



Hunter's Sky

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Description: In the small shifter community of Hunter's Creek, bear shifter Zack is fiercely protective of his young son and his family. He's always harbored a deep-seated aversion to wolf shifter Victor Ramirez, despite Victor's undeniable skill as the beta-commander of the neighboring wolf pack.

Zack goes to great lengths to steer clear of Victor—until the night a human is savagely attacked and abandoned on their doorstep. Lachlan “Mo” Granger, a human schoolteacher desperately searching for his missing sister, is viciously attacked and inexplicably heals by the next day.

Victor never intended to claim one mate, never mind two. After seeing his abusive father murder his mom and defenseless younger sister, Victor grows a cold hard shell around his heart that he needs for survival.

With shifter children vanishing and the community teetering on the brink of chaos, will the three men manage to bury their differences and conflicting feelings, or when the unthinkable happens and Victor realizes what he might lose, will it be too late to convince them all he was wrong?

And for the first time since he lost his first family, he desperately wants to make a new one?

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Chapter One

Zack took a swig of beer and watched as darkness fell and the yard lit up with twinkling lights. Mattie seemed to have enjoyed himself, and even managed to score a goal with Alex's encouragement and Mac helping by not putting up much defense. He looked down fondly at his son, mouth open, eyes tight shut, completely dead to the world. He knew he needed to take him to bed, but he just wanted another minute with his family, to remind himself he was a lucky bastard.

Zack looked over as the door to the house opened and his mom stepped out, followed by Rashid and Roxanne, the mated alpha pair of the huge wolf pack that in shifter terms owned the land right next door to Hunter's Creek. Actually, now that he considered it, he knew they owned it in human terms as well. His mom's face softened as she saw Mattie asleep, and Roxanne clutched Rashid's hand in response to the same thing. Not that Zack minded anyone acknowledging the cuteness overload when they looked at Mattie.

His eyes narrowed as he took in the fourth person walking toward him. Victor Ramirez, wolf shifter, beta commander of Rashid's pack, and all-round pain in his ass. Zack wasn't sure why he'd taken such an instant dislike to him. No, he knew. Victor thought he was God's gift to everyone. The man oozed confidence and power and seemed to think he could dictate to the shifters at Hunter's Creek. Well, Zack didn't answer to him, and he'd had to make that clear on a few occasions over the past year and a half.

"Zack, he's so adorable," Roxanne murmured and practically threw the brightly wrapped gift at her mate so she could bend down and softly kiss Mattie's hair.

“I was just going to take him up for a bath,” Zack countered, because the little tyke was covered in grass stains and purple icing. He carefully plucked a twig from his black curls.

Roxanne beamed, then looked at his mom, who caught on immediately. “Let us,” Mom said and without waiting for an answer, plucked him from Zack’s arms and turned to the house. He didn’t mind though, she and his dad were away so much on council business that she didn’t get the chance to be a grandma as much as she liked.

Roxanne turned to follow, and Raschid met her. His hand slid down to her belly, and he kissed her cheek. “Be careful.”

Zack understood immediately, and he was happy for them both. They had two pups, and the youngest was ten years old. Either this was a surprise or the happy conclusion to a lot of trying.

Riley walked over with a few beers and handed one to Raschid. Victor thanked him when he offered but shook his head. Raschid huffed and held his hand out for the other bottle, which Riley handed him, then pushed it at Victor. “You’re not on duty. I have five excellent wolves outside that, incidentally, you trained.”

Victor smiled sheepishly, and Zack was so shocked at seeing it, he missed Raschid’s question. “Sorry,” he turned, registering the silence. “Busy day.”

Raschid chuckled and clinked his bottle with Zack’s. “It’s not often your son has his second birthday.” He glanced behind him at the house.

“Congratulations,” Zack said.

“That’s the trouble with shifters,” Raschid smiled. “We can’t do a surprise announcement.” Raschid was assuming he’d heard the heartbeat, but he hadn’t. Too

noisy and, to be honest, not something Zack had ever really registered before. He could in his animal form, but not in his human. He had no intention of admitting that while Victor was listening, though.

Riley tipped his head to the side thoughtfully. “What's wrong?”

Raschid grunted and took another swig. “I can’t visit my neighbors with my pregnant mate?”

“You know you can,” Riley said in amusement. “But you have something else you want to say as well.”

“I was going to call around tomorrow.”

Riley leaned forward. “No one’s listening.” They weren’t. The yard was packed, and various kids were yelling as one team scored or didn’t.

Raschid met Riley’s gaze, and Zack wasn’t too thrilled with what he saw in them. “We’ve had a few problems with our younger pack members.”

“What sort of problems?” Zack asked immediately.

“Look, we’ve all done it. Partied, drank too much.” Raschid shook his head. “Pretended to drink too much.” Zack chuckled. That was true. It took an awful lot of alcohol to affect a shifter, and those with human friends couldn’t ever say why. Zack had never found anything that could give him more than a very mild buzz. Not that he’d ever go any further. Mattie’s mom had taught him that lesson, even if he might have ever been tempted.

“It started about a month ago,” Raschid said. “One of our pack lost her seventeen-year-old daughter. She didn’t come home one day from the high school both Alex

and Tyler go to. She was found in her human form by the cops five days later when they raided a crack house in Billings. We were horrified, obviously, but discovered she'd gotten involved with a human boyfriend who was bad news. It's rare with shifters, as you know, but I suppose this is the downside of trying to integrate into society."

Because the day was approaching when the regular world would find out about the existence of shifters. They all knew that and were trying to prepare the generation it would affect the most.

"Then three weeks ago it happened again," Raschid said. "Except the cub was thirteen. Still alive, thank the goddess, but to use a human term to describe him, he's a nerd. He started at the mixed school in the fall as his shift was secure and he's a science enthusiast. He was bored at the pack school, and we were confident in our decision. Apparently, his older brother noticed he was behaving strangely at school. At lunchtime, in fact. Evan was worried Emilio was going to shift, so Evan and another pack member brought him home. We've straightened out his disappearance with the school, but trying to get him to shift was difficult even for me. It was as if what he'd taken robbed his wolf of that ability, which, as you can imagine, is a huge problem."

It certainly was, Zack thought. Shifting was an ingrained response to any threat, and his wolf should have taken over, to say nothing of a powerful Alpha like Raschid commanding his wolf to shift.

"He has no memory of that day at all. There is no link between Rachel's human boyfriend and Emilio. In fact, the human boyfriend dropped out of school and seems to have disappeared."

Riley glanced at Zack, worry shadowing his features. "Then we have two problems," Zack said. "We have a drug powerful enough to severely affect shifters, and we don't

know where it's coming from, or how they're being targeted."

"You agree with me, then?" Victor spoke up. "That Emilio wasn't some random choice. That he may have been targeted because he's a shifter."

Zack hadn't until Victor spelled it out, but he had to admit it made some sense. "It's still only one or two in a school population of eighteen hundred." He wouldn't have agreed normally, but the circumstances were shocking enough.

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“Which is where we get to the third incident,” Raschid said. “And why it’s urgent.”

Zack narrowed his eyes. “Go on.”

“One of our kids didn’t come home from school yesterday.”

Zack frowned. “Yesterday?” Why the hell had it taken this long for Raschid to reach out? Asher was a talented tracker, for starters.

“Yesterday,” Raschid bit out. “Amelie Connors is fourteen. Her only living relative is her father, Kenneth Connors. He was too drunk last night to even realize she wasn’t home. He’s a hybrid and obviously, so is she.”

Zack breathed out. Fuck. He knew Raschid was having trouble integrating the hybrids. The cubs whose mom or dad was human.

The cubs like Matthew.

The more traditional members of the pack disapproved, and in certain circumstances could easily shun them. It was something Roxanne was trying to fix, but trying to correct even an unconscious bias was hard. He also knew that in any other scenario, Amelie’s no-show would have been noticed immediately. Noticed and acted upon.

“We can start with Asher—” But he cut off at the flare in Raschid’s eyes. The anger. The frustration. The sense of failure. And he knew it was too late.

“She’s dead.” Riley said very quietly.

“She was found in what looks to be a human campground,” Victor said. “Tourists, mainly. But less than ten miles from our lands.”

Raschid carefully picked the label off his beer. “And Kenneth Connors is passed out drunk. The only ones to get angry at a fourteen-year-old’s death are sitting in your yard.” Raschid pinned them both with a gaze. “And I need your help.”

Chapter Two

At the precise second Victor smelled an unusual scent, about another six shifters all stilled and raised their heads. He’d registered the noise of a car a few minutes ago, but knew the five wolves outside would have as well. He also knew there were many shifters that lived here, and the sound of a car wasn’t unusual.

The scent of blood, however, definitely was.

At the same time that he took off for the gate at the end of the yard, Zack, Asher, and Riley did as well. And his fucking alpha. He had a second to snarl at Raschid, who insisted on putting himself in danger when it was his fucking job to keep him safe. The squeal of tires also registered, and Victor snapped out orders for two of his gammas to follow the black car currently disappearing around the corner like a road rocket. Jem and Ike obeyed immediately and ran to the truck but Victor knew it was already too late.

Then he looked at what he’d smelled. At first, he thought it was a heap of rags on the ground, but as Riley and Zack both bent down, he smelled human. Or what was left of one. There were way too many heartbeats out here for him to know if he or she was still alive.

Then Zack stood and Victor saw the person he was carrying, or what little he could make out under the blood.

“Take him inside,” Riley ordered. “I need to see what I can do.”

“Maintain the perimeter,” Victor ordered the other three gammas. “Let me know the instant Jem and Ike return.” And because his alpha followed the others inside, so did Victor.

There were too many people to crowd around the small ground-floor room where Zack had taken the human, but because Raschid did, again, so did Victor.

Victor stood and watched as Riley and Zack carefully peeled away blood-drenched clothes. Riley looked over and spotted Alex. “Alex, get me some water. I need to get this blood off.” Alex dashed away, and Victor watched carefully as Zack and Riley worked in unison.

“His arm’s broken. Wait a moment.” Zack stilled and Riley closed his eyes for a moment in concentration, then winced. “Shit, his spleen.” He immediately left the arm and placed his hand on the upper side of his abdomen, and the human was definitely ahe. Victor swallowed hard as Zack simply ripped the human’s shirt open and Riley laid his hand on bare but incredibly bruised skin. He had a second to register a growl before he realized it was coming from his own throat at the same time that he heard a second noise from Zack. He pressed his lips together, but then the smell hit him.

At first, he thought he was back home in his mama’s kitchen watching her stir the rum and coffee into her Torta Barozzi, but then he realized the sweetness was coming from the man Zack was hunched over.

Touching.

Jealousy and anger hit Victor like a freight train, and a snarl started in his chest, erupting from his throat as he took a threatening step toward the bear shifter. How

dare he—but then Zack looked up from where he was crouched over the man on the bed and a deep warning rumble came from the bear. Victor felt his alpha's restraining hand on his arm, but for the first time since he had met Raschid, his wolf ignored the command to stand down. Victor's wolf was incensed. How dare the bear shifter touch his mate? He would rip off the hand that thought it could, and crush—

“Victor—”

The alpha command hit Victor's wolf hard, but his animal still fought for dominance.

“Zack,” Riley commanded, sharply. “Stand down. I can't sort you two out and heal your mate at the same time. Do you want him to die?”

Victor seemed to jerk back to awareness as horror hit him hard. “No,” he whispered. Zack's mate? He looked at the human lying on the bed and knew it was only his alpha's grip keeping him from rushing over and sweeping him up into his arms.

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Riley sighed and gestured to the other side of the bed. "Victor, come to the other side." Victor moved instantly, sending a threatening glare to Zack, barely registering the one Zack returned. Alex pushed his way past Raschid with a bowl of water and some cloths. Victor didn't even ask. He just took the water from his arms, ignoring the boy, who glanced at Riley but sensibly backed away to the door. As Victor took the bowl, Zack snatched the towel draped over Alex's shoulder. Riley nodded. "Be careful. His nose was broken, and it's still really bruised. I'm having to concentrate on the serious injuries first."

"What other injuries?" Zack asked before Victor got a chance to, but Victor very much wanted to know as well. He dipped the soft rag in the warm water and more gently than he thought he was capable of, started cleaning his mate's face.

"Ribs. One had punctured his lung." Riley continued, then frowned and reached under the young man's head. Riley's hand cupped the back of it, and then Riley staggered but Zack reached out quickly and steadied him.

"Take some of mine," Zack bit out and Victor stopped what he was doing a second to watch Riley let go and hold on to Zack for a moment. Then he nodded and straightened, his hand going back to his mate.

"Brain bleed," Riley whispered, which just about stopped Victor's heart. "It's okay, it's healed," Riley added and he withdrew his hand.

"Son?" Victor looked up and saw Christopher Hunter standing next to Alex, watching Riley in concern. But Riley seemed okay. He glanced at Zack and wondered what the hell had just happened? But Zack was carefully drying around his mate's face. Victor

waited for the jealousy or anger to return, but surprisingly, his wolf wasn't objecting.

He gazed in fascination at the man lying in front of him. He was slender, short even for a human. He was pretty sure that both of Daniel's mates were taller than his mate. He had pale white skin, but with so much swelling and huge purple and red bruising, it was difficult to see much. His short brown hair was matted with blood and Victor wanted to clean that as well. Fuck, what the hell was going on with him? Although he knew, of course he did. Every shifter knew instinctively when they met their mate.

There were, however, two huge problems as far as he could see—no, make that a list of them. And not simply that his mate was fully human and had been beaten nearly to death, but that his mate also appeared to be Zack's as well. He reached up and carefully cleaned the blood from around a pair of eyes he wished were open so he could see their color. Zack immediately followed carefully with the towel, and again Victor's wolf seemed to accept it.

"How's he doing?"

They all looked up as Jax, Riley's mate, appeared at the door.

"Where would you like me to begin?" Riley smiled at Jax. "We have a human that was dumped on our doorstep deliberately after being beaten to within an inch of his life, and he's about to be fought over by Zack and Victor, who, despite recognizing the human as their mate seem to actually hate each other, so I have no idea how that would even work."

Christopher shook his head. "Do we know who he is?"

Victor risked a glance at Zack, the weight of Riley's words settling in him and making him feel vaguely ill. He was going to have to challenge the bear for his mate? Zack met Victor's gaze, and Victor recognized the same desire and challenge in the

bear shifter. He had no qualms about fighting for his mate. He would fight to the death to claim him, but how would that even work? They were struggling in the pack assimilating hybrids. What would happen if he tried to claim a full human mate?

Riley stepped back. "I want to let him rest for a while, then I'll reassess the same injuries. I don't want to start on the bruising until I make sure the other injuries have fully healed."

"There's a doubt?" Victor bit out.

"He's human. Sometimes it's not as simple as one and done," Riley countered. "I want to give his body a rest." Riley stepped back, and Victor heard a gasp from Alex.

Everyone turned to the boy. "What is it?" Christopher asked.

"I know him," Alex said. "I couldn't tell with all the blood, but Tyler will know him as well."

"Who is he?" Zack asked before Victor got the chance to.

"Mr. Granger. I think his first name is Lachlan or something, but I'm not certain. He works with the kids who need extra help with reading."

"He's a teacher?" Riley confirmed, and Alex nodded.

"Started this semester."

Victor stared back at his mate. What was going on? First, the school had problems with drugs, and it may have something to do with the pack, and now a teacher from the same school had been dumped on Hunter's Creek doorstep.

He glanced up at Zack, who was watching his mate, then looked up and met Victor's eyes. "You don't think this is a coincidence, do you?"

Victor shook his head. No. No, he didn't.

Chapter Three

Zack didn't even bother looking up as Riley shoed everyone out of the small room. His dad put a hand on his shoulder and told him not to worry about Mattie tonight, as they would take the baby monitor into their room. He felt a stab of guilt, but his dad squeezed his shoulder lightly and reminded him his mom was having a blast with her grandson.

He knew Victor had left the room with his alpha, and for a moment it was blessedly quiet. Riley had to finish the healing, but he was resting and eating for now.

Victor had seen the energy exchange he'd done with Riley and Zack was expecting questions. It had happened as a complete accident last year. They'd gone on a job to look at a security system a charity wanted to implement to deal with the identity of their thousands of donors. Zack hadn't flown them this time, as it had been all the way down in Miami. They'd been in a cab from the airport and barely twenty minutes later, some idiot in a stolen car had rocketed away from the cops straight into a school bus.

