on through her,” Amia answered. “Talbot stops with her. I thought about it many times before I met Reno. I still have moments where I question carrying a

baby, passing on my genes, my father's genes, to another, to an innocent baby.”

“Amia.” Abby walked over and pulled her close. “You are not your father. You are everything good and wonderful in this world. You came from a life where hate was the emotion of choice. Yet, you chose love. How can a child that is part you and part Reno be anything but wonderful?”

“Thank you, Abby.”

Oakley wondered what choice she would have made if she'd had an Abby in her corner. That wasn't fair, though. Travis had tried to talk her out of it. Tony would have, if she'd given him the opportunity or knowledge of what she'd had planned.

“I have Emery, but I can't have more children. Mitch doesn't love me any less,” Quinn offered.

“Of course, he doesn't,” Abby said. “Tah wouldn't love me any less if Regan is our only child. Though, I still think we'll have at least one more.”

Oakley swore every shifter in the room inhaled.

“I'm not pregnant yet,” Abby admonished them. “But I had a dream. Tah was walking and holding the hand of our son. I can see them as clear as if I'd seen it just moments ago. One day, we'll have a son.”

No one said a word, but no one doubted her, either. The bonds these women had. It was a sisterhood all its own. One she was now a part of.

“So...anything to do other than walking?” Oakley asked, just as the door opened.

It wasn't Gabriel as she'd expected. It was another man. One she hadn't met. He scanned the room, gaze moving over Oakley quickly then passing over the others. He seemed unable to focus until he got to Ariel.

“I heard you were all in here,” he said, giving a good attempt at sounding cheerful, but Oakley saw something was off with him. He kept rubbing his forehead.

“Griffin!” Ariel cried, going over to give him a hug. “I was hoping to see you while I was here. Dinner with Daniel and me tonight. I won’t take no for an answer. I swear you’re getting skinnier.”

“Way to make a guy feel good,” he grouched, though he seemed to cling to her as if trying to absorb some of her strength.

Griffin. She’d heard the conversation between Murphy, Finn, and Zane about the pride being worried about him. The way he chatted around the room, the way everyone was so at ease with him, showed how much they liked and trusted him. She didn’t know much about him, but even she could tell he didn’t look good. He was thin with dark circles under his eyes. The way he kept rubbing his forehead made her think he was dealing with a headache too. She moved toward him, wanting to introduce herself and get a better feel for him.

“I’m Oakley. We haven’t met yet.”

“Murphy’s mate,” he nodded. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Are you okay, Griffin?” Ariel asked.

“Just a headache,” he murmured, rubbing his forehead again.

“Griffin.” A woman with long, dark hair ducked her head in the door. Her amber gaze scanned the room, seeming to stop on Oakley, Quinn, Amia, and Abby. “Sorry, I didn’t realize the room was occupied. I’ve been looking for Griffin, and I thought I saw him walk in here.”

Lies. Oakley knew it, and from the look on Abby’s face, she suspected it, as well. Diane was the one to speak to the woman.

“Sylbie, how are you feeling today?”

“Much better,” the woman rushed to assure Diane. Oakley found something familiar about Sylbie.

“You must be one of the new arrivals,” Abby said, but Oakley noted she didn’t move closer to the other woman. She shot a glance toward Oakley. “Kenzie, let’s go for a walk,

really stretch your legs before you're confined to the bed.
Diane, walk with us?"

"Of course," Diane agreed, possibly picking up on the undercurrents in the room.

"I'll join you," Clara offered with a glance toward Amia. "I promised Uncle Thomas I'd check back in soon. This seems like the perfect time."

Ariel walked Griffin over, so he was between her and Quinn. Oakley caught the jerk of Amia chin and knew the woman had denied Abby's silent order to leave with them. They'd go for help. They all knew something was off, which meant Sylbie would, too. Oakley needed to hold her attention until the others were out of the room.

"You look familiar, Sylbie," Oakley said, moving closer toward her. "Have we met?"