Riley had nearly killed himself trying to help before the ambulances arrived. Literally nearly died draining so much of himself. He'd staggered to another child and Zack had put a hand out to steady him just as Riley had touched the kid's chest. Zack had felt the drain of his own energy immediately.

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But it had worked. Riley had managed to keep three kids alive until help arrived, and Zack had managed to keep his brother alive to be able to do so.

They'd talked about it later with Asher and the only conclusion they could draw was that it was because they were twins, as when they'd tried with Asher, it hadn't worked. Riley always asked that no one touch the person he was trying to heal, so he didn't inadvertently heal a minor issue in the second person when he might need everything he had for the injured one, and as far as they knew it had been the first time Zack had touched Riley while he was healing. They'd practiced a little and knew roughly what they could get away with, but they had to be careful, especially if Zack had to fly the helicopter after.

He heard the door open, and expecting Riley, stiffened a little when he smelled the wolf. He'd hoped Victor had returned to the pack, but he guessed if Victor thought Lachlan was his mate, then he wouldn't leave.

Zack tried not to feel a sense of satisfaction comparing their situations. The pack was already having trouble with the human/wolf hybrids. A fully human mate would cause even more, and he couldn't see Victor leaving the pack.

"Any change?"

Zack looked up reluctantly. "No. Riley's gone to refuel, but he'll be back."

Victor didn't reply, but he slid his hand across the bed almost surreptitiously, so he was just touching Lachlan's arm. Zack had a hold of his hand, but Lachlan hadn't moved. "Has Raschid left?"

Victor nodded, but then scraped a hand over his face, drawing Zack's eye. The man was attractive, Zack allowed. Kind of Antonio Banderas good-looking. Maybe he should slip up and call him Zorro? Might be fun trying to annoy him.

Then Zack realized what he'd said, and shame heated his skin. Fuck, how old was he? They definitely had a problem, though.

"I think we've got a problem."

Zack gazed at Victor, surprised, as it seemed he'd just plucked that thought out of his head. But Victor was right. "More than one," Zack allowed.

"Apart from my wolf and your bear recognizing our human mate, but not each other, you mean?"

That was the biggest, definitely. "And how does that even happen?" Zack asked.

"I don't know."

"Do you think it is a bit too much of a coincidence?"

Victor looked up. "You mean both of us?"

"Well, no, that's unusual, but only because we aren't feeling it with each other. I meant where he was dumped. Why here?"

"You mean as opposed to, say, outside a precinct or an ER?"

Zack looked back at his mate. "I hate to say this, but the other thing that seems too much of a coincidence is the drugs at the school and the fact that Lachlan only just started working there. Drugs are a nasty business."

“What makes you such an expert?” Victor asked dismissively.

More guilt festered in Zack’s gut.

“Shit,” Victor swore, and Zack looked up in surprise. “I’m sorry. That was—I didn’t think.”

Zack shrugged as if it didn’t hurt and kept his gaze on Lachlan. He didn’t realize Victor knew, but it would be reasonable to ask where Zack’s mate was when Victor knew Mattie was his. “It wasn’t the same. Jessica was an addict. Lachlan definitely isn’t, or Riley would have known. He might have seen something with one of the kids and this was a warning to look the other way.”

“Or he might be involved,” Victor said.

“Wait—” Zack’s head shot up. “Are you implying my mate has something to do with the supply, actually dealing?” His bear growled long and low in his head.

Victor didn’t back down, just kept his gaze on Zack. “Bad things can happen to good people. Pretty sure your girlfriend didn’t set out to be an addict.”

Zack inhaled a lung full of his mate to calm his bear. He didn’t want to admit Victor had a point. “We’ll see when he wakes up,” Zack said grudgingly.

“Assuming he stays long enough to explain.”

Zack scowled. Was Zorro trying to bait him?

“Do you have any experience with human mates?” Victor asked quietly, his fingers gently stroking Lachlan’s arm.

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“No. Shit.” An awful thought occurred to him just as the door opened and Riley and Alex walked in with loaded trays. He stared at Riley. “You need to warn Daniel to keep Luke away.”

Riley grinned. “Already done.”

“The Ashani wolf,” Victor murmured, understanding immediately. Zack hated that Victor knew all their secrets, but they’d had to tell Raschid for safety, and Zack understood that as Raschid’s beta commander, Victor would be told.

But yeah, Luke had to stay away or he could easily give Lachlan a wolf simply by touching him.

“Thought you two would be hungry,” Riley said and moved to the bed. “How’s he doing?”

“Shouldn’t he be waking up?” Victor asked, worry creeping into his voice.

“I’m keeping him asleep,” Riley said. “I need his body to rest.”

Alex left after Zack had thanked him. Riley stepped up and lowered the sheet, placing his hand on Lachlan’s chest. A low warning growl filled the room, but it cut off abruptly as Victor stood. “Sorry.” He crossed to the door and left quickly.

“His spleen is good, and the broken ribs. Can you roll him gently to you so I can see what the head injury is like?”

“Didn’t you heal it?” Zack blurted out the question and winced at the accusation in there.

“Internally, yes, but the actual wound itself still needs attention. Human brains can swell after trauma. Don’t forget I can’t make him shift to take care of everything. That’s what I need to check for. I couldn’t heal the skull itself until I was sure of that.”

Zack turned him gently then reluctantly let go and watched as more bruises lightened and disappeared on his mate’s skin.

“How are you doing?” Riley asked after a moment and let go. Zack immediately reclaimed Lachlan’s hand.

“How is it even possible?” Zack asked. He could tell Riley anything.

“I’m assuming you don’t mean that Lachlan is your mate, more that you don’t think Victor is?” Zack scoffed.

“No, I got lucky there.”

“Did you?” Riley asked lightly.

Zack sighed. It was complicated. “Victor’s worried that Lachlan is involved with the drugs.”

Riley pulled the small stool out from under the bed and sat down, his shoulder nudging Zack. “Let’s get Daniel on board.”

“No,” Zack said in alarm. He didn’t want the FBI agent anywhere near— “Fuck,” he whispered. They had little choice.

“This is going to be incredibly hard,” Riley said. “But hard on all three of you. Lachlan is human, and we don’t know anything about him.”

“I know,” Zack agreed, but he also knew whatever Lachlan had done or might be involved in, Zack would somehow get him out of it.

“But don’t forget how much harder this is for Victor,” Riley cautioned. “You have us. According to Raschid, Victor has nobody.”

“But I don’t even like the man,” Zack snapped out, getting the scent of wolf a second too late.

“Don’t worry,” Victor growled out as he came into the room. “The feeling is entirely mutual.”

Chapter Four

Lachlan “Mo” Granger opened his eyes. Nothing hurt. He knew who he was. Had no idea where he was, though. Had expected to die, so depending on where he currently was, he was relieved...or not. He didn’t seem to be tied down at least.

He realized he was in a bedroom of sorts. A bed, definitely. He focused on the picture on the wall, and counted five, six, seven kids. What the hell? Maybe...

A quiet snore, more of a rumble, came from the side and he jumped. Mo took in the enormous man stretched out in the chair. He was an absolute bear of a man, huge. Very dark brown hair, slightly wavy, which matched the dark shadowed stubble surrounding his chin and his neck. If he was guarding him, he wasn’t very—

Guarding? Crap, memory hit Mo really hard. He had to get out of here. He lurched upright and hissed in a breath as what felt like ice picks dug into his head. His feet hit

the floor, and he tried to get his balance, hanging on desperately to the hand that grabbed his.

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Shit.

At the same instant he realized the bear was awake, his body caught on to him trying to stand. Unfortunately, his legs didn't get the memo, and they buckled. The door opened just as the large hand became two and he was swept up carefully into strong arms.

"Hey, be careful," a deep voice rumbled through the ice picks, soothing the stabbing pain behind his eyes as he squeezed them shut, his stomach roiling. He turned his head into the warm body holding him. "Hit the lights, Riley."

The room dimmed. "Lay him down, Zack." That must be Riley. Mo tensed, getting ready for the movement, but Zack grunted and didn't move. Riley sighed.

"Okay, you sit, and I'll look at him from here." He felt the big man lower himself and confusion swirled in him as well as nausea. Then he felt a light touch to the back of his head. The relief was instant, and he relaxed.

"Mr. Granger, my name's Riley Hunter. I'm not sure what you remember of last night, but we were having a family barbeque and heard a car squealing away from the lane outside. When we went to see what had happened, we found you, injured and unconscious on the ground, and assumed the car had dumped you."

Mo lifted his head a little experimentally, but the small ache was manageable. He thought quickly. "You know me?" Where was his wallet?

"My family has a registered foster home," Riley continued, "and one of our sons

recognized you from school. You didn't have any ID on you."So why hadn't they called the cops?

"We didn't call the cops because we wanted you to be able to make that decision when you felt better," Riley continued, almost as if Mo had spoken out loud.

But who did that? Any normal person would call 911. Mo lifted his head some more and finally risked a glance at who held him. The man—no, Zack—was smiling and Mo had a ridiculous urge to smile back. Like he wasn't sitting on some stranger's lap. "I—you can put me down, thank you," he added. Zack looked almost disappointed, but he stood again effortlessly and allowed Mo's feet to touch the floor. He didn't let go fully until Mo straightened and seemed balanced.

Mo turned to Riley and wondered what the hell to say. "Thank you, and yes, my name's Lachlan Granger. I'm clearly in your debt."

"Lachlan," Zack said, but it wasn't a question, almost as if he was trying out the name.

"Mo," Mo hurried to correct him. "Lachlan was my dad." He winced. Zack's smile fell immediately.

"Where does it hurt? Your head?" Zack reached for his arm and his huge hand circled Mo's wrist. "Riley?" Zack pressed without waiting for an answer.

"I'm fine," Mo interrupted, and he was. He didn't know how, and his memory was still fuzzy. But he had to say something. "So, it's Sunday?" He hazarded a guess.

Zack nodded. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Mo hedged. "I must have been mugged or something. I'm afraid

everything's a little fuzzy?" Could they hear the BS?

Zack's face softened, and he glanced over at Riley. Riley stepped away from him. "Is there someone you'd like us to call?"

"No, I suppose I need to get back. Contact the cops. See if someone's found my wallet."

"I'll take you," Zack said immediately. He nodded to the door. "There's a door opposite that's a main bathroom."

"I also put a pile of clothes in there you can choose from," Riley added, and Mo glanced down and nearly groaned. All he was wearing was a pair of boxer shorts, and they weren't even his. Heat swept up his face.

"No one's outside," Riley assured him. "We were just going to have breakfast. If you don't mind our crazy brood, would you like to join us?" Riley took a step to the door, and while Mo knew he needed to get the hell out of there and work out what the fuck had happened, but meeting what seemed to be a local family might be something too good to pass up. He glanced down at his arm and flexed his fingers. He must be going nuts because he would swear he remembered the bone cracking last night, although that was after they'd hit his head a few times, so that might not be reliable.

"Thanks," he mumbled and headed for the door. Riley opened it and nodded to the door opposite. Mo headed for the bathroom and closed the door.

He closed his eyes as soon as he was inside. Okay, so not all families were the same. There could be a very good reason they hadn't called 911 as soon as he'd been supposedly dumped on their doorstep. They could also easily be involved. Khloe's murderers were clever bastards, he knew that. Maybe he should leave? Sneak out? He didn't know these people and in the last few years, he'd found out personally how

little he should trust anyone.

And what was with that big guy holding him? That was downright weird. Mo opened his eyes and sighed. Yes, it was strange, but for a few seconds it had been kinda nice. The guy had known the lights would hurt his eyes, and he'd smelled incredibly good. It had been an awful long time since anyone had touched him. He took in the bathroom and nodded to himself. He peed and washed his hands, warily glancing at his face, then doing a double-take. He stared at his familiar image. The pale skin, a little scruff because he needed a shave, his brown hair that needed a cut. His brown eyes. Even the few freckles on his nose.

And not a single bruise. Not the split lip he definitely remembered. Not the blood that had made him gag and choke on. He was healed. He took a few steady breaths and tried not to panic. He hadn't been dropped here last night. They were lying. He'd been here for days. He must have been. He reached for the clothes folded on a chair and quickly dressed. He had to get out of here.

He whirled around and opened the door, and came to a shocked standstill, and stared at the teenager he immediately recognized because he was one of the students he assisted with English. Next to him, clutching his hand and sucking her thumb, was a little girl. "Hi Mr. Granger," Tyler smiled, "Zack thought you might need to see a familiar face."

The little girl took her thumb out with a pop. "And we can't start pancakes 'til you do." She leaned forward. "And there's chocolate chip and blueberries an—" She looked at Tyler.

"Banana," he supplied.

"anana," she confirmed, let go of Tyler, and held out her hand for his. Mo took it because she smiled and who could resist that? Mo let her lead her down a corridor

and through some double doors into a huge kitchen. All conversation stopped immediately, and Mo swallowed nervously as at least twenty people turned to look at him.

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“Guys,” Zack remonstrated and stood up, pulling out a chair next to him. The girl let go of him, skipped to Zack and held up her hand for a high five, which Zack immediately did. “Good job, Martha.” Martha carried on and took a seat between a slightly older girl and a teenager he recognized from the same high school.

“Mo,” Zack prodded. “Come and sit. You must be starving.” Conversation started up again. “Eat, and I’ll introduce my crazy family.”

Mo walked to the seat and sat down, smiling politely at everyone. A younger woman turned from the counter and grinned. “Coffee?”

He nodded gratefully. Zack nodded to the cream and sugar in front of him, and she put a mug of coffee down in front of him. “I’m Cassie. Zack and Riley are my brothers.” He smiled hello and introduced himself as Mo.

“Daddy?”

Mo glanced at Zack, who had turned to his other side at the sound and watched as Zack got the little boy some milk and cut up a pancake. Daddy? This was Zack’s son? He gazed in confusion. This was the weirdest shit he’d ever seen. It was like being in some alternate dimension. Because he absolutely knew he’d been here for more than one night for his injuries to heal, which meant somehow, and he had no idea how, it looked like he’d been kidnapped by the freakin’ Brady Bunch.

He took a sip of coffee to try to cover his confusion, then Zack groaned and at least six of the men all looked at the double doors. He followed their gaze to see what they had heard that he obviously hadn’t and gaped at the gorgeous man who strode

through the doors as if he owned the place.

“Victor,” Zack nearly growled the name. Victor came to a stop and simply stared at Mo. Mo couldn’t have looked away if his life depended on it. Bad analogy, Mo admitted, because the man fairly oozed danger.

The woman—Cassie—with the coffee rolled her eyes, murmured something about men and pushed a mug into his hands. “It’s just coffee, but you can get extra testosterone at the table.”

Quite a few of them chuckled. Mo didn’t. Zack didn’t, and Victor didn’t seem to either. Mo looked from one to the other, recognizing the apparent dislike and, yeah, challenge almost. They both looked at him, and Mo sighed. He had no idea what was going on, but these two clearly didn’t like each other, and somehow he had managed to get in the middle of that.

Could his life get any more complicated?

Mo watched as Victor accepted a coffee from Cassie with a tight if polite smile, then he got distracted as three different people all passed him huge platters of food, introduced themselves, and carried on talking as if nothing unusual was happening. Mo smiled back and insisted everyone call him Mo. Zack kept trying to tempt him with different things he kept refusing until Martha, who kept sneaking looks at him, put down her fork and sighed. She pushed her plate over. “Are you sad ‘cause all the chocolate chip pancakes are gone?” She beamed. “You can share mine. I don’t mind.”

Mo had to swallow particularly hard, feeling a little foolish if incredibly confused. He shook his head but politely thanked her, then decided to help himself to a blueberry one, then added syrup and a couple of strips of bacon. Zack topped Mo’s coffee up as if it was a normal everyday occurrence.

“What’s everyone got going on today?” An older man—Christopher, he thought his name was—asked everyone.

“I’m meeting Shelly at the mall and staying over at hers tonight,” Cassie said brightly. Mo nearly laughed when he saw about six pairs of male eyes all stare at her disapprovingly. Christopher’s eyes narrowed. “I’m going to need you to call me in view of—” he stopped. He didn’t look at Mo, but Mo knew he’d second guessed what he was about to say because Mo was there.

“We’re staying in, Dad,” Cassie said and took her own empty plate to the sink. “Boys, you’re on cleanup.” Alex, Tyler, a young man he thought was called Mac who looked to be in his late teens, plus a younger one that looked about ten, all groaned, but stood obligingly and headed to the sinks. Shocked, Mo kept quiet and thanked Tyler when he took his empty plate away.

“Who’s got homework to finish before school tomorrow?”

Tomorrow? So it was Sunday? This was getting weirder and weirder. Christopher asked again. There was another round of groans, but Tyler met Christopher’s gaze.

“I was going to go ask Luke for some help.” He sounded embarrassed and shot Mo a look. He knew some of Tyler’s background. He’d been located a year ago when his parents had died, and Mo believed his brother was his guardian. Tyler hadn’t had much of any schooling, and he’d been home-schooled for a year before coming to the high school. Mo looked around, doubting if one of the guys was his brother, then caught himself and cringed. He knew better. Hewasbetter. Just because Tyler’s skin color differed from the other men sitting around the table did in no way mean he wasn’t their brother.

“You okay?”

Mo looked over at Zack and noticed a few people had left. He nodded because he couldn't give him any other answer. The boys made quick work of the plates. Christopher stood and held out his hand for Zack's son, swept a giggling Martha up, and another little girl called Beth eagerly joined him.

"How about we go see if Shay wants to play hide and seek for a while? I'm pretty sure we could gather up another few stragglers who didn't want to get up for breakfast this morning."

Martha giggled. "Kaiden, an' Kaia, an' Dakota, an' Grayson, an' Harlowe."

"When's Isaac and Zane coming home?" Beth asked.

Mo tried not to gape. Exactly how many people lived here?

Christopher chuckled. "Next Saturday. Stop wishing their vacation over." He gathered up the kids, then glanced over at the boys. "We can catch a game later if anyone's interested?" They all enthusiastically agreed, then Christopher swept the little ones out. After another moment, all four boys left as well. Which left Mo with Victor, Zack, and Riley. He wasn't too thrilled and was waiting for the questions to start.

"You have a lot of kids." Mo commented, half in awe.

Zack chuckled. "Well, Mattie's mine. Riley over there has two. My other brother Asher, who's on vacation with his husband, has three. The other three boys Mac, Alex, and Jamie came to us as foster children, but are now officially adopted along with Mac's sister, Beth. We just successfully placed a five-year-old girl and a seven-year-old boy with adoptive parents, so we do have some empty beds," he grinned. "Tyler, who you know, has two sisters and lives in a house with the rest of his family across the way, but we asked him over for breakfast because we thought it would feel

less like you were being kidnapped.”

Mo couldn't have come up with an answer to that if his life depended on it. Maybe the men had kept him and allowed his injuries to heal before they dumped him? But that made no sense either. Riley grinned at Zack's comment, and Victor, who up to that point had just glowered and remained silent, even cracked a small smile. “I ought to leave and go to the cops, I guess,” Mo said. Not that he was going near the cops, but they would think it odd if he didn't say something.

“Lachlan Granger?”

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Mo jumped a little and looked over at the door. Another man stood there. The man smiled and walked into the room. “I—”

“He prefers Mo,” Victor interrupted, and Mo gazed at Victor in astonishment. Not only because he’d corrected whoever this was, but that he’d spoken at all.

The man smiled a little but carried on and extended his hand. “My name’s Agent Daniel Mayner. I believe you said you were mugged last night.”

Mo froze just as he was extending his hand. Shit, shit, shit. He blinked and mentally shook himself. “Agent? Since when does the FBI get involved with muggings?”

Daniel clasped his hand and replied. “How about we cut the bullshit, and you talk to me about Khloe?”

Chapter Five

Victor rose to his feet, the snarl widening his lips. Daniel didn’t look the least bit impressed or terrified Victor was about to rip out his throat. In fact, the sneaky wolf barely glanced Victor’s way. His mate, however, looked terrified, and Victor quickly went to stand with him, noticing, to his surprise, that Zack did the same.

“Daniel,” Zack growled out, his tone a warning. Daniel dropped Mo’s hand and, looking like he didn’t give a shit, went and helped himself to a coffee.

“Lachlan ‘Mo’ Granger,” Daniel started like he was reciting a shopping list. “Twenty-seven. Dual major in elementary and special education. Father, Lachlan

Granger, currently in Leavenworth serving his third year of fifteen for myriad drug convictions. Mother Annabel Carter, deceased. Sister Khloe Granger, twenty-two, whereabouts unknown.” Daniel looked over at Mo, and Victor had a sudden urge to scoop his mate up and get right the fuck out of Dodge with him.

“Does that about cover it?” Daniel asked mildly.

Victor watched as Mo’s fingers nearly blanched white with him fisting them so tightly. “How long have I been here?” He looked up and met Daniel’s gaze. Daniel frowned, glanced at Zack.

“Since last night.”

“Really?” Mo said a little sarcastically. “Can I please see your identification?”

Victor stared at Mo in confusion. Why did Mo think they were lying?

Daniel dug in his pocket, removed his wallet, and passed the entire wallet over to Mo. Even he looked a little shocked. Mo took the wallet and examined Daniel’s ID, checked his driver’s license, and even compared the credit cards to his name. Mo handed it back and thanked him.

Victor couldn’t stay quiet any longer. “Why do you think you’ve been here longer?” Without hesitation, he handed Mo his own phone and opened it, showing the date and the time. Mo’s brown eyes turned to his.

“Because I was very badly beaten up and I don’t have so much as a bruise.”

“Well, shit,” Riley said, then shook his head. Victor met everyone’s desperate gazes around the room. What the hell should they say?

“Tell me about Khloe first,” Daniel said and sat down. Mo sighed and dropped into his chair. Victor and Zack were on either side.

“You know about my dad, and I’m sure you can imagine how I grew up. My dad was always a little on the edge of the law, but after Mom left—well, died—he didn’t even try to hide it.”

Victor wondered if that statement was telling. Mo had said his mom “left” then amended it to “died” as if they weren’t simultaneous. His shoulders sagged, and he noticed Zack reach out his hand and clasp Mo’s, and Mo allowed it. Victor wasn’t sure whether to be astonished a human would accept such comfort from a stranger or wildly jealous it wasn’t him offering it.

And he was confused. Despite what his wolf was telling him, Victor had known for a long time he wasn’t destined for a mate.

“How did Khloe get involved?” Daniel asked.

“I was always determined to drag us out of the life. Dad used to make us both act as runners, and I told him that if he made Khloe do it, I would call the cops. He agreed, but then I was trying to focus on school, and I took my eye off the ball and she got a boyfriend.”

Mo said it like a death knell, and fuck it, Victor reached out and took his other hand, gratified when Mo squeezed it back, still stunned he didn’t think it was weird.

“Name?” Daniel asked, looking up from where he was jotting some notes on his phone.

“Rigor Elkin. I don’t know if that was his real name.”

He wasn't sure if anyone else had seen the slight stiffening of Daniel's shoulders, but Victor slid his gaze to Riley and knew instantly from the way he watched Daniel that he had. Daniel sighed and scrubbed his face. "We know of Richard Elkin, or Rigor as he likes to be known. Not personally, but the bureau does. He's bad news and involved in drug running. When Texas got a little too hot for him, he moved here. His minions have spent time in and out of jail, and that's where we think he met your dad."

"A case you're working on?" Zack asked casually. Too casually, and it clicked. Daniel only got involved in shifter-related cases. Was this linked? And was it the tie-in to the deaths and drugs they were investigating at the high school?

Daniel gave a brief nod and looked at Mo. "I know you're looking for your sister."

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“With no luck,” Mo acknowledged. “I managed to find out she’d been seen in Billings, and this was the closest job I could get. I suppose I started asking the wrong questions, or maybe the right ones.” He let go of Zack’s hand to rub his head and Victor was almost giddy he hadn’t let go of his. “I don’t remember much of yesterday. I’d gone to a couple of bars and shown her picture around. I remember going to the bathroom in the second one and I suppose I got hit over the head. I have flashes of questions that made little sense, and then the next thing I knew, I woke up here.”

He looked around at everyone. “So, are you going to explain to me now how I don’t have so much as a black eye?”

Daniel eyed him first, then everyone else. “I guess that depends on if you knew that your mother was a wolf-shifter or not?”

Even Victor gasped at Daniel’s bluntness. He got ready for his mate to explode but as he chanced a glance at him, he wasn’t reacting shocked, scared, or outraged. He looked puzzled, but he wasn’t running for the door. “What do you mean?” Mo asked.

“Are you prepared to sign a confidentiality agreement?”

“Hell, yeah,” Mo answered, and wouldn’t you know it, Daniel had one on his phone. Mo signed and gave his phone back. “When you say ‘wolf-shifters,’ are we talking the huge, popular romance genre?”

Victor wasn’t even gonna ask. He read science fiction when he could get his hands on it. Riley chuckled. “Hundred percent yes.”

Mo's mouth fell open. "It's real?"

Zack sighed. "It depends on what you read." Riley shot a look at Victor and Zack, which Mo followed. "Fated mates, definitely." Mo snatched his hands back and Zack and Victor growled simultaneously.

Mo looked at them both. "No. Absolutely not. I have a sister to find."

Victor wasn't sure Mo realized what he'd said, and he sneaked a look at the bear. He met Victor's gaze with understanding. Mo hadn't objected to having a mate, even two maybe, but he'd objected to having to deal with that on top of finding his sister. Interesting.

"So, this is Khloe's known last sighting, and that's why you're here?" Victor clarified. Mo nodded.

"Do you know anything about the drug deaths at the school?" Daniel asked.

"I knew the kids involved. I didn't know them personally, as I work with kids needing extra help." He looked at Riley. "Tyler, for example."

Riley nodded. "Tyler and his sisters came to live with us about 18 months ago. None of them had ever had any schooling. Tyler is very bright, even though he needs to catch up. Our other son Alex persuaded him to enroll."

"They are all a credit to you," Mo said honestly.

Riley smiled, and he nodded at the others. Victor assumed that was Riley's bullshit meter confirming Mo was telling the truth, but he didn't need Riley to know that.

"Tell me what you meant about wolf-shifters and why you think my mom was one,

and what that has to do with my face?”

Riley glanced at Zack as if he was asking if Zack wanted to answer, and Victor was suddenly irrationally pissed that Riley didn't think him capable of an explanation. Victor stood. “Might be easier if I just show you.” He sighed, not giving any fucks about undressing, which he did with speed. Mo gazed at him like he was crazy. He didn't look at the bear. Victor took another step back and reached into himself. He knew by the surprised faces that he'd shifted quicker than they expected. He had gotten quick out of sheer necessity for survival and he didn't even feel the change now. One second, he was human, and another he just wasn't.

He looked at his mate. Mo hadn't moved, didn't look like he dared breathe. “He won't hurt you,” Zack murmured, and that shocked him. It would have made sense for Zack to encourage Mo to be frightened of Victor, but then Victor wouldn't have done that to Zack, either. He padded slowly forward, not that there was a huge distance between them, but Mo still hadn't spoken, and Victor was concerned he was about to freak out. But he didn't, and when his snout was an inch away from his legs, Mo leaned forward and put his hand out.

“Can I touch you?”

Victor lowered his head in answer, and he couldn't restrain the shiver of pleasure as Mo ran his hand through the fur on his head and the back of his neck. Victor groaned, and he rested his head on Mo's knees, steadfastly ignoring the chuckles around the room. Victor didn't do touch. Not even as a wolf, which is why he was always on patrol when the pack had their scheduled runs. It gave him the excuse he needed. Victor had learned as a pup that touch meant pain, so he'd trained his wolf not to need it.

But this? Fuck, he could stand here all day. “You're huge,” Mo said, and Victor tried to work out what was in his voice. Nuances of sound were harder in his wolf form,

but there was a small smile curving the corners of his lips, and so Victor didn't think the words were a criticism. He definitely wasn't frightened. He inhaled cautiously, wanting to fill his lungs with Mo's sweet scent, and while it was there, so was another scent. Strong enough that if he shut his eyes, he could imagine he was in the forest. He could smell the earth, grass, and deep wood tones, but on top of that a spicy orange zest wrapped around him and made him shiver. Victor raised his head and looked at Zack, gazing in wonder. The scent was coming from him. He'd been around the bear a dozen times, but he'd never smelled anything like this. Victor wanted to roll around in it, scent-mark himself. He met Zack's gaze and got his second shock. Zack was staring intently at him, his nostrils flaring as if he was scenting Victor, but it was his eyes. Both huge, blown pupils so distended and dark the brown was almost black. The instant punch to his gut, and the way his body reacted, had him taking a step toward the bear before he knew it. Every cell in his body tightened.

It was a good thing he was all wolf right that moment, because if he'd been a man, a naked man, he would have grabbed both his mates and taken them somewhere private.

Both. His. Mates.

Victor didn't know if his life had gotten easier or a million percent more complicated, and he shifted back, turning away while he dressed, and scooting his chair under the table when he sat. Not that any of the shifters would say anything about his body's reaction, but Mo would be able to see his hard-on from space.

Mo spoke after a few seconds of shocked silence. "Are you saying my mom could do that?"

"Not necessarily," Daniel said. "It would depend on if she was a pure-bred wolf shifter or not, and I can't scent any animal in you."

Riley nodded. “Neither can I.”

"Differentanimals?" Mo asked.

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"Riley and I are bears," Zack said, and Mo grinned.

"Wow."

"Wolves are the most common type, but we've managed a few surprises over the years," Zack added.

Mo shrugged. "I've definitely never done that. How do you know about my mom?"

"Because part of my job is dealing with crimes committed by or against, shifters. A lot of missing person reports involving shifters come to me. Your mom's sister, Janelle, reported her missing six years ago."

"What?" Mo gasped.

"You didn't know she had been reported missing?" Daniel asked.

"No, well, yes I suppose, but what I mean is I didn't know Mom had a sister. She told me she grew up in foster homes." Victor could feel the bewilderment and hurt coming off Mo in waves and cautiously moved his chair closer so they were touching. He took back his hand. Zack did the same.

"She ran away from her pack when she met your dad. Her pack didn't approve of mixed mating."

"With humans, you mean?"

Daniel nodded, but Victor knew he also meant different shifter species. He was glad no one was dumping that information on Mo right that minute, he had enough to deal with. "I'm getting the reports sent over so as soon as I have their details I will let you know."

Mo nodded, let go of their hands, and hugged himself. "I need a phone."

Victor met Zack's worried gaze, knowing he felt just as useless. "We can do that," Victor said. That was the easiest thing. Daniel's phone buzzed then, and he looked down.

He read whatever message he'd received then looked back at Mo.

"As soon as I have any more information, I will tell you. I should be able to take over the case from Detective Pauley."

Mo scrunched his nose up.

"What is it?" Victor asked.

"Pauley's the one that basically told me Khloe going missing was what she deserved because she was a junkie."

Daniel stood. "I'm going to request all the case notes so I can see exactly what happened, plus look into your dad's conviction. It will take me a few days."

Mo nodded. "You know where I live."

"Absolutely not," Victor snapped out. "There's no way you're going home alone while those goons are after you."

Mo's eyebrows shot up. "And where do you suggest I go?"

Victor immediately looked at Zack and Mo noticed. "No," he said, standing up. "There's like a million kids here. I'm not giving those guys any excuse to come looking."

"And for the same reason you will have to miss school, at least until we find out what's going on," Daniel said.

Victor gazed at Zack. Mo couldn't just leave, and Victor couldn't take him to the pack house. Zack had a son. "Then I'll come with you," he told Mo.

"I don't want you at your home either Mo," Daniel chimed in. "At least not for a couple of days."

"Let me call my alpha," Victor said. They had a lot of outlying cottages and he knew at least two were empty. Raschid would offer help immediately, but the rest of the pack wouldn't be happy, especially when they found out Mo wasn't even a hybrid. But he'd sort that out if and when it came up. For now, he had to concentrate on keeping Mo safe and figuring out what this thing was with Zack, if he felt the same, and what the hell to do about all of it.