The door snicked closed as the others left, and the real Sylbie came out to play.

"You know. You recognize me. I was afraid you might," she whispered, jerking a gun from behind her back and pointing it directly at Oakley. "I warned him sending me in would be a bad idea. But your father," Sylbie glanced toward Amia, "will do whatever it takes to get his hands back on you. I don't get it, though. You're nothing special."

"Sylbie, what are you doing?" Griffin asked, taking a few steps toward her. "Put the gun away."

"You're stronger than he thought, but I still managed," she murmured. "Go for the nerdy one. That's what he told me. Lure him in. Feed him the drug and get information. You gave me everything. A few kisses here and there. Touching you." She licked her lips. "Tasting you. Who knew you'd be such a wild one in the bedroom? Fucking you wasn't a hardship, but the conversation afterward was the real silver lining. I knew everything about this place before I ever rode through those gates. Welcomed as if I were one of you."

"You are one of us," Oakley countered. "Panther shifter, right?"

Sylbie snarled.

“I’m nothing like you. Your father cured me when I was just a little girl. He took that side of me, cut it out like the disease it is. He could have done the same for all of you, if you hadn’t killed him,” Sylbie screamed, anger rocking through her, but the gun remained steady in her head.

“Talbot was a lot of things,” Oakley agreed. “A father wasn’t one of them.”

“Funny that he took the *disease* out of you yet put it inside me.” Quinn stepped slightly in front of Ariel, making herself the more available target.

“You were nothing,” Sylbie snapped. “A science project. One way past its expiration date.”

She lifted the gun, but Griffin moved before Oakley did. He shoved Quinn and Ariel aside as he stepped forward.

“No!” he roared, and Oakley was surprised by the force behind the male’s tone. He didn’t seem the aggressive type. He was definitely more than he seemed.

Sylbie never missed a beat or changed the direction of the gun. The first bullet caught him in the right shoulder, but Griffin didn’t pause. The second caught him mid-chest. Oakley hit Sylbie then, and the final bullet hit low on Griffin’s hip. Oakley clocked it all while she took Sylbie down. Claws came out, but Oakley was prepared. She knew Talbot would never take everything away from a shifter. Especially one Blane planned to keep and train. Who better to infiltrate a group of shifters than one of their own.

One moment, Oakley was rolling across the floor, exchanging blows. Then Sylbie was over her, hands wrapped tightly around Oakley’s throat as Oakley fought for release. The woman was stronger than she appeared, but Oakley was, too. She maneuvered until she could get her feet between them and used all her strength to throw Sylbie off. The woman flew, landing hard on her back across the room. Before she could even rise, Amia was there with something in her hands. The metal gleamed as she swung it, connecting with Sylbie’s head.

Sylbie gave a weak cry and reached up to try to push Amia away. Amia merely swung again then again and again until Sylbie lay limp beneath her.

“Amia!” Oakley called. “Enough. She’s not moving.”

“He sent her here for me,” she growled, throwing the item in her hand aside.

Oakley still wasn’t sure what it was or where Amia had grabbed it from. It didn’t matter as they all turned to where Quinn and Ariel kneeled over Griffin, trying to staunch the flow of blood. The man was unconscious, and the pool of blood beneath him was growing.

Ariel was whispering to him, telling him all the reasons he needed to stay with them, all the reasons she needed him.

The door flung open, bouncing against the wall, but this time, it was Gideon who stood there, Logan and Clara right behind him. He ran toward Griffin within seconds of scanning the room.

“Speak to me,” he ordered them.

“She shot him three times. Shoulder, chest, and hip,” Quinn answered.

“Ariel, move,” Gideon ordered. “I need to get to him.”

Quinn was the one to tug Ariel away, wrapping her arms around the other woman. Oakley knew they were friends. Ariel had been the one to find Quinn and made arrangements to get her back home.

“This one’s dead,” Logan called from across the room where Sylbie lay.

“We need to go,” Gideon called. “Logan, help me get Griffin out of here.”

Professor Mueller strode into the room. “What’s going on? Is that Griffin?”

“He’s been shot,” Logan said. “Three hits.”

“There’s a gurney in the hallway. Get it!” Professor Mueller commanded. “We need to get him into surgery.”

Immediately.”

Suddenly, all the phones in the room were going off. Oakley was the first to answer. Her mate’s voice was pure animal when he spoke.

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the medical center. Griffin’s been shot. The woman who did it is dead.”

“Who’s with you?” he demanded.

“Amia, Quinn, Ariel. Gideon, Logan and Clara, and the professor just walked in. They’re taking care of Griffin.”

“Stay with Logan,” Murphy ordered. “All of you.”

“Why what’s going on?” she asked.

“We’re under attack. Blane’s here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was a bloodbath, but thankfully, most of the blood was from the enemy as far as Murphy could tell. He was hellbent on getting to the medical center and his mate. He knew Oakley wouldn't stay put. She didn't have it in her. He'd known it even as the order for her to stay had come out of his mouth. She would fight, and he supported her there. The animal, though, that was a different story. His lynx was set on protecting her. So much so, the need to get to her tore through Murphy, directing his every move.

The grounds were crawling with Blane's men, and not all of them were human. Not that it was surprising to see shifters turn on their own kind. Still, it hurt. The pride needed to get members into the world and start searching for those who weren't aware of who and what they were, before they were caught and taken by a team of hunters. Then turned against their own. If they were even allowed to live.

Murphy took a hit to the side and turned to engage the two hunters coming at him. The bullet had done little more than graze his skin. He was lucky. He needed to focus on where he was and the battle before him. His mate could and would take care of herself. She had since the day she was born. If anything, she'd be the one to find him and save him. Again.

Daniel was engaged with several hunters at his side. Tah, Reno, and Tony had gotten separated from them, but it didn't matter. Each man was more than capable of holding his own. Plus, they all had the same end goal, the medical center and their mates. To get there, though, they had to wade through the chaos. It made Murphy wonder how many men Blane was okay with sacrificing. First the attack on the Holloways? Now here? The two had been entirely too close. What was Blane thinking? More importantly, where the hell

was he? Was he even on the property? Or was he sitting back somewhere, waiting to see who was left standing when all the dust settled? That sounded more likely.

Every inch of ground gained was hard fought. Hunters were spilling in like ants. He heard a familiar voice from ahead of him and surged forward until he reached her.

“Hey, mate,” she murmured as he took inventory of her. There were healing bruises on her neck as if someone had tried to choke the life out of her. “I’m fine, and the other woman’s dead.”

“Good,” Murphy growled as Daniel joined them.

“Ariel?” he asked Oakley.

“She’s good,” Oakley promised. “She’s with Griffin.”

“What happened?” Daniel wanted to know.

“Everyone was right to be worried about Griffin. My guess is he was being drugged and used for information. This woman named Sylbie shot Griffin three times before I took her down. She’s dead, but they had to get Griffin into surgery. Ariel went with Gideon and Professor Mueller. Alpha team showed up and began evacuating everyone. They think the medical center might have been compromised, that Blane could be there. Abby has it all under control. They’re taking everyone to Tony’s. Alpha team will put the house on lockdown.”

“Where were you headed?” Murphy asked, taking in her team surrounding her, currently holding back the hunters trying to get to them.

“For you,” she whispered. “My team and I are at your disposal. What do you need?”

“Just you,” he said then glanced at the men around him, ones who needed to find their mates. “We need to get to Tah and Reno. Let them know.”

She nodded, and with the additional manpower, they quickly made it to Tah and Reno. Finn and Calloway were with them. Tony was nowhere in sight, but Murphy wasn’t

worried about him. From what he'd heard, Tony was more than capable of holding his own in any battle. Murphy immediately jumped in, covering his brother's back.

"Murph!"

"I've got you, brother," Murphy shouted back. "Laura? Sean?"