Chapter Six

And of course, because his alpha was exactly that, Raschid arrived practically before Victor had finished his coffee. Mo looked startled at yet another new face, and Victor didn't blame him. It had taken him a few months to get them all straight in his head. He could smell every different scent, of course, but he wasn't like Raschid, who could immediately put a name to each one. Not that Victor wasn't just as much an alpha as Raschid, but he wasn't the pack's alpha, so he didn't have a physiological or emotional connection with them.

And what was he going to do about Zack? Victor had never heard of mates not knowing they were mates until they were in their shifted form. Mo didn't have an animal, and Victor had known he was his mate the second he smelled him. Then he realized he'd started calling the bear by his name. Shit. He'd called him just "the bear" for months. Less personal, and yet now he'd used his name. It was all completely fucked.

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He stood politely when Raschid came into the kitchen, frowning when he saw his alpha was alone. Raschid should never be out of the immediate pack area unaccompanied, especially at the moment. Raschid met his gaze. "Tarran is outside."

Victor felt a little mollified. Tarran wasn't bad. He had trained the man himself. Raschid walked over to Mo, who was gazing at him like a kid on Christmas Morning and Raschid held his hand out to shake.

The snarl was out of Victor's throat before he knew what he was doing. Raschid met his gaze and, mortified, Victor immediately showed him his neck, cringing at his display of submission. But challenging his alpha? Raschid would be well within his rights to rip out Victor's throat.

Then he stilled as he realized he wasn't standing alone. Zack was also on his feet, although he remained silent, and just stood next to Victor, very close. Zack had moved, so he was shielding both him and Mo with his big frame. Victor was too stunned to speak, even when Raschid smiled politely at Mo, but withdrew his hand. No one had ever stood in front of Victor against any threat.

"Outside," Raschid ordered quietly, and Victor's heart sank.

He took one last glance at his mate and took a step, but Zack had moved again and was blocking him. Raschid glanced at Zack. "I am no threat to either of your mates, I just need to discuss pack business with my beta commander."

Victor sidestepped Zack and went outside after his alpha, not looking Zack in the eyes.

He paused when Raschid turned to him, an amused smile on his face.

Victor stared at him in shock. “Alpha—”

But Raschid put his hand up. “No, that in there was my mistake. You made it obvious last night that the human is your mate, and if he had been a wolf, I would never have touched him. But you’re just as much an alpha as I am, and I shouldn’t have forgotten that. The bear is an interesting development, though.”

Victor groaned and his shoulders sagged. “You’re telling me.” Then he wanted to bite his tongue. Zack would have heard him.

“The only reason I asked you outside is to confirm the bear is also your mate? I am aware most of them inside can still hear us, but not the human. Sorry, Mo, I believe he prefers to be called?”

Victor nodded. Not that his alpha really needed any sort of confirmation with the way Victor was behaving.

“The immediate problem, well, for us, is logistics. I know you mentioned the cottage near here, but if your mate is truly in danger, it’s too isolated.”

Victor didn’t have a solution, but Raschid stunned him again by slapping him on the back. “Come on, let’s go back inside and discuss this.”

Victor followed him back into the house and met Mo’s anxious gaze. Zack didn’t bother looking him in the eye. Shit.

“Victor asked me about the spare cottage the pack has, but the development with Zack makes that impossible, as I’m sure Zack is aware.” And Victor understood. They were mates, and Zack had a son. They couldn’t take the child into any sort of

risky situation.

“Because of Mattie,” Riley agreed.

“I’m not about to start putting kids at risk,” Mo chimed in.

“Of course not,” Raschid agreed calmly. “The simple solution is that the three of them stay here, and the pack will protect the property.”

Victor glanced at his alpha in shock.

“Apart from the fact that Victor is pack, which extends to his mates, even if the logistics are somewhat challenging, or the issue that Daniel informed me of this morning, there’s still the issue of the drugs and the high school, which also involve the pack.”

Victor heard Zack quickly explain to Mo what Raschid had told them last night. “No,” Mo said. “I absolutely won’t put any children in danger by staying here.” Victor almost smiled at the stubborn lift of Mo’s chin.

Raschid glanced at Zack questioningly. “Mo, we understand that. We really do, but the fact is, this place is already on their radar or they wouldn’t have left you here.”

“It was a warning,” Mo said. “We all know that.”

“We do,” Raschid confirmed. “But if you stay here, we can protect you.”

Mo opened his mouth to object, but Raschid shook his head. “My pack has over five hundred gamma wolves, many of them trained by Victor himself. Everyone is safer here.” Riley stood and pulled his phone out, his fingers flying over the keys.

“Five hundred?” Mo gaped. Victor was immensely relieved Raschid hadn’t pointed out the obvious. That neither Zack nor he could be apart from Mo, certainly not once they were bonded.

And what about him and Zack? He nearly missed what Riley said because the thought of him being bonded had stunned him so much. But now it was in his head. He tried to shift unobtrusively to give himself a little more room in his pants.

“But won’t your family object?” Mo asked.

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Victor saw Riley and Zack exchange glances. “No,” they said almost simultaneously.

“It’s the best solution for the moment,” Riley said, and Raschid stood.

“Daniel said he would keep me informed. I will make sure you are protected.” They heard the door open and children’s voices, and Victor let out a breath of relief when he realized Christopher had brought the kids back. That was going to be another problem. The older kids couldn’t go to school while this was sorted out, either. And he guessed that was why Riley was texting. To warn everyone.

Christopher strolled back into the kitchen with what looked like half a dozen kids. He immediately went to shake Raschid’s hand. “Thank you,” he said, confirming that Riley had told him what was happening.

Raschid glanced at Victor. “Keep me informed.” Then he left.

“Let’s get you both settled,” Riley suggested.

“I can do that,” Zack said.

Mo glanced at both of them. “Both settled?”

Christopher chuckled and Riley joined in. “That’s definitely a private convo.”

“Mattie?” Zack said.

“In the playroom with Jamie,” Christopher confirmed. “Any problems, I’ll give you a

shout, but you three need some time to talk.”

Did they ever, Victor thought. But what the hell was he going to say? And Zack had a son. Did that mean he'd been mated, but she'd died? Had the child's presence kept Zack alive following his mate's death? Or wasn't the connection as strong in bears? He trailed after Zack, who was explaining the layout of the house to Mo and very obviously ignoring Victor, and he tried to distract his wolf with what to say once they got upstairs.

Because the combined scents of both his mates were driving his wolf mad. He could feel the animal pushing him forward. Now that his wolf was satisfied both his mates were safe for the moment, the urge to touch them was almost overpowering. And he didn't mean holding hands like they had downstairs. He meant lots of bare skin to bare skin, preferably in a large bed with no interruptions.

Wolves were simple creatures. His alpha wolf had decided he had two mates, and he wanted to claim them immediately.

As if he'd said that thought out loud, Zack glanced back at him and inhaled, and Victor couldn't look away. He didn't even know how he'd gotten into the room Zack had led them all into without walking into a wall. Victor heard Mo talking, but from a distance, almost. He stood staring at Zack and letting Zack look his fill. Mo's words trailed off as if he realized no one was listening, but then Victor caught Mo's scent again, and before he'd even thought about it, he reached out to Mo, at the same time Zack did. His wolf was trying to take over because Victor was clearly being too slow. He pressed Mo against his chest as Zack stepped up close.

“Guys,” Mo said. “Not sure what...” But Mo's words trailed off as Victor bent his head and buried his nose in Mo's neck, nuzzling and scraping his cheek to scent-mark him.

Then he looked up and met Zack's gaze. He reached out, pulling Zack nearer but keeping a hold on Mo with his other hand. Zack growled long and low in his still-human throat, but the sound was all dominance and possession, and Victor nearly moaned as his cock punched against his zipper. Then Zack bent his head, and their lips met, and Victor forgot about everything else.

Victor heard the growl from Zack at the same time as their lips fastened, but he didn't stay there long, instead bending to take Mo's as well, unable to resist the pull to both of them. He ignored the startled eep, but loved the way Mo seemed to sag against him. Zak moved and pulled Mo between them, then simply lifted him up to their height. Undeterred, Mo wrapped his legs around Victor and returned kiss for kiss while Zak simply tore the tee shirt Mo was wearing in half, then started kissing whatever skin was in front of him.

Mo bent his head back and Victor moved so Zack could kiss him again, but he felt Zack's arms come around Mo's front and, from the gasp and the shudder, he would guess Zack was playing with Mo's nipples. Good to know he was this responsive. He felt Zack's hands slide lower and into Mo's waistband.

"Wait," Victor said before Zack ripped those as well, but Zack must have worked it out, because the big man headed to the bed and pulled the comforter down. "Strip him," Victor ordered and deposited Mo on the mattress.

"What?" Mo said and scrambled back. "I—" He blinked a couple of times, as if to clear the lust from his brain. Victor didn't like it, but he had to listen to what his mate said. Mo looked from one to the other. "Both of you?"

"Both of us," Victor said firmly, but Zack paused just as he went to undo his jeans, and Victor saw something that looked a lot like desolation in the big guy's expression.

And he suddenly had a flash of Zack's life. He might be a shifter and the mating pull in a shifter was like nothing else on the planet, but Zack had a son, a family. Victor didn't know whether to envy him or feel sorry for him. Shifters could and did reject other pups. It was harsh, but it happened. He supposed that was the same in the human world.

Zack's hands fell away from his jeans and he stood, fixing Mo with a false smile. "I'll leave—"

"No," Victor said, even though he could admit that earlier he'd wanted nothing else than to have the bear nowhere near him. He strode over to close the few paces between them and slid his hand behind Zak's neck, yanking him close. "You're mine as well, big guy, so you'd better get used to it." And Victor took the surprisingly soft lips with his own, teased the man so they fell open, and swallowed the resulting groan. Victor had always been attracted to guys who were smaller than him, but the feel of Zack's strength, his muscles, knowing he was letting Victor dictate the kiss, was such a huge rush that his head spun. He broke off when he heard the tiny sound from Mo, and took in his hurried breaths, the wide-eyed stare, and the flush that decorated his neck

"You're our mate," Victor said, and gestured to Zack. "Both of us."

Mo frowned a little, then shook his head. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing's going to happen if you say no," Victor assured him. "You say no, and we go back downstairs."

"I'm not a shifter," Mo said, looking between them.

Victor reached over for him and cupped his chin. "Does that bother you?" He watched as Mo took an inhale and his pupils darkened. Whatever he was feeling,

Victor would put money on the fact that he had shifter genes, which made sense with what they'd found out downstairs

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“It should, but no,” Mo whispered, a rosy flush pinking his neck. Victor’s wolf growled in satisfaction. Victor turned and ripped Zack’s shirt off, but then as the big guy went for his jeans, Victor slapped his hands away. He heard the resulting startled inhale and watched as Zack’s big brown eyes darkened with lust.

So, the big man liked a little dominating?

Victor could so do that. “Get on the bed,” he ordered and turned to Mo, who looked entirely too aware, and Victor didn’t like that. He followed Zack but didn’t attempt to undress himself, and watched as Mo licked his lips. Victor pulled the remnants of Zack’s shirt free and ran his hands up his bare back, reveling in the feel of Zack’s skin, even scraping with his nails and returning moan for decadent moan. He heard a slight sound from the bed and broke the kiss, glancing at Mo.

“I think our mate feels left out. Why don’t you show him what you can do with your mouth?”

Mo almost whimpered and tried to shove his unbuttoned jeans down. Zack moved closer to the bed, a predatory look in his eyes. Victor heard Mo’s audible swallow and moved to the other side of the bed. Zack didn’t need any more encouragement, and Victor had to adjust his own thickening cock as he watched Zack sit next to Mo, then gently cup the back of his neck and lean in to take his lips. So carefully, so controlled. Victor ached to see the bear lose control. He watched as Zack lightly skimmed his fingers over Mo’s bare chest, almost freezing when Mo groaned.

He's scared he's gonna hurt him.

The flash of insight took Victor by surprise, but this wasn't just about shifter strength versus human frailty, this was more.

Big guy. Even Victor had called him that.

"Like that?" Victor encouraged and Mo moved closer to Zack, his body begging for more even if he couldn't vocalize it. "Lay him back, show him exactly how good you are with your mouth."

Victor forced his own hands not to move, as Mo needed no encouragement, but Zack needed confidence. Mo leaned back on the bed and Zack simply followed him. "That's it," Victor said. "Look how he's hard for you."

Zack let out a growl that was more his bear than anything else, but Mo didn't seem scared; if anything his kisses seemed more desperate. Zack broke off and slid Mo's pants down almost reverently. Mo glanced over and sent Victor a heated look, before his eyes closed as Zack bent and nuzzled the spot between the inside of his thigh and his balls.

"Fuck," Mo whispered, and he seemed helpless not to thrust his hips a little. Victor watched for a second until he decided he was way too far away.

Chapter Seven

Mohadtobedreaming. Two sexy guys wanted him? He heard the orders Victor gave and while he had no intention of letting him do that outside the bedroom, in here it was all kinds of hot.

Then Zack licked a stripe from his balls to the tip of his cock before closing his mouth over it at the same time that Victor joined them. Victor's lips took Mo's, and he tuned out all thoughts and concentrated on feeling. Victor broke off for air, but

before he could dip his head a second time, Mo reached up and brushed a gentle finger over Victor's lips, tracing them carefully. He reached down with his other hand and slid his fingers into Zack's hair, shivering in pleasure as the rumble in Zack's throat vibrated against his cock. In that moment, they were still all touching but the connection seemed stronger. He felt Victor's warm breaths against his fingers and followed the line of Victor's generous mouth. Victor moved lightning quick and caught Mo's finger in his mouth just as Zack pushed his tongue into the tip of his cock. Mo arched and closed his eyes, surrendering to the heat swirling around his insides and travelling like lightning into his balls.

"Wait," Victor murmured to Mo. "Hold on."

Mo gasped. He couldn't, yet he really wanted to. "Take him deeper." It took Mo a second to realize Victor was instructing Zack, then Zack seemed to almost swallow him down, and Mo went over the edge.

He had no idea if he yelled out loud. The sheer pleasure that seemed to white out his brain cut him off from everything outside his own body and, for many seconds, he wasn't completely sure he was in his body anymore. Mo floated until the bed he was lying on dipped at either side of him and an arm—no, two—reached across his belly to anchor him. It took another moment before he was cognizant enough to open his eyes to see a pair of deep brown and a pair of dark gray eyes looking at him.

"Give me a minute," he groaned, and Zack's eyebrow shot up nearly in time with Victor's. If Mo had any energy left, he would have laughed. Synchronized eyebrows. "I need a moment."

"Little one," Victor said in a deep voice. "We must have a conversation first. That was to relax you." Mo groaned. He was certainly relaxed. Puddled was a word that came to mind.

“You want to talk,” he added a little sulkily. An unkind person could have said he pouted, but of course Mo didn’t do that.

Victor glanced over at Zack. “I am assuming you would be unable to hold yourself back from the mating bite?”

“The what?” Mo asked, then groaned. “Oh my God, it’s exactly like it is in all the books.”

Zack chuckled. “I’m not sure what books you’ve been reading, but Victor’s right. I would struggle not to bond, and I don’t think you’re anywhere near that yet. But I want to explain more.” He looked down, avoiding both their gazes, and somehow Mo thought it was going to be bad.

“You guys don’t ever do casual sex?”

Zack looked up. “Sure, but never with you.”

A million words seemed to want to fight their way out of his mouth, but he kept silent.

Zack rolled onto his back and moved his arm, and Mo immediately felt the loss. Which was insane, but in the current situation, maybe loss was the least insane thing he was feeling.

“And Mattie complicates everything for me.”

“Hey,” Mo chided. “There are single parents the world over. Two point two kids went sideways a long time ago, and who cares anyway?” He grinned. “From what I saw of your family, you should be the first person to know that.”

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Zack nodded but then took a breath as if he needed to say something. “Nearly four years ago, I met a girl, and she was...accepting.”

“Accepting?” Mo blurted out, then could have cut out his own tongue for his own impatience. “Of wolf shifters?”