"Safe," Finn called.

None of them would ever take a risk when it came to the safety of their mates and children. He turned, catching Oakley's gaze as she fought between Travis and Bolts. She was strong and fierce and his. He was a lucky man, and he knew it. He hoped she felt as lucky.

Murphy, Finn, Tah, and Reno fought together as they always had, moving seamlessly as a unit, the way they had once when they'd been in a desert. Tah had been the alpha then, too, though none of them had known about his lion back then. Even Tah. So much had changed over the years since they'd all left the Marines behind, but not this. Not the core of their group, of who they were and would always be. Family. That was why the tide was turning in their favor. They were fighting for something much greater than hate. They were giving their all for love, for survival, not just for themselves but for their entire species. For every shifter species.

"Tah," Murphy called as they got closer.

Tah and Reno both paused, letting the rest of the group close in. Both locked onto Oakley at the same time.

"Oakley," Tah called.

"She's getting everyone evacuated. She was with Logan and Clara when my team found me. Amia's with Quinn and Mitch."

"Kenzie?" Reno asked.

"Diane's with her and Gabriel," Oakley offered.

"Do you feel like they're pushing us toward the medical center?" Bolts asked, interrupting their conversation.

“What do you mean?” Murphy asked.

“They’re herding us,” he offered. “It helps that they’re pushing where you want to go, but why?”

“The woman who attacked us,” Oakley said. “She said she’d been looking for Griffin. I have no idea how long she was in there, or what she might have done while she was.”

“We hold ten feet from the building,” Tah ordered. “No one goes in until we know it’s safe. Spread the word.”

Murphy paid attention and finally saw what Bolts had. The hunters were attacking in waves that pushed them toward the middle of the property where the medical center was. None of them had realized it, since that was where they were headed anyway. Now, Murphy kept wondering why.

“Are they out?” he asked Travis. “Can you reach out and make sure everyone is out?”

“Call Mitch,” Oakley ordered. “I’ll reach out to Quinn.”

But it was too late. As the center came into view, a giant boom filled the air, the power of it throwing all of them back. At first, Murphy wasn’t sure what happened until the shrapnel started raining down on them. Black smoke rose from what had once been their medical center that housed their clinics and laboratories.

Tah’s roar rocked the air, just as Blane finally appeared among the rubble, keeping his back against a portion of collapsed wall. Murphy wasn’t sure where he’d come from, but he knew it wasn’t the explosion that had caused that roar. It wasn’t even the sight of Blane. No, it was the woman he held in front of him. Abby. He held Abby by the hair, a gun at her head. Thomas stumbled out after him, falling to his knees, while he did his best to cup his stomach where it appeared his intestines were trying to spill out.

“Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in,” Blane called. “Or should I say look what cat I dragged in.”

He shook Abby by her hair. It took four of them to hold back Tah, and still, he fought.

“One wrong move and she’s not going to look so pretty with half her head missing,” Blane warned then casually turned and put a bullet in Thomas’ head. “Die already.”

He turned back to Tah.

“You know what I want. My property for yours.”

“There’s nothing of yours here,” Tah shouted, holding his mate’s gaze while Reno growled beside him.

Tah shrugged them off and took a step closer before stopping.

“Take me. You want to take down this pride. I’m the alpha. Let her go. Take me.”

“You think I don’t know how mates work? I’ve been hunting your kind longer than you’ve been alive. As long as I have this one...” He paused, giving Abby a vicious shake. Somehow, she kept her lips sealed, not making a single sound though her eyes briefly closed. “I already have you and the rest of your animal kingdom. I want my daughter. Now!”

“You’re not getting your hands on my mate!” Reno roared.

“Here. I’m here!”

Amia called out as she darted from the tree line. Tony dashed after her, grabbed her and jerked her back against him then put a gun to her head. Murphy was taking it all in, trying to process what the hell was going on. Alpha team had been evacuating the building. Amia shouldn’t be here. The fact she was, that Tony was, meant Tony had something up his sleeve. Despite the gun, Murphy knew he wouldn’t hurt Amia. Hell, Tony and Amia were close. Murphy and Finn held Reno back, trying to control him.

“He has a plan,” Oakley whispered to Reno so low Murphy barely heard her. “Trust him.”

Reno still bucked and fought, but Murphy caught the slight nod to acknowledge he’d heard.

“Bring her to me,” Tony called. “You can have this one.”

Blane laughed. “As if I’d trust you. You’re as crazy as your uncle.”

“Learning a lot from him, too,” Tony said. “Amazing some of the experiments he’s done. The ideas for more.”

“Nice try. I know he’s dead. Now, bring her to me.”

“You know exactly what I want you to know,” Tony fired back at Blane. “I wanted you to think he was dead, so that’s what I spread. Right now, he’s right where I want him. In my lab, running tests, getting me answers I need. The drugs are almost completely flushed out of his system.”

Murphy saw Blane tense, saw the worry cross his face, just before he gave Abby another jerk.

“He’s dead,” Blane stated.

“Of course, he is,” Tony agreed, but there was no conviction in his tone. It was placating, as if he were only saying what Blane wanted to hear.

“My men have you surrounded,” Blane said. “Bring her to me.”

“Look again,” Tony warned. “My men have yours surrounded. You want me to let you walk out of here, you come to me.”

Murphy caught his breath as someone popped up behind Blane. Two people who must have been moving into position while Tony had drawn Blane’s attention. The gun hand was jerked upward as Abby was shoved forward. Tah was there instantly, scooping his mate up. Amia took three steps toward Blane before Reno caught his mate against his chest. Murphy and Oakley both moved forward, but it was Lyra who ducked around Aleksy and thrust a knife into Blane’s side.

“Don’t kill him!” Tah roared his command.

“Don’t worry,” Tony said as he stepped in front of Blane. “I’ve got a room all ready for him.”

Chapter Thirty

Marcus Blane was trapped. Aleksy had picked up the male and thrown him to the bottom of the remaining steps. Blane had slid, scraping his flesh open. His head bounced twice. He still bled from his side, and he'd received other cuts and bruises as he'd tried to find a way out of the circle they'd closed around him. There was no taking him to Tony's. Not with Brenna in the refurbished room they'd kept Talbot in. They'd end this here.

"What are we going to do with him?" Murphy asked the group around him.

Tony and Aleksy were there along with Mitch and a few others from alpha team. Tah stood beside Tony. Reno and Logan were both at his side. Amia stood next to her mate, glaring at the man in the cage, the father who'd made her life and so many others' a living hell. Lyra was there, Blane's blood still coating her fingers and arm. Quinn stood by Oakley close to Murphy.

"Whatever the fuck we want," Tah growled to Murphy's question.

"You think I care what a bunch of animals and animal lovers do to me," Blane sneered. "Do your fucking worst!"

"Like you did." Amia was the one who stepped forward. Reno reached out to grip her side as if afraid she'd veer too close to the monster on the ground.

"Shut your mouth, girl. I should have left you buried in the fucking ground. Animal-fucking whore," Blane yelled.

"Fucking kill him," Reno snarled.

"No," Tony said, his voice deadly calm. "He has information. I plan to get every kernel of it out of that small brain of his."

“I won’t be telling you anything,” Blane said, then started laughing.

“You’re going to tell me everything,” Tony countered. “I’m going to enjoy every moment of extracting it. Let’s see how many layers of skin you have, how many slices and dices you can handle.”

“You won’t be the only one getting that pleasure,” Tah vowed and grunts of agreement filled the air.

Everyone wanted a piece of Marcus Blane. He’d been the devil haunting them most of their lives. He’d killed too many, stolen lives that never had chance. He was the monster in the dark, and now, he was theirs to mete out justice on.

“What the hell’s he doing?” Quinn growled, making them all take a closer look at where Blane sprawled. “He’s got something in his hand!”