“No, we would never tell someone we weren’t a hundred percent committed to.” Mo tried not to inhale a sharp breath and wondered if Zack realized what he’d just said. “People tend to be scared of me,” Zack admitted. “Girls especially.” Mo reached over and linked their fingers. Couldn’t they see how gentle he was? “Mattie’s mom was in her final year of college. Clever. She wanted to be a doctor. She’d gotten into the best schools. Then it seemed like she changed almost overnight. She was doing her finals, and I didn’t know at the time, but a so-called friend introduced her to pills to keep her awake so she could study more. Jessica was driven. She’d come from a poor background and everything she did had to be with a full scholarship.”

Zack hesitated. “I knew she wasn’t my mate, but we’d been seeing each other for months and she told me she had an implant.” He flushed. “Condoms aren’t so much a barrier for us. I didn’t see her for about two weeks while she had exams, but I’d texted her a few times. Sometimes I got a reply, sometimes not, but I knew she was busy and, like I said, she wasn’t my mate. Then another few days went past, and I got a text from her roommate to say Jessica had missed an exam. Her roomie was furious because Jessica had told her she was spending just about every night with me. When that obviously wasn’t the case, the school called her parents and then the cops. It was like she’d disappeared off the face of the earth, and she eventually became an official missing person. Fourteen months later, a local sheriff found her dead body—and Mattie. He was six months old but luckily the sheriff was a shifter so he smelled

shifter in Mattie, which means he would have come to us anyway, but they found a letter she must have written to her parents and never mailed, saying Mattie was mine.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mo said.

Zack squeezed his hand. “Unfortunately, her mom had a stroke and died seven months earlier, and her dad remarried and moved away. I wrote to her dad via the cops and told him about Mattie, but he wasn’t interested. He blamed Jessica for her mom’s death and didn’t want anything to do with him.”

“His loss,” Mo said.

“Simpler,” Victor commented, which Mo understood, but it still seemed a bit callous.

“But it means my life isn’t simple. I—”

Mo couldn’t help it. He laughed. But because it could be taken the wrong way, he curled his fingers around Zack’s.

“I’m probably being hunted by some sort of mafia drug gang. It’s likely said gang is responsible for some child murders, and they also seem to want to kill me. My sister is missing, oh, and I’ve just found out that some people can turn into animals. Does that about sum things up?”

Victor glanced over at Zack, a smirk on his face. “Just about.”

Mo turned his head to Victor and waited. Zack followed his gaze, and Victor groaned. “Something tells me you don’t share,” Mo said.

Victor glanced at both of them and squirmed internally. No, he didn’t. His private

business was just that, but something told him his little human mate wouldn't let him get away with it. "Not so much, but briefly, I was born just north of Sacramento." He paused. "I'm fifty-one." Mo gazed at him in shock, and Victor wanted to run. Just go.

"Damn, shifters age well."

Victor kept his gaze on Mo. He hardly breathed. "Does that bother you?"

Mo smirked. "No,Daddy." And Mo seemed to take great delight as the bronze of Victor's skin reddened. At least he assumed it did. His face was hot enough. Mo waved a hand to encourage Victor to continue. He might as well get it over with.

"My dad was...someone who thought he should be an alpha but was only capable of dominating those smaller and weaker than him. There was me, my older sister, my mama, and Dad. It was okay growing up because Dad was out at work all day, and he liked to go drinking with his buddies most nights. I got used to seeing the bruises on Mama, but with a typical child's ignorance I accepted her explanations of being clumsy until I was around seven and then they suddenly started appearing on Cecily's skin as well. By this time I was ten I was showing alpha traits." Not that he dared show them to his dad, although he had a feeling the bully knew. He'd never hit Victor, and Victor would never be able to say if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Bad because he took his frustration out on Mama and Cecily, who couldn't hit back.

Mo reached over and brushed a kiss on Victor's cheek, and Victor stilled. He didn't know what to make of any of this. He was used to being in charge. The only person he would ever submit to was Raschid, but he felt like he was baring his neck for both his mates. Was that what it was supposed to feel like? He saw the look Zack sent him, and something told him Zack was acknowledging the same thing.

"The pack was huge, and a lot of us lived more on the outskirts. Dad wasn't one of the inner circle even though he wished he was. Then Dad got in trouble with one of

the betas, and they basically fired him. He used to be in charge of the stores, but he was lazy and selfish, so I can imagine him screwing up, even stealing. He would have ended up working the pack farm, but it was like he couldn't care. He spent all day eating food we didn't have, drinking liquor we couldn't afford and, like we said, it takes a lot of alcohol to have an effect. He barely shifted as well, and he kept sending me out to hunt when unsanctioned hunting wasn't allowed, but if I didn't go, he'd take it out on Cecily and Mama."

Victor heard the tiny, distressed sound from his mate and stroked a gentle finger down Mo's cheek. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Because we're your mates," Zack said. But was it that simple? Victor doubted it, but cocooned in this room, it seemed to be.

"Anyway, I was caught trying to take down a deer, and we'd been told because of the drought to leave them alone so they could repopulate, but I'd been out all day and the couple of turkeys I'd gotten wouldn't have satisfied him, so I was desperate. The betas weren't interested in anything I had to say and they forced me into the brig. I had to stay in overnight as punishment, which meant I didn't turn up with any food." Victor paused but pushed himself to continue.

"I could hear Cecily's screams as I ran up to the house, and I heard them cut off as well. He was shifted, which shocked me as I ran in, and there was blood everywhere. Mama couldn't shift very well. I never knew why, but basically because Dad hated her doing it. He wouldn't shift, so he didn't want anyone to be in a stronger position than him, and Cecily was a non-shifting omega. I'll never know what happened for sure, because they were both dead, but I guessed he'd killed Mama first, then Cecily had seen, so he'd killed her." He'd never forget. Never forget the smell, the sight...the sound of Cecily's screams.

"One of the neighbors ran in, but he wasn't strong enough to stop me." His father had

shifted back to try to say Mama had threatened him with a knife. He hadn't even finished the sentence before Victor had ripped his throat out. He'd been twelve.

"The gammas came and took care of the bodies. Mama and Cecily had a moon ceremony. Dad was just dumped for the coyotes. One of the betas moved into our house with me, but the morning after the moon ceremony, I just left. I didn't want anything to do with a pack that would let that happen."

"And you ended up with Raschid's?" It was Zack that asked this time.

Victor smiled ruefully. No idea how he'd even managed that. "Yeah. Took me a year, but one of Roxanne's dad's betas found me on their pack lands, and instead of throwing me out, took me home to meet his mom, who basically adopted me."

Zack chuckled. "And I'm guessing that beta was Raschid?"

Victor nodded. He'd sworn undying loyalty to Raschid from that point on and never regretted it. Over the years, Raschid and his family had become Victor's. He would give his life for theirs every time.

Up to now.

Because he didn't know how he was going to keep his mates and his job at the same time. It was impossible to even think about letting either go.

Chapter Eight

“So,whathappensnow?”Mo asked, wondering if it was impolite to consider a nap or round two? Round two would be better, even if he did feel like he'd dropped into some sort of alternate universe. Zack rolled away.

“I ought to go check on Mattie.”

Mo felt the vibes in the room shift, as if the last hour hadn't just happened, and it annoyed the crap out of him. Victor rolled away as well.

“Wait just a minute.” They both paused. “What the hell is this? You spout all thisme Tarzan you Janebullshit and then leave everything hanging?”

Zack flushed. “I—” He looked at Victor for some reason.

“Look, I know all this is new, but you can't just blow hot and cold like this. I mean, what's the end goal here?”

“The end goal,” Victor said carefully, like he was talking to a preschooler, “is that we mate.”

“But you’re human,” Zack added. “And with everything going on. We don’t want to steamroll you.”

“So, what was this? Let’s give him a quickie to shut him up for a time?” Mo was furious, and he didn’t know why, but the calmer Victor seemed, the angrier he got. This was crap. Utter crap. This wasn’t what it was supposed to be like.

And he stilled. What wasn’t it supposed to be like? Why the hell did he feel used? No matter what, he thought, this wasn’t a romance book, and he needed to find his sister. The big lugs could go screw themselves. He scrambled out of bed, but Victor grabbed his hand. Mo looked down at the large hand that seemed like it could encircle both his wrists. “Let. Go. Of. Me.”

Victor moved his hand away instantly, and Mo yanked on the borrowed clothes, and left the room not looking back, but feeling the stares of two pairs of eyes burning into his back all the way down to the kitchen. He needed a coffee. No, he needed a double vodka. Mo huffed. “Not that I’ve ever had even a single vodka.”

He stopped suddenly, for some reason expecting the kitchen to be empty, but Zack’s dad was sitting at the table with Mattie on his lap. Mattie was coloring and concentrating hard the way little kids did. His dark hair was the image of his dad’s, and it made Mo’s breath catch. Christopher looked up and smiled. “There might be some vodka in the top cupboard, but if so, I don’t know how old it is.” His eyes twinkled. “But I made some fresh coffee, if that helps.” He patted his chest. “I’m only allowed so much caffeine on a weekend.”

Mo hesitated, then decided if the two idiots upstairs weren’t going to communicate, maybe Christopher would. He smiled and went to help himself, then took a seat next to him and glanced down at the drawing. “Ooh dragons,” Mo acknowledged, enthusiastically. “Is that the prince? Because it looks like he has a castle.” Mo pointed to the building in the distance. Mattie glanced at it, seemed to consider that for a

moment, then nodded. “Maybe you should draw a crown he can wear on his head?” Mo thought for a moment. “Unless you think it might fall off when he’s flying?”

Mattie paused again, but shook his head. “When he a boy.”

“When he’s a boy?” Mo repeated subtly, using the correct possessive contraction. “You mean he’s a shifter dragon?” Wow! How many toddlers would come up with that? And then he grinned. One who had grown up around them.

“And what color is the prince going to be?”

Mattie thought again, and Mo looked at the drawing. He would bet ninety-nine kids out of a hundred, when faced with a coloring scene, always started with the main image, in this case the dragon, but Mattie had started with the sky. Interesting.

“Red,” Mattie pronounced confidently.

Mo nodded his agreement, and because he couldn’t seem to turn it off, added, “Can you point to the red color?” He gestured to the box of crayons and Mattie reached over and plucked the red one out.

“Good job, buddy,” Mo praised, and took a sip of his coffee. He glanced over at Christopher, who had an amused smile on his face. “Sorry,” Mo murmured. “Force of habit.”

Christopher chuckled. “Please don’t apologize. I owe you our thanks anyway. We all do.”

Mo was a little nonplussed. “Umm, I would think you’d want me out of here. I seem to have some unpleasant hangers-on,” he said vaguely for Mattie’s benefit.

Christopher grinned. “Oh, don’t worry about that. This house has seen plenty of action, and the boys will keep the kids safe. I meant with the work you’re doing with Tyler.”

“He’s a clever kid.”

“And Luke has taken him as far as he can go.” Christopher stopped. “We home school the young shifters until they’re secure in their shift,” he added as an explanation, “but Tyler hasn’t been with us that long, and while his confidence in his academic ability is poor, he was bored with the little ones and is close to Alex. And Mac’s at college now.”

“Are they all shifters?” Mo asked. “This is a group foster home, correct?”

Christopher nodded. “My mate and I set it up when the twins—Zack and Riley—were eight. We’ve had over thirty-four kids since then.”

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“That’s amazing.”

“Of course, not all of them shift. Depends on breed and designation.”

“Such as?” Mo asked, completely fascinated.

“Some omegas can shift, some never will. Hybrids don’t, as a rule.”

“You mean different species?” Wow!

“Technically,” Christopher agreed. “But we also use the term to describe human and shifter offspring. You, for example.”

Mo leaned back in his chair. With everything that had happened with those two upstairs, he hadn’t really had the time to absorb the bombshell about his mother. “And I must be a non-shifter?”

Christopher grinned. “That’s where it gets complicated. Another of our sons, Asher, who’s on vacation with his mate and their kids, runs this place now with help from Riley and the others. His mate didn’t shift until they were bonded. Tessa and I are heavily involved in the shifter council, and—”

“What’s that?” Mo interrupted, then immediately apologized.

Christopher waved it off. “We basically police ourselves, but we know the time is coming when the human world will eventually know about us and we’re preparing for that. The heads of many nations know about us already, but there is a lot of

dissension over how and in what circumstances the news should be shared. We don't want to cause panic, but with the advent of satellites and mobile phones, it's a wonder everyone doesn't already know."

Mo nodded his understanding. "So, all the kids here came as foster kids and they've been adopted?"

"Oh no," Christopher said. "Jax gave birth, so did Sai. Have you met Jax?"

Mo frowned. "No, the only women I've seen are your wife and Cassie. She's your daughter?" There had been a lot of people at breakfast.

Christopher opened his mouth then closed it, and a slight flush crept up his neck. Mo watched his obvious discomfort. "I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?" Christopher swallowed, but before Mo had a chance to ask him again, he heard a squeal as a little girl he remembered from breakfast ran in followed by two men. Riley, who he obviously knew, was holding a squirming toddler, and another guy with the most startling green eyes he'd ever seen walked into the kitchen.

"Hi Mo," Riley greeted him. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused," Mo answered honestly, then looked at the other guy. He definitely hadn't been here for breakfast. He put out his hand to Mo, and they shook. Riley bent and settled the toddler down on his wobbly legs.

"I'm Jax, Riley's mate, and I completely understand. It took me weeks to get everyone straight in my head when I first moved here."

He looked at the little girl. Must be from a previous relationship, or might not be theirs? He shook the curiosity off. It was none of his business, and he loved blended families. The only thing that gave him pause had been Christopher's reaction.

Wait...

He said Jax gave birth.

Then he relaxed. Jax must be transgender. He was pleased for him.

Christopher shot Riley an apologetic look and Riley gazed at him for a moment, then chuckled. "He had to know sometime."

Mo glanced up. "I had to know what?" What the hell was going on?

Jax glanced over at them both, then understanding flashed across his face. He sat across from Mo and smiled. "Male omega shifters can get pregnant and give birth. It requires certain circumstances, but so far Sai, Luke, Olli, and I have all given birth to our babies."

Mo blinked. Then he blinked again. Part of him wanted to look for the hidden camera to see if he was being punked, but Jax had a grace about him that told Mo he wasn't lying.

"You gave birth."

Jax nodded.

"You got pregnant."

Jax chuckled. "The other way around, but yeah."

"What's an omega?" he said, suddenly feeling a little sick.

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“A shifter designation. There are many but in general the three are Alpha, Omega, and Beta. We also add gammas into the mix either to describe general shifters or those that work as security for the Alpha.”

“Victor’s an alpha,” Riley put in.

Mo frowned. “But he said Raschid was his alpha.”

“Yes, Raschid is the alpha of his pack, but Victor demonstrates alpha tendencies.”

You’re not kidding.

“I don’t know why I should be surprised after everything else I’ve found out today,” he admitted. But at least he was human. He couldn’t imagine rolling up to the school staff break room six months pregnant.

That was so ridiculous he almost laughed.

Almost.

Chapter Nine

Zack heard Riley and his dad spell it out to Mo and closed his eyes in defeat. Mo would go, if not right away, then as soon as the danger had passed. Zack wasn’t a great catch by anyone’s standards, shifter or human. Mo had shown no signs of feeling the true mate match with him, even if Zack felt it. No, not felt. That was too weak a word. He burned for Mo, but the one thing that kept him in check was Mattie.

Mattie didn't have anyone except him. Sure, he had his family, but somehow the mating urge was tempered with fears over his son. He wanted nothing more than to wrestle Mo to the ground and pound into him, but apart from the screwed-up knowledge that he wasn't the only alpha in this relationship, he just couldn't. Which probably made him a screwed-up shifter. He knew Mo was his mate. Absolutely knew it, especially since he'd watched as his brothers found theirs and knew the signs.

Zack had always felt less. Not that he blamed his family or his twin. Riley and he had a special connection he wouldn't swap for anything. He just wanted the happiness Riley had.

Riley had a true gift as well, something Zack didn't have. All Zack had was strength, and that didn't help him at all. He didn't know why Riley had gotten the gifts and he hadn't. He hadn't cared at the time, he'd been too busy looking after the foster kids and his brother. And later, the shared energy had been so neat. He felt like he had been part of Riley's gift, but of course he hadn't been. He felt a bit like a Duracell battery. He knew it helped, but he wished there was something he could do.