“No, you fucking don’t!” Tony yelled, losing all sense of the calm he’d displayed.

Everyone moved at once, but more blood was already spilling from Blane as they finally reached him. He was rolled onto his back. A jagged piece of wood he must have found amongst the rubble was stabbed into his neck. From the amount of blood, Murphy would say Blane had hit the jugular.

“You fucking bastard. I won’t let you die!” Tony screamed, slapping his hands over the area where the wood was still shoved into Blane’s neck.

Blane’s attempt at laughter was more of a choked gurgle. Murphy knew he wouldn’t make it. They all realized it. It was justice but not. Blane deserved so much worse. He deserved life in a cage being subjected to one study after another. He deserved to be drugged and forced to fight his own men to the death. He deserved every ounce of the hell he’d subjected shifters to. All of it and more.

“Let him die,” Tah ordered, pulling Abby close to his side. “Let it end with his blood.”

Tony screamed, the sound guttural, tortured, as he bent over Blane.

“Tell me where he is, you bastard! Tell me what you did to him!”

Blane smiled, blood covering his teeth and dripping from the side of his mouth. He tried to say something, but Murphy couldn't hear it. Tony bellowed again, as if accepting he wouldn't get the answers from Blane about whoever he looked for. He jerked the wood from Blane's neck. Blood spurted up in an arc to cover Tony and the ground around them. Tony screamed again and brought his hand down, jagged wood held tightly as he drove it through Blane's eye.

No one moved. They all stared at Marcus Blane. Murphy thought of the beatings, the feel of Blane's fists. The broken bones and rage that had kept him company while Blane had held him captive. He'd almost broken. Almost succumbed to the need for death to take him. Instead, he'd found his mate. Now, with Talbot's death, Blane's death, Murphy hoped it shattered the Hunting Society, hoped it scattered them to the winds. The pride needed the rest. Tony and his men needed the rest.

“He's gone,” Oakley whispered beside him. “He's finally gone.”

“Yeah,” Murphy agreed, tugging her close and wrapping her in his arms. The bastard was finally gone.

* * * *

It was over. Well, as much as it would ever be over. Oakley was still trying to catch her breath. In the aftermath of Blane's stabbing, the remaining hunters had gone wild, attacking the shifters and men in front of them as well as the men and coyotes behind them. Most had fought to the death, but they'd managed to take some prisoners. Now, the pride, Oakley's team, and Tony's soldiers were picking up the pieces.

The medical facility that Gabriel and Daniel's dad had seen built, one Tah and the pride had added on to, was gone. Blane and the ones he'd managed to sneak in had strategically planted bombs around the inside of the building to ensure it went down. Thankfully, all the data that had been accumulated was backed up on an outside server Tony had helped them set

up. Oakley wouldn't tell Tah that meant Tony had access to everything. If he didn't know that by now, that was on them.

"Hey," Murphy called as he walked into the bathroom where she still stood, staring unseen into the mirror above the sink. "Showering?"

She nodded. "That was the plan. I can't believe... Is it really over?"

"As much as it ever will be," he offered as he toed off his boots and reached back to grasp his shirt, jerking it over his head and tossing it on the floor. "We both know hate doesn't disappear. It's still out there, waiting for another zealot to give it voice and unite a new faction of those whose only desire is to see our complete annihilation. We might have a short reprieve, but we have to use that time to fortify, to grow stronger, to send teams out to find those of us who don't know who and what we are. We need to find them before those whose only intentions involve hurting and killing them do. We have to do better, be better."

"You've given this a lot of thought," she murmured, undressing as well.

"Daniel has," Murphy shared, going for his belt and the jeans hugging his hips. "It was all Ariel talked about for the longest time. Saving young women, so they didn't suffer what she did."

"Oh, God. Not Ariel."

Oakley knew the sick games hunters played with women barely out of girlhood. The same thing Talbot had threatened her with when she'd been a teenager. The same thing he'd made her listen to another woman experience.

"It was before I met her, before she met her mate. When Daniel and I were traveling, that was his focus. I wanted to find labs, try to take them down. Daniel wanted to find people and try to save them."

"He was trying to save her?" Oakley murmured, and it broke her heart to think of what the other couple had endured.

“Yes,” Murphy agreed, shoving his jeans and boxer briefs down his legs and nudging them aside with his foot. “Here. Let me help.”

He unbuttoned her jeans while she released her bra. His hands caressed her skin as he tugged her pants and underwear down her thighs. He left them dangling at her knees while he leaned in and licked her. Good lord, he licked her as if she were a favorite treat he’d been denied for too long.

“Murphy,” she growled as she braced her hands on his shoulders.

“Let me taste you, lass. God, there’s nothing so sweet as you on my tongue.”

She held tight, one hand slipping up into his hair and wrapping in those red locks. He tugged her clothes lower until she could step out of them. Then he had one of her legs over his shoulder, opening her up as he dove in. Her moans quickly turned to cries as he brought her to orgasm, again then again. Her body was practically boneless by the time he finally stood, scooping her into his arms, taking her into the shower and sitting her on the bench while he started the shower.

He turned his back to the jets, keeping the cool spray off her as the water heated. His cock bobbed in front of her face. It was more than she could resist. She leaned in, opened her mouth, and sucked him deep, easily taking him to the back of her throat while he groaned above her.

“Oakley. God, lass. You feel good.”

She moaned around his shaft, bringing her hands into play, one stroking his shaft in tandem with her mouth while she cupped and gently tugged at his taut scrotum with the other. He moved his hips, pumping into her mouth. She let him take control of the pace, knowing she controlled everything else about the experience. He tasted smooth, like a fine whiskey. One she planned to consume for the rest of her life.

“Enough,” Murphy ordered, pulling out of her mouth then jerking her to her feet.

She was turned and facing the wall, hips pulled back. Then he was inside her, stroking hard and deep and pulling more moans from her empty throat.

“I love you,” she cried as he took her up again, sent her flying. “I love you.”

“Ah, lass,” Murphy crooned in her ear as he slowed his pace for a moment, riding her through her orgasm. “I love you.”

He took her harder, pounding into her as he chased his release. She knew the moment he found it. Felt him swell inside just before he shouted, his seed filling her up and overflowing. Her legs shook, barely holding her up by the time they finished. Murphy, thankfully, seemed to have just enough strength left to clean them both, wrap them in towels and carry her to the bed.

“You distracted me,” she murmured, cuddling against his side.

They’d gone back to the room at Tony’s once things had settled down. Her body was exhausted and needed rest, but her mind refused to shut down.

“How’s Brenna?” she asked, knowing he’d checked on his sister before coming to join her.

“Doing better. Even Finn has to admit Jonah is good for her. He washed the color out of her hair. I don’t know how or what he used, but her red curls are back. She’s Brenna.”

“I’m glad,” Oakley assured him. “We won’t know the extent of what she’s been through until she starts talking. When she does, she’ll need all of us. Especially Jonah.”

“Yeah,” Murphy agreed. “I can admit he’s good to her, good for her.”

“I know Tony’s mad Blane died, but I’m not sorry. He deserved to die. The only thing that upsets me is, it wasn’t at my hand,” she confessed.

“Most of us feel the same,” Murphy agreed. “Amia wanted that kill more than anything, but I’ve heard about what

he did to Lyra before Aleksy could get to her. She wanted it just as much as the rest of us.”

Oakley nodded. Unfortunately, Blane had robbed them of his kill. The bastard had taken his own life. All the horrors he'd committed, all the lives he'd ruined. Murphy was right. They did have to do better, be better.

“I want to be part of the team that goes into the field, that finds people like us and saves them. Helps them discover who and what we are. I need to do that. I know what you're going to say, but I need to make amends. I do,” she argued, cutting him off when he opened his mouth. “I need to. For me. For what he was, what he did. I need this. For my mothers. Both of them.”