Then there had been Mattie's mom. He had let her down so badly and he doubted the shame would ever leave him.

He should have known, even if a small voice told him it wasn't possible. What if the sheriff hadn't been one of theirs? He would never have found his son, who was the greatest gift he'd ever had. He just imagined him at ten, fifteen, twenty, and wondering how he'd been unlucky enough to win the Zack lottery.

"It isn't what you're thinking," a low voice said beside him, and Zack turned to Victor. Belligerently, he wanted to refute him. To slay his words as if they were enemies to defeat, but all Zack did was shrug. "You think that your son is a barrier," Victor continued, "but I am envious of you."

Zack turned to him, stunned that he had guessed his thoughts so correctly, and watched as Victor owned his words. And stood by them.

“I’m no good for Mo.”

Victor scoffed. “And you think I am? He’s a human. I’m a pack enforcer. We don’t fit in any way, shape, or form.”

“But I have a son,” Zack protested weakly.

“And if you don’t recognize that as a draw, then you’re crazy,” Victor said softly.

Zack glanced at him. Hisothermate and saw him for the first time. Really saw him. Here he was worried about losing Mo to Victor and Victor was worried about the same thing. Victor reached out slowly, and his hand curled around Zack’s neck, tugging him toward him, and Zack went willingly. Victor’s lips felt different from how he’d tasted upstairs. The kiss was hesitant, as if unsure of its welcome, so Zack parted his lips and brought his own hand up. They stood tasting each other while all the sounds from other people seemed to fall from the world, and it was just the two of them trapped in a small bubble of time.

But how could they make this work when Zack couldn’t leave here, and Victor couldn’t stay? At least since both of them were alphas they wouldn’t be receiving a bite.

Zack heard a small sigh, and then it must have registered with Victor because he lifted his head, smoothed his thumb over Zack’s bottom lip, then let go and stepped back. Zack managed to tear his eyes from him, only to see Mo leaning against the kitchen doorway, smiling. “You two look really hot together.”

Victor’s laugh was unexpected. Zack stared in astonishment as it completely changed

Victor's face, and the ache in his balls quickly went from something to be aware of to something a little more obvious. He tried to adjust his pants unobtrusively, but the twinkle in Mo's eyes told him he'd failed.

Zack gave up any pretense and extended his arm, hand palm up in invitation. Mo straightened from the doorway and walked toward him. Zack could hear Riley and his family in the kitchen and knew they had to take this somewhere private. And as much as he wanted to, the bedroom wasn't going to be conducive to conversation. "Let me show you outside." Mo's smile showed surprise but a little pleasure, so Zack found some sneakers that were Mo's size from the huge collection they always kept because often the kids that arrived didn't have any. Victor slid his feet into his boots, and Zack grabbed his sneakers. He glanced at Mo. "It might be cold out," and he took a jacket from a line of pegs. Mo's smile turned to amusement as Zack fussed, but he stood demurely while Zack made sure he was warm.

Zack was proud of their home and showed both Victor and Mo everything from the garage stuffed with bikes of every size imaginable to the court area where they played basketball, to the paths that led straight to the forest. "Raschid's pack starts about a mile in that direction."

"It's beautiful out here," Mo said longingly. "What about the other houses I could see from the front as we came out?"

"Family, neighbors. Shifters in the main, or a couple of trusted humans. Riley has his own house a bit farther out along the lane that you can't see from here, but he's moved back in while we find out what's going on." Zack walked him to the side of their home so he could see around it. "The big house is Daniel's place. His mates run the school in the annex attached to the house that you can see."

"Have I met them?"

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Zack hesitated and shot a glance at Victor. What the hell should he say? But then Jax had told him about their men giving birth, so Riley, who could read emotions, must trust Mo. If he was honest with himself, so did Zack, but there was a good chance the mating pull might cloud that, so he was relieved Riley clearly did.

“So, this is going to sound crazy.”

Mo laughed. “Crazier than humans turning into animals or guys having babies?”

Zack scrubbed his jaw. He had a point there. “We can’t let Luke touch you.”

Mo’s eyebrows shot up. “And Luke is?”

“Luke and Oliver are Daniel’s mates, but Luke has certain unusual gifts.” Mo just waited and Zack swore to himself.

“Luke can give you a wolf,” Victor said very bluntly. “And when I say give, I mean he can turn you into a shifter.”

Mo’s jaw dropped, and his lips parted, but no sound came out. Zack winced. It sounded crazy, and he was surprised Mo wasn’t running for the hills. “We have to be careful,” Zack hurried on, although he wasn’t sure how he could make this any better. “They only teach shifter kids obviously. We didn’t know for a long time, well, until it happened to an FBI agent.”

Mo’s eyes grew even wider, and Victor chuckled. “Zack, I don’t think you’re helping. Martin is a friend and yes, he used to work for the FBI, but he had a bad

accident which means in his human form he limps quite badly. In his animal form, however, he can run free of pain, and Martin will be forever grateful to Luke.”

It was a good thing they were near the small wall because Mo suddenly sat down on it as if his legs couldn’t hold him up. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me?” he croaked out.

“I’m sorry,” Zack blurted out, hunkering down in front of Mo. “I didn’t mean to drop all this on you at once.”

“No, I think that about covers it,” Victor said, and Zack shot him a glare. He was enjoying this.

“Zack!”

They all turned to see Riley jogging toward them with the phone. “I just got a call from family services. They’re on their way with an emergency placement.”

Zack shot to his feet, incredulity running through him. “But that’s impossible. We can’t take any kids right now. It isn’t safe.”

“Actually,” Victor said. “This place is locked down better than Fort Knox at the moment. I counted six of my gammas already watching from the trees.”

Zack glanced at Victor. “That’s beside the point. We have no idea what this kid has already gone through. If they’re an emergency placement, it usually means something traumatic, and putting them in this situation would likely make matters worse.”

Victor nodded, acknowledging Zack’s point. Riley sighed. “They’re already on their way. And Helen Reynolds says she has nowhere else to put him.”

“How old is he?” Mo asked, as they all headed for the house.

“Fourteen. Refuses to say what sort of shifter he is. He was in foster care between the ages of seven and twelve, but then his biological father came out of the woodwork. Currently he’s one more shoplifting conviction away from juvenile detention. His father is currently in Mexico for business and there’s no other responsible adults he can be with. We don’t even know if he can shift, so there isn’t anywhere they can put him in case his first shift happens without warning.”

“And I’m betting stress might bring that on,” Mo said. “What age is normal for a first shift?”

Zack met Victor’s admiring gaze as we both recognized Mo had gone from shocked to competent in the blink of an eye.

“Generally adolescence, but that can vary widely based on type of shifter and designation,” Riley answered. “Jax is getting a room ready, and Alex and Tyler are sorting out some toiletries.”

“Well,” Mo said as we got to the house. “There’s never a dull moment around here.”

Wasn’t that the truth.

Chapter Ten

Mowatchedinaweas the family all worked seamlessly together, even down to the kids. Christopher and Jax took the little ones away, but Mo noticed Tyler and Alex hung around, which made sense. Knowing he couldn’t really help—not that they needed him—he glanced at Victor. “Want a coffee?” Sometimes all that stood between him and insanity was a cup of black gold.

Victor peeled himself off the wall and followed him into the kitchen. He'd just filled the coffee machine and turned it on when they heard a car. Mo couldn't help going to the window and felt Victor move up behind him. "Tell me how this works." He nodded as a woman got out of the driver's side and moved up to shake Riley's hand.

"I've never been here when they got a new kid. I don't actually visit much, only when I'm accompanying my alpha."

Mo turned and looked openly at him, and Victor let him. His gray eyes had lightened, and they looked almost silver, which was weird, but then he was part wolf, so nothing could really top that. Mo's second thought was wondering why he wasn't freaking out. So, okay, he might have done so earlier when he thought he'd been basically kidnapped, but he wasn't now. Neither of them spoke for a few seconds. "What do you want from me?" Mo whispered.

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Victor's eyes darkened suddenly and Mo got a sudden lungful of something that reminded him of dried grass, with a woody undertone and a barely there rich, smoky feel. A teacher he'd worked closely with a few years ago had requested a bottle of bourbon as a gift when he retired, and as Mo had never tasted the stuff, he and a friend went to try some. The only one he liked tasted almost like a mixture of chocolate and smoke. It certainly managed to set his throat on fire.

Mo's lips parted, because that thought, that scent, seemed to be having the same effect on his body, and he leaned forward, needing to be closer.

"Whatever you're willing to give." But Mo didn't just hear the words, he seemed to feel them. They swirled around and mixed with the chocolate and smoke until he could nearly taste them on his tongue.

"Whatever's happening, I can't let it get in the way of me finding Khloe." He felt like he needed to warn them both.

Victor closed the gap between them and bent his head.

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"I didn't ask to come here! You can't make me."

Mo jumped at the yell and Victor took a step backwards. They both looked to the open door to see a kid in scruffy, ripped jeans—not the expensive kind—a tee that looked way too big, and a jacket that was way too small. He was practically snarling every time Riley or the woman he assumed was the social worker tried to reason with

him.

Mo's gaze narrowed as he took in the blond, scraggy hair pulled back in a hair tie. Then the kid glanced toward them, and he took in his startling, different colored eyes. One was a pale blue and the other a golden brown. Mo knew heterochromia was mostly a benign condition present from birth, but he'd learned in college it was always something that needed to be checked out.

"How about you come with me, and I'll show you your room?" Mo glanced over at Alex, who was standing on the stairs, but Alex's mild words seemed to anger him even more.

"Who the fuck are you? They paying you to be my welcome committee? Or maybe you just get down on your knees every time one of them asks and suck—"

"Don't be a prick," Alex snarled the response, and even the adults went quiet. Mo assumed Alex losing his temper was rare. Alex walked down the last three steps and right up to the boy. "I get that you're scared." He ignored the scoff. "I get that each place melds into another. I know what you expect because I've been there and stood in exactly the space you're in now. But if you ever speak like that to one of these guys like that ever again, you and me are going to have problems." Alex didn't wait for an agreement, just assumed he would be obeyed. He pointed to a plastic bag that the kid had dumped on the floor. "Now pick that up and follow me." Then Alex turned and headed back up the stairs, and wonder of wonders, the boy picked up the bag without a word and followed him.

Zack, who had remained quiet throughout the exchange, stepped up to the social worker whose mouth was hanging open after that little display from Alex. "Coffee? Tea? You might as well come in while we check over the paperwork." She nodded and seemed to pull herself together. Then she noticed Mo and paused.

“He’s trusted and aware,” Riley said, which shocked Mo, but kind of felt nice as well. Mo stepped forward and nearly offered her his hand before remembering Victor’s reaction from yesterday. He settled with just introducing himself. Zack stepped very close to Mo, and she smiled, then relaxed.

Mo saw her take a quick inhale when Victor moved nearer, but she didn’t offer her hand and neither did Victor. Zack pulled out a chair for her, then one for Mo, as well. Mo sat gratefully, because he was still trying to process what had happened, or was happening, between him and Victor, and Zack. They really had to talk more. This whole thing had gone from zero to sixty in a moment and whatever he might want, he couldn’t lose sight of his main goal. He wasn’t about to forget about his sister just because—well, just because he had two gorgeous guys telling him they were his mates, apparently.

“That’s one powerful alpha up there,” Helen said, accepting a coffee from Riley, and suddenly Mo understood. She was a shifter, and that was what Riley had meant by Mo being aware. And probably why Zack had pressed close and maybe why she hadn’t offered to shake Victor’s hand. Although, surely they didn’t think she was a threat to him? And just how many shifters were there here?

Riley chuckled. “He’s been getting more dominant, certainly, but that was a first.”

It was Victor’s turn to scoff. “And he isn’t even eighteen.”

Helen grinned. “Well, I hope he can help settle Noah. We know who he is, but he’s never been on any alpha’s radar. He was in court yesterday and one of Daniel’s team was there giving evidence on another case. Kent Kursman. You know him, I think?”

“Kent?” Zack said. “Yeah, he’s been here a few times. Good guy.”

“Well, he immediately flagged Noah Watkins as a shifter, but wasn’t sure what kind,

so I became involved. He has a human father but he's in trouble all the time, and as far as I know the father is unaware of shifters. I can't take him back because the father is out of the country on business and the housekeeper charged with looking after Noah quit her job."

"How come you have him now?" Riley asked.

"Mall cop caught him shoplifting. He had an iPhone on him we've returned to the store, and the cops arrested him. He was about to be sent to juvie, as it's a second time, but Daniel interfered because he got a call from Kent, so they persuaded the judge to release him to them until the father returns. He didn't have any spare clothes and we can't get access to the house as Noah says he doesn't have a key. The judge is disgusted that the father doesn't seem to care, and he's even threatening prosecution for abandonment even if Montana doesn't have a minimum age for that. Daniel wasn't there. Kent says he's looking into a missing person case, but he said he'd fill Daniel in when he saw him."

Mo met Zack's eyes and felt Victor cover his hand protectively. Daniel's missing person case was Khloe. He sent Zack a tremulous smile and caught Victor's fingers with his and didn't let go. Helen glanced at Victor. "Are you the reason there are gammas patrolling outside?"

Victor nodded his head, but didn't say anything else.

"We can't explain at the moment, Helen," Zack said, "but the case Daniel's working on is connected to us, and Alpha Raschid is providing protection. If you could have found somewhere else, we'd have said it wasn't a good idea to bring him."

Helen sighed. "Sorry, but we're stuck."

"And he's here now," Riley said as if it was a done deal.

“And I imagine this place is heavily protected.” She sighed. “I’m asking a lot, but we don’t know if he has control of his shift or even if he can shift at all, because he isn’t speaking to us. I didn’t dare place him anywhere else.”

“How can you guys know he’s a shifter, but can’t tell what kind?” Mo asked without thinking and then apologized. “Sorry, I really should have a filter.”

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“It’s a sense more than anything. Our animal recognizes another,” Riley explained. “Sometimes scent will tell us if it’s familiar, but I couldn’t tell what shifter animal he is. Maybe later when I go talk to him, I will get a better idea.”

“Can I ask where Noah goes to school? I work at Carrgrove High.” He knew people in different schools that might be able to give him insights into Noah.

Helen shook her head apologetically. “His schooling has been very hit or miss, but he’s not in that district. He’s registered at East Middleton this year.”

“Do you know him?” Zack asked, and Mo shook his head. “I was just going to reach out to colleagues and get a better idea of where he’s at education-wise. East Middleton is an expensive private school.” Which didn’t gel with the clothes Noah was wearing, but then it sounded like those were loaned.

Helen got out some paperwork for Riley and left when she’d finished her coffee after Tyler came back down with a request for cookies and juice. He said Noah seemed to be listening to Alex anyway, and they’d gotten him some spare clothes because his needed to be washed.

Riley sent Tyler back with plenty of food. “I’ll give them a few minutes to settle down, then I’ll try to talk to him again.” And then it was just the three of them in the kitchen.

And they were back to what Mo had asked Victor, but maybe he shouldn’t be asking them what they wanted from him. Because if it was any sort of commitment, he couldn’t make that promise. Not now, and maybe not ever.

Chapter Eleven

“And you believe that’s a coincidence?”

Mo winced at Victor’s incredulous question. Riley had just come back after trying to talk to Noah and had gotten nowhere. Then the social worker had called back with further information, and Riley had shared what she’d told him. Victor’s suspicion mirrored their own.

Noah had lived with his grandmother up to her death when Noah was seven. Agnes Watkins was fully human as far as they knew, or if not, she lived a typical human existence in a small ground-floor apartment. Her daughter, Noah’s mom, had left when Noah was only five months old and was a missing person. Father unknown at that time. And even then, right up to Agnes’s death, Noah had been a model student. He was intelligent and engaged, polite, and had many friends. Noah spent five years bouncing around the system after his grandmother’s death, his behavior becoming increasingly worse, but then he was fostered by a young couple and while he took some time to adjust to the change in his living arrangements and work through his anger and grief, he eventually settled, especially when the foster parents applied to adopt him. Noah was even on the winning team for the interschool Science Olympics. The school had been interviewed by a local reporter.

And that’s where everything went sideways, because Noah’s father turned up. Sean Pearson hadn’t known his one-night stand of so many years ago had resulted in a pregnancy, but he was easily able to prove he was Noah’s biological relative through DNA. It had been an old friend that had seen the picture of Noah after the interschool competition. Noah’s distinctive eyes were identical to Sean’s and very rare. Noah wasn’t interested, though. He was happy with his foster parents and didn’t know this stranger that turned up claiming to be his father and wanting him.

The judge halted the adoption process, but Noah made it clear he wanted to stay with

his foster parents, and at that age the judge would take Noah's wishes into account. He wouldn't have anything to do with Sean Pearson. Sean Pearson didn't have a record, but he was a "person of interest" in a number of FBI cases. But what was obvious was that Sean Pearson wanted Noah.

Then his foster mom was killed in a hit and run, which was the point in the story when Victor exploded and said what most of them were probably thinking, that it was too damn convenient for Pearson. The foster dad was heartbroken and, despite still wanting Noah, before Noah knew what had happened, he was placed with his father.

"It was all rushed," Riley explained, "A new judge stepped in at the last minute when the family court judge was involved in an road traffic incident. He rushed everything through with undue haste and took no regard for Noah's wishes. It's been a revolving door since then. Noah settles down for a few months, then erupts. This recent episode happened while Mr. Pearson was out of the country on business. One of his many businesses is a pharmaceutical company and he has a plant in Mexico. His trips are frequent, and his housekeeper was supposedly supervising Noah."

"If the father's away on business all the time, why did he fight the adoption?" Zack asked.

Riley arched an eyebrow. "No one knows. Noah has never complained of any sort of abuse. On the surface he's well cared for. He has therapist visits, designer clothes, and when he doesn't ditch, has the opportunity to attend a private school. Pearson is currently in Veracruz, Mexico, and cannot immediately leave, but the likelihood of Noah being a shifter puts a whole new light on everything."

"Cannot immediately leave," Mo repeated in astonishment. His son was in trouble, homeless, and he was leaving him there?

"He isn't wearing designer clothes now," Asher muttered.

“Why a new light? Because he’s a shifter?” Mo clarified still stunned, but needing to know.

“It’s his age,” Zack murmured. “Because we have to be careful where shifter children live, especially one in a volatile situation like this,” Zack murmured. “If Noah was happy, then his father would be brought into the loop.” He glanced at Riley. “I’m assuming there’s a reason why he hasn’t been?”

Riley nodded. “Pearson doesn’t have any convictions, but one of his businesses is a trucking company that keeps showing up on border patrol reports. Illegal migrants have been found in his trucks on numerous occasions. Sometimes the drivers have taken the fall, and sometimes the undocumented immigrants had hidden in the air flow vents, for example, and were discovered on inspection. One of the immigrants insisted they had been directed to that particular truck and told when and where to hide and had paid a lot of money for the information. Border patrol has suspicions that Pearson is running a lucrative smuggling chain of illegal immigrants, but they have no solid evidence.”

Mo sighed. What a mess for the kid to be in. And because Mo wanted something to do while he was waiting to see what Daniel could find on Khloe, he’d offered to help and try to assess where Noah was at education-wise. Riley had gotten some school report cards. His elementary one had been very promising. Everything had gone to hell when he went to live with his father.

“His dad is shipping a new phone to Noah, and it will be here today, ostensibly so he can talk to his son and vice versa,” Riley added sarcastically.

“Why isn’t he on a plane?” Mo asked, but no one could answer.

So, the next morning, after Mo had insisted after a night on his own for his sanity, and in an effort to try and forget every wakeful minute he’d spent alone in a cold bed,

he'd offered to see Noah.

Mo winced as Noah slammed open the kitchen door and practically threw himself onto a chair. The boy had refused to come out of his room yesterday, and while he seemed to be responding to Alex, he'd clammed up with everyone else. Mo noticed he had a brand-new iPhone in his hand.

Noah folded his arms defensively and sent another scowl in Mo's direction. And Mo instinctively knew whatever they discussed about school wouldn't reach him. He'd been warned not to mention shifters, as it was likely Noah had no clue about his heritage or whichever parent had given him the shifter gene.

"Tell me about your grandma."

Noah's head came up so quickly Mo imagined he could get whiplash. "She's dead."

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Mo nodded. “I never knew mine, any of them. I knew my dad—he’s doing fifteen in Leavenworth—and my baby sister’s missing. No mom. I’d have killed to have a grandparent.”

Noah sneered. “They’re no good. Just die earlier.” And Mo’s heart clenched. The anger, the betrayal, was so stark in Noah’s voice.

“So, tell me about your gran.”

Noah chewed his lip. “She’s dead,” he repeated.

Mo nodded. “That wasn’t what I asked.” Mo wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around Noah, but he knew that wouldn’t work. Noah shrugged.

“She was okay. Strict, but she taught me all sorts of card games.”

Mo changed tack. “I bet it was a pain living with an old lady, though. Bet she kept you on a tight leash.” He could see Noah struggling not to jump to her defense. “Bet you were glad when you could go to your dad’s.”

And he caught it. That flash of agony in his eyes even when his mouth stayed closed, and Mo felt like shit about doing this. But someone had to get through to him or he would be in baby jail soon, and Mo had no idea how that worked for a shifter.

“She was cool. But she died when I was a kid.” He shrugged. Mo didn’t point out that at fourteen, Noah was still a kid.

“I understand you and your dad are having difficulties, which is why you’re here.” And Mo saw something else. Defiance, yes, but a little desperation as well. Almost like Noah hadn’t expected this conversation.

His father had told the social worker it wasn’t working out as he’d hoped. That he really didn’t know what to do with Noah. That maybe they weren’t a good fit, and he was thinking of boarding school, which couldn’t possibly be allowed to happen since Noah was a shifter. The man acted like having a child was something you tried on for size. Like clothes. Noah kept getting into trouble, and he didn’t know what to do with him. And maybe it was good if they had a break. He definitely wouldn’t be back in the country for another four days, and his housekeeper had quit. Mo had seen it many times. Overwhelmed adults. Overwhelmed children. But Mo would bet his life there was something else going on here.

“I’m really interested in what you like to read,” he said, and Noah scoffed. Mo reached for the tablet Riley had given him. “How about you read to me?”

Noah was so grateful for the “out” that he obediently read a couple of passages easily before Mo let him go.

He waited maybe two whole minutes before Riley, Zack and Mattie, and Victor all came trooping back into the kitchen. Riley shut the door behind him.

“I didn’t enjoy that,” Mo said. He’d offered, sure, but it had been too much too soon. The quest for information seemed more important than a child’s wellbeing, which he didn’t like. But he wasn’t a psychiatrist or therapist.

He didn’t care if this was for Khloe. He wouldn’t traumatize a child. “All I did was remind him that his dad thinks he’s too much trouble and everyone good in his life has died.” He felt Victor put an arm around him, but he shook it off. He didn’t deserve to feel better.

“I spoke to Alex while you were in here,” Riley said. “And to explain, Alex has been here since he was eleven. He doesn’t remember ever belonging to a wolf pack, which is a huge thing for wolves. His dad left the pack and apparently took Alex with him, then told Alex years later, as he dropped him off at a police precinct, that he could stay there and eat ice cream until his dad came back for him. That he wouldn’t be long. He never returned. Alex was seven. He spent years bouncing around the system before he was recognized as a shifter, and he was eleven when he came to us.”

Mo’s heart ached for all the kids in the same situation. So many. Too many.

“Alex is convinced something else is going on. He’s been here over six years, and he might be a child, but he has a lot of experience.”

Mo scoffed. “I’m sorry, but experience in what?”

“Being a shifter,” Victor answered suddenly. “Being a child and coping with a huge secret that might get you killed.”

Mo gaped at him. “But—”

“Noah’s ashifter,” Zack repeated. “You need to leave your human sensibilities at the door with this one. Whether Noah can actually shift or not, he has the instincts of a shifter. Imagine being an adolescent on steroids and you’ll get a small idea of what this kid is going through.”

Mo glanced at all the determined faces and knew he was so out of his depth. Maybe he didn’t belong here at all. Mo stood and shrugged. “You all know better than I do.” He headed to his room. He didn’t care what they said. He was leaving. He had a sister to find.

Chapter Twelve

Mostaredattheempty bed. The carefully folded t-shirt he'd been given because he had no clothes with him, and no one had thought—offered even—to get his things from his apartment. Well, he was done. He was going. Daniel hadn't been back, and they were all busy with the new kid...and Mo's heart ached for him. So much anger. They didn't need the problems he was bringing to them. Khloe was his problem. These guys had enough of their own.

The door opened and Zack walked into the bedroom, stopping when he saw Mo standing looking at the t-shirt he'd worn yesterday. Mo let it drop to the bed. "You're leaving." He said it like he was foretelling the end of the world.

Mo looked up. "I have to find Khloe. Hiding here isn't going to help."

"It shames me, but not one of us thought to get your belongings. I guess we're so used—" But Zack cut himself off.

"So used to taking in throwaways?" Mo asked through gritted teeth. "I'm not one of your charity cases. I've been looking after myself all my damn life, and most of that I looked after Khloe as well." How dare he?

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“I don’t blame you for being angry. Hell, spitting mad. We dumped all this on you and didn’t so much as give you a chance to breathe.”

“I don’t need help to breathe,” Mo snapped. “I can breathe just fine. What I need to do is get back to what I should be doing.”

Zack looked distraught and Mo got it. He understood their apparent motives but he couldn't be caught up in all this shifter stuff. “You have Mattie,” Mo said softly. “He has to come first with you, and I wouldn’t expect it any other way.”

“I don’t know what to say, what to do,” Zack whispered, “but please take Victor with you. These shifters are playing for keeps. You need him.”

Mo hesitated. “I don’t know.”

The door opened and Victor prowled in. He seemed to read the room. “What?” he asked, but Mo saw his dark gaze fall on Mo’s pathetic bag of borrowed belongings.

“I’m going to find Khloe,” Mo said, glancing at Victor. Victor frowned, shot Zack a look, but nodded.

“With me.”

At least he hadn’t fought him over it. Mo looked at the bed. “None of this is mine,” he mumbled and walked to the door.

“Mo,” Zack whispered and moved toward him. Mo took a step back, but this time

instead of hesitating, Zack kept going until they were standing almost face to face. Even if Mo had to look a long way up. Any other second in time and that would have been funny, or incredibly hot. Zack took Mo's hand and drew him closer. "Don't ever think that I don't want to fight for you. That I want nothing more than to walk out that door with you."

Victor glanced at him. "Go," Zack choked out, stepping back. "He needs protection." Victor strode toward Zack and wrapped one big hand around Zack's neck, dipping his forehead to Zack's, and Mo took the hit like a blow. "You should stay here with Zack." At that moment they looked like they needed each other far more than Mo needed them.

But Victor didn't even answer Mo. He addressed Zack. "I know this is killing you. I'll keep him safe."

But that meant Mo was splitting them up. What a mess.

"Zack? Mo?"

Hearing Riley shout, Mo opened the door and walked down the stairs. Daniel was standing at the entrance to the kitchen. "I have news," Daniel said and walked into the kitchen with the expectation he would be followed.

Mo was glad to see just Riley and Daniel when he followed them in, but was surprised to see Alex come in behind Victor and Zack, who had followed him. "He's watching a movie with Tyler, and he can't hear," Alex said at Riley's eye-brow lift, "but I want to hear this." Mo knew who Alex was referring to, which was the main reason Mo had to take his problems elsewhere. Daniel leaned back and eyed the seventeen-year-old, who seemed like he was going to be a powerful alpha from what Mo had heard yesterday. "This affects my school, Daniel. I have the right, and you know you can trust me."

Daniel's smile was slow in coming but it did, and he glanced at Riley half in amusement. "Good luck." Riley just rolled his eyes and Alex grinned, battle won, and went to make coffee.

Daniel turned his attention to Mo. "We have eleven more missing teenagers."

Mo gaped.

"What the hell?" Zack said, straightening up. "Since when? Where?"

Daniel held a hand up. "Not in this area but close. That's why they haven't come to my attention, and," he sighed, "three have turned up dead."

Riley leaned forward. "This is on top of the ones we already know about?" Daniel nodded, then thanked Alex for his coffee. Alex delivered some more and plonked cream and sugar down so everyone could help themselves.

"Yes," Daniel said shortly. "But they weren't immediately claimed, which is why I didn't know."

"What do you mean?" Mo asked, equally horrified and confused.

"When shifters die, they revert to human," Victor answered. "There is nothing on any sort of post-mortem that can identify them as shifters."

Mo felt sick. The poor kids.

Daniel turned his gaze on him. "Over the years, our main fight has always been about discovery. That if certain human governments knew about shifters, we would be forcibly weaponized. We've been lucky so far in the fact that the humans that know are as protective of us as a resource as we are ourselves, but that could change any

day with any election, and we are trying to put policies in place that will protect us when that happens.”

Mo couldn't imagine. No, unfortunately he could, and he reached out without thinking and grasped Zack's hand. Victor hadn't sat and was too far away, or he'd be holding onto him too. “Last year,” Daniel continued, “a maniac tried to make his own shifters by transferring the shifter's animal to a human by force. I lost my cat when I was taken and it's only because of Luke that I got a wolf.” He shrugged and smiled. “Took a little adjusting.”

Mo gaped, then realized what he was doing and closed his mouth on a snap. “Luke is the one who can create shifters?”

Daniel hesitated. “You understand how vital it is that he's protected.” Daniel didn't phrase it as a question, as if there was any doubt.

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Mo nodded, still completely stunned. “I won’t—”

“We know,” Victor almost growled, and in the middle of everything, to be trusted with such a huge secret meant an awful lot.

Daniel leaned forward. “This is what we think. We don’t know but we suspect that Rigor Elkin—Khloe’s boyfriend—found out about shifters through your dad. Rigor doesn’t have the brains or the money to take this any further. The kids have to be being held somewhere. Judging from the state of the bodies and the puncture wounds on the ones we found, human law enforcement is discounting the victims as junkies, even though they are often children. Only we know any different.”

Daniel took a breath. “We know recreational drugs don’t work on shifters so there has to be another reason.”

Mo’s head shot up. “But I was told Khloe was a drug addict.”

Daniel shook his head. “If she has shifter genes, that’s impossible. Who told you that?”

“Detective Pauley,” Mo whispered.

Daniel nodded. “I’ve already pulled his records, and I think he’s taking bribes from Rigor,”

Mo sat back in stunned shock, but for the first time hope swelled in him.

“What do you think is the other reason?” Victor asked.

Daniel shrugged. “Our best guess is that they aren’t trying to create new shifters, they’re trying to control the ones they already have. Either someone with insight or someone that has access to confidential information knows that the NATO member nations are discussing a joint shifter peacekeeping force. I’m sure you can imagine there are a lot of governments that don’t want that to happen, or if it does, need to find a way to neutralize it. We think the deaths have been caused by overdoses as they are trying to perfect the drug to control shifters.”

He felt rather than saw Victor’s reaction, as the wolf gave nothing away. Still, the slight straightening of his body was telling, at least to Mo.

“How are they identifying shifters?” Alex asked.

“We looked into the ones that we know about. “They were all athletes, some football players. So physically strong. One guy even carried three classmates to safety when one of the labs exploded.” Daniel sighed. “Simultaneously.”

Mo nearly smiled at the reaction from the others. They all had disapproval down pat.

“Do you know who the spotter is?” Alex asked.

“Spotter?” Zack asked.

“A spotter is someone who is trained to look for something,” Mo explained before Daniel could. “In a high school, I’m guessing ancillary staff, someone not quite as much in the public eye. Someone on the custodian’s staff maybe, or the athletic team, according to the reports you mentioned.”

“He or she would need access to students,” Alex said, “so there during the day, not

after hours like the cleaning crew.”

Daniel sent Mo an admiring look. “If you ever get sick of teaching.” Mo graced him with a smile, and Daniel turned to Alex. “You finish school first.” Alex grinned like it was an old argument.

“So, what’s the plan?” Zack asked.

“We’re getting an agent that looks young enough to be a student,” Daniel said.

“No.” Alex stood, almost defiantly. “I’m already there. Established.” Mo watched in fascination as every other adult around the table objected, but Alex didn’t react. He regarded Daniel. “I’m alreadythere,” he repeated. “I have a ton of friends at school. I live here, so no one is going to think it weird when I interact with Daniel if they’re watching, which we assume they are.”

“I want in,” Victor said immediately. “Find me a job coaching whatever Alex does.”

Alex smirked. “Soccer. Think you can keep up with me?”

Victor nodded once, and Riley groaned. “Why couldn’t you have been a beta?”

Alex just shrugged. “Maybe I wouldn’t have needed you as much if I had been.” The silence, Mo thought, was telling, especially when Riley stood and enveloped Alex in a hug.

“And I can come in to teach self-defense,” Zack insisted. He shrugged. “I can do computers as well.”

Riley snickered, letting go of Alex. “You should be able to after all these years.”

Mo glanced at Daniel, who to Zack looked, resigned. Were they really gonna do this?
Mo swallowed then spoke, “None of you need to do this. It’s—”

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“If you’re about to finish that sentence with it’s my problem”, Zack said, “Then you’d better get used to being part of this family, right the hell now.”

Mo gazed at Zack, and then Victor, who nodded once to show his total agreement.

“I still want my clothes,” he said almost belligerently.

“I don’t know,” Victor drawled. “I’m kind of liking you without them.”

Daniel held a hand up. “We’re not ready yet for plants. I need agents in place, and even I cannot run an undercover op at a school without permission. I would need an awful lot of people’s permission, and it would look suspicious if we suddenly had up to four new staff when no one has left. Let’s leave it on the back burner for now while I do more digging into the ones that are already there.”

“There’s an assistant football coach that’s new,” Alex murmured. “He’s the only one I can think of, but he takes a lot of interest in soccer and general athletics as well.”

Daniel nodded. “On it.”

Chapter Thirteen

It hadn’t been a sense for Mo to go back to his apartment. Even he knew that. He also realized there was no good reason for Victor being with him. The bad guys would never believe they had experienced some sort of romantic awakening while Mo was recovering. It wasn’t realistic.

For humans, anyway.

The next best thing was learning that Christopher was stepping up and taking the kids—nearly all of them—to their friends in Tennessee, where Christopher's wife would be joining them. Alex was already determined to be their eyes and ears in the school if they went that route. Mac was in college and hadn't bothered refusing, just arched an eyebrow when asked. Noah also had to stay, as his father would return in a few days, and as a temporary foster child had state constraints anyway.

Mo was expecting problems with Noah as his life had been on a merry-go-round for seven years, the hero worship he had for Alex was new to the mix.

So the rest of the kids, including Daniel's, left with Christopher and most of their parents. Daniel, Riley, Zack, Victor, Mac, Alex, Tyler, and Noah stayed. Luke decided to go visit Roxanne, Raschid's pregnant mate, as they'd been asking for some advice on the shifter curriculum at the pack school. Asher returned home alone, with his mate and their family firmly ensconced with their grandparents.

Martin Richards seemed to move in, and Mo really liked the ex-FBI agent. His loyalty to the family was absolute and Alex, in particular, seemed to have a lot of respect for his Uncle Martin.

He should have felt guilty driving people out of their home, but if he was honest, he was relieved. He also loved that this family pulled together, circled their wagons, and made sure every child felt heard and valued. He wasn't surprised that Alex had wanted to stay, but that the adults had listened and valued Tyler's arguments had surprised him. Tyler had moved back in and was sticking to Alex. It was like the young alpha had a home beacon system. Zack had explained afterwards that even if they hated it, the kids always got a voice, and Mo loved that.

Really loved it.

In fact, in all ways Zack was becoming more irresistible by the second and while he'd tried to hold back from both of them, he was afraid it was a losing battle. By Wednesday afternoon, the place seemed deserted, and not in a good way. He met Luke for the first time while being warned not to touch him.

Luke had chuckled. "It sounds like I have a deadly disease." Daniel wrapped an arm around him and the kiss should have come with a warning. Now that the kids were away, it was like all bets were off. They still dialed it down for Alex, Tyler, and Noah especially, but as Riley explained, it was a fact of life.

"I want my children to know I find my mate irresistible," Riley said honestly. "It's different for shifters. We don't date unless our self-control is off the charts, or we have other reasons."

Which made Mo really think about Victor and Zack. Any other point in his life he would have welcomed them both with open arms, and then he scoffed because every waking moment since he'd even finished college had been consumed with finding Khloe. He didn't have another life, and not one that he would ever swap while she was safe and home. He'd always been unable to even think of bringing a third person into his shit-show, but Victor and Zack were already there.

And then there was the lure of family. To Mo, who'd never really had it, it was like a siren's song.

In fact, the longer the day went on even after the family clearing out, the more irritated he became. He'd likened them to the freaking Brady Bunch, and he was getting a little sick of their perfection. How dare they be all loving and supportive of each other? Even Victor, who wasn't one of them, had busied himself taking packed bags down to the cars and holding children when it was required. Although even he'd looked a little startled at that. In fact, if it wasn't all a little too perfect, it would have been adorable. Alex had been everywhere like the golden child he was, and even

Noah had been able to keep his snarky mouth in check.

And Mo was sick of it. In fact, when Zack had teared up hugging his son goodbye, he hadn't been able to stand watching it anymore and had gone up to his room, firmly closing the door.

Not that he was sulking or anything. He could hardly be blamed for being a little upset because his life was once again spinning out of control. He told Zack and Victor to go away when they knocked on his door. He was way too hot, miserable, frustrated, and uncomfortable. Hadn't they ever heard of air-conditioning in this place?

Victor woke suddenly, knowing it was the scent of his mate that had jerked him awake. He didn't know how he knew, but the urgency, the utter, craven need made him catapult out of bed and reach for his door to open it, uncaring that he was barely clothed in sleep shorts and only those because of the number of children that had been in the house up to today.

At the same time that he yanked his door open, Victor sensed Zack before he even saw him, who looked like he had erupted from his room maybe three seconds faster. Victor stalked toward Zack, but even as his pupils distended and Victor could smell the scent of welcome on his skin, Zack croaked out, "It's not me."

Victor still had enough presence of mind to catch Zack's words before he slammed his mouth down on the lips he'd ached for. Zack tasted glorious, and he swallowed every delicious moan from the big bear until Victor's cock seemed to thump in time to the pulse rushing the blood to it.

He broke off for air, only to find he had pressed Zack to the wall. Just as he bent his head again, desperate to bite that tantalizing piece of skin on Zack's neck where his blood tempted and pulsed, he heard a tiny whimper from the room next door. Victor's

wolf roared in fury. Their mate. Their mate was hurt. Zack scrambled as fast as Victor to get to the room, and Victor flung the door open. Through his wolf, he could clearly see their mate in bed despite it being dark.

Thrashing and distressed, Victor lunged toward him. Zack moaned. “He’s in heat. Fuck, Victor, he’s in heat. Can you smell that?”

Which was enough of a startling thought to bring Victor up short, even though the alpha wolf in him roared in his head. Victor could practically feel his claws as he fought to be let out, and for too long a moment, he had to stand and just breathe. Not that breathing was much better, as the erotic scent of Mo in full heat made Victor nearly feral.

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“Victor,” Zack hissed, and a bunch of some material hit his chest. Reflexively, Victor caught it and, as Zack crooned and pulled the sticky sheet off Mo’s body, Victor shook his head to clear it.

“Run the shower,” Victor ordered, just as there was a knock on the door. Zack stood, and Victor was surprised at the deep warning growl that rumbled from the bear.

“I know,” came Riley’s voice outside. “We’re getting you coolers filled with everything you’ll need, and extra bedding. Zack, I’ll leave your phone out here as well, in case you need us. I’ll make sure you’re not disturbed.”

Victor nodded, knowing Riley’s empath gifts had alerted him, but taking one look at Zack, sweat covering him, shoulders hunched protectively over their mate, Victor turned and went to start the shower himself. Tepid, since they all needed to cool down a little. His cock was still rock hard, and Victor knew it wouldn’t be going down anytime soon, but his head cleared a little and he grabbed towels then called Zack to bring Mo.

Zack appeared with Mo in his arms once more, both of them naked, Mo blinking dazed eyes open. Much as Victor desperately wanted to take him from Zack, it made more sense if they just got in the shower. “Can you manage this time? I’ll get the things in from outside and change the bed.”

“What’s happening?” Mo whispered, and Victor heard Zack hush their mate and step in the shower. Victor moved. Opening the door, he saw a pile of bedding, both their phones, and some water bottles. He knew Riley would be downstairs getting them some more. Victor quickly stripped the bedding and remade it, regretting that these

sheets didn't smell of Mo, but certain with an accompanying shiver of satisfaction, that the bed would soon smell of all three of them.

Victor stepped back into the bathroom, grabbed an enormous towel, and held his arms out for Zack to deposit Mo into them. They worked seamlessly, Victor's wolf and Zack's bear not seeming interested in challenging the other.

Mo shivered a little, but his skin was still hot. "What's happening?" Mo asked again as Victor dried him, but his words dissolved into a moan as Victor rubbed the towel over his groin.

When he'd dried Mo, Zack took over again so Victor could get the fastest shower on record. As he stalked back into the bedroom, Zack had gotten Mo in bed and was trying to get him to drink a little water.

"Mo," Victor said, because Mo had to understand while they were all at least somewhat coherent.

"I'm sick," Mo whispered.

"No, baby," Zack promised. "You're in heat. This is your body telling you that you want to mate with us."

"But I wanted to mate with you before," he almost whined. "You wouldn't."

"He doesn't mean just sex," Victor said firmly. "He means bonding, and we need your permission."

Mo looked at Victor in surprise. "Bonding? As in..."

"As in you belong to us and we belong to you," Zack said. "You know we're mates."

Mo looked at them both. Victor wanted to promise not to deliver the mating bite, but he couldn't do that. In the middle of a rut, Victor's alpha wolf might take charge.

"And you'll help me?" He winced and pressed a palm to his leaking cock. Zack followed the movement, and the bear's brown eyes grew even wider. Such stunning eyes.

Victor shook his head again to clear it, knowing he was hanging on by his fingertips. "You don't just mean now, do you? You mean to find your sister?"

Mo nodded, seeming past any words.

"I solemnly vow, my mate," Victor said, "to do all I can—" he looked at Zack "—we can, to find Khloe."

Mo groaned, then lay back and opened his arms. They both moved quickly. "It hurts," Mo whispered, and Zack shuffled down to take Mo in his mouth. Victor approved even though he could feel his cock thicken and knew his knot was going to form soon.

He also knew what that meant. Victor knew Mo was aware that omega males could get pregnant, but he couldn't sense the presence of a wolf in Mo, even having a mom as a wolf shifter, but if his body was preparing to knot Mo, maybe his wolf knew better than all of them.

He had a brief image of Mo, utterly gorgeous as usual, but with an added distended belly protecting their unborn pup. Victor snapped, and he reached for Mo.

Victor's alpha howled long and low in his head. A challenge for all other shifters. A declaration.

A promise.

And he leaned down and sank his teeth into Mo's neck.

Chapter Fourteen

Zack opened his eyes to see Mo sprawled naked over his body and he rumbled appreciatively, even if the heat still coming off Mo felt almost like flames licking his skin. He squinted over to his right and took in Victor. He wasn't surprised the man was asleep. He'd looked after them both for hours. Zack could see the mark on Mo's neck from the mating bite Victor had delivered. Mo had been insatiable, and they'd made a good team, but then Victor had taken over and dominated Zack as well.

And he'd loved every second of it. Guilt pricked at him though. He was an alpha. He should be the one taking charge not being taken care of. But he had to remind himself that was how the wolf pack dynamic was so different to bears. Technically, if pressed, all male bears should be alphas, but they didn't form packs, more small family groups.

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And Hunter's Creek was different from all of it.

But that didn't give him an excuse. Zack sighed. His bear hadn't bitten Mo, almost as if he hadn't been driven to. Was it because Mo was human or was the fault with his bear? Would he have even managed to satisfy Mo if he wasn't following Victor's direction? Dominance seemed to roll off the man like water. Zack was more likely to go along with whatever Asher or Riley decreed in the family. And that had never seemed wrong. He more than pulled his weight with the kids and the business. He'd earned his place with them, but what if he didn't with his mates? What if he was lacking? Why did they even need a third wheel? And now Victor had bitten Mo...

He breathed out slowly, taking care not to jostle Mo, and glanced back at Victor, only to see his eyes open and fixed intently on Zack.

"What was that thought?" The question was growly, demanding, and full of heat. Zack felt his body respond. His cock jerked, still swollen with need. Just looking at Victor made heat seem to pour off him.

"Tell me," Victor commanded.

But what could he say? Victor growled again and Mo whimpered restlessly. Zack lifted his head a little and kissed Mo's forehead, the man settling immediately. Victor waited until Mo was fully asleep again, but didn't look repentant.

His gaze remained on Zack, and it was only the intense need to make Victor happy that forced the confession out of him. "I'm not the alpha you are."

Victor didn't respond for a long time and Zack's unease ramped up. He kept his steady hold on Mo though. Victor gestured to Mo. "What are you doing?"

It took Zack a minute because he wasn't sure exactly what Victor was asking. "He needs touch. I get the impression he's a little touch-starved. It settles him."

Victor tipped his head at Mo. "And supposing you were the same kind of alpha as me. Would you think to do that?"

Zack glanced down. His huge hand spread all over Mo's back. "I didn't realize I was doing it."

"No, because giving comfort and silent support comes naturally to you." He leaned forward and brushed his lips against Zack's. "You enjoy being dominated in bed."

Zack's breath caught because when Victor had given him precise instructions with Mo, he'd found it all kinds of hot. Victor brushed a thumb over Zack's lips and Zack trembled. "I think people take one look at you and make assumptions. I also think you don't trust many people to contradict them. You come off as easygoing and affable, but that's because you're hiding."

Zack swallowed and tried to look away but Victor's palm on his cheek stopped him. "It's not a failure. Any form of submission to me is a precious gift. You don't have to hide from me. You never have to hide who you are," he whispered before his lips captured Zack's.

"That is so hot," Mo murmured, and Zack went to break off, but Victor stopped him for a couple of beats as if he was saying the decision to kiss or not was his, and Zack melted a little more. In fact, when Victor drew back, Zack wasn't particularly interested in objecting to anything.

He looked down to see Mo licking his lips. Mo's cock was poking into Zack's abdomen and Mo wriggled a little, trying to get friction. He could see Mo's heat was far from over, but Victor rolled Mo off Zack gently and made him drink a little water. Mo refused after a couple of swallows and trembled, his pupils so huge in his delicate face. "I'd rather take a long drink of you," he whispered.

Which should have been corny not hot, but Zack simply bent his head and nuzzled the skin at the base of Mo's neck until he groaned and leaned back into Zack's arms, arching his neck for better access.

"Lie down, Zack," Victor ordered, and Zack went willingly while Victor held Mo. "Now, my mate, how about you show Zack how talented your mouth is?"

Mo hissed in a breath and if anything, his eyes widened more, and he turned, settling between Zack's outstretched legs and bending his head to take Zack in one swallow.

Fuck.

Zack nearly jackknifed up but clasped the sheet, ripping it instantly, but Zack didn't care. Nothing in his life had ever felt this good.

"That's good," Victor murmured. "Can you stretch a little more? Feel how big he is? How good he tastes?" Victor moved and trailed a finger down Mo's spine, and he moaned around Zack's length, the vibrations completely sinful. Zack didn't know what he'd ever done to deserve such attention—

"Use your tongue around the head," Victor said, and Zack just about saw stars. Then Victor directed Mo to follow every thick vein with his tongue and just as Zack didn't think it could get any better, Victor did something to Mo with his fingers and Mo rocked forward, gagging a little.

Zack felt his claw-tipped fingers sink into the mattress. He was going to come. “Stop,” Victor ordered. Zack was ashamed at the noise of disappointment he made, but Mo lifted up when directed. Victor made Mo lie down and had Zack kneel between Mo’s legs. Zack didn’t need an order to suck Mo’s cock.

Then Zack felt Victor’s hot breath on the back of his neck. “Has anyone ever had this delicious ass?”

Zack faltered and nearly pulled off Mo. He would have if Victor’s hand on his neck wasn’t commanding him to be still. But for the first time his ass almost clenched. The couple of casual hook