“Ah, lass, don't you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. You are my soul, Oakley, the soul of a lynx, who forgot how to dream. Until you. Now, every day with you is better than any dream I've ever had,” he swore.

“I love you,” she whispered, leaning in to kiss him.

He tucked her closer against him, and she lay her head on his chest when they finally broke the kiss.

“Daniel and Ariel will want to be involved. When we leave. Reno and Amia, too. Even Vic and Gideon will, though I guess they'll have their hands full for a bit, now that Tony's discovered River is Gideon's son. Talbot was a sadistic bastard.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But he's gone. Blane's gone. What they built is dismantled. I hoped it would happen, but I never really believed it could. And I know it's not over. I agree with everything you said before, but it feels like it. In this moment, knowing their both gone, by our hands. It feels like it's over, and for a little while, we can be a little less afraid.”

“We can,” he promised. “For a little while, we can.”

They held each other, and she imagined all the mated couples were doing the same. They might breathe a little easier for a while, but none of them would ever be the same. Tah hadn't let Abby out of his reach from the moment he'd

scooped her up. Reno had been the same with Amia. Ariel and Daniel had stayed with Griffin, who was going to have a hell of a recovery before him. The drugs were affecting his ability to heal, and until Professor Mueller knew for sure what Griffin had in his system, neither he nor Tony would give the younger man anything to help.

Logan and Clara were with Gideon and Vic, trying to help River process that the man he'd thought was his father was gone. They'd decided against telling the boy who his real father was yet. Diane and Zane were with Kenzie and Gabriel, who'd had a healthy baby boy they'd named Hudson. Her nephew. He was adorable and strong and would make a great playmate for Finn and Laura's son, Sean.

Calloway, who she'd met during the fighting, was helping Quinn and Mitch assess their losses, which were thankfully very small. His mate, Darby, was using every source she and her father had at their disposal to gather intel on what was happening around the world, now that Blane and Talbot were both out of the picture. And Aleksy and Lyra had slipped away to be alone, which she understood. She wouldn't mind some alone time with Murphy.

“What are you thinking?” Murphy asked.

“How lucky I am to have you.”

“I'm the lucky one,” he murmured, rolling until he was between her thighs, thick and hard. “Now, why don't we see if I can help you sleep.”

“Yes,” she agreed, wrapping her legs around his waist. “God, yes.”

Want to know more about the pride? You can find all the books in the Awakening Pride Series at laceythorn.com

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About the Author

Lacey is a hyper blonde, bouncing through life with her magical bracelets of positivity. She has a passion for life and romance. She writes possessive, alpha heroes who demand everything from the women they love. Her stories reflect her strong family ties, friendships that showcase how some family consists of those we choose, and a goofy sense of humor that helps keep her laughing through all life's ups and downs.

If you want to talk books, television, movies, actors, or music (she loves music!), drop her a line at laceythorn2007@gmail.com.

Lacey's Booklist

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Waking the Beast

Tempting the Tiger

Freeing the Feline

Saving the Beast

A Jaguar's Touch

The Liger's Mark

Unleashing the Beast

Eyes on the Pride

Cry of the Pride

Mending the Beast

Heart of a Lion

Soul of a Lynx

Awakening Pride: The Holloways

His to Bear (comes between The Liger's Mark and Unleashing the Beast)

Claimed by the Grizzly

Rumble and Growl

Kodiak's Heart

Grizzly's Bear (comes between Mending the Beast and Heart of a Lion)

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Wolf's Wild Woman

Bee's Enraged Beast

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Craving Sin

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Bare Love Series

His Bare Obsession

Bare Confessions

Bare Seduction

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Running Bare

Something More Series (Previously Girls Night Out Series)

More Than One Night (Previously Jack's Dee-Light)

More Than Friends (Previously What Friends Are For)

More Than I Do (Previously Marital Bliss)

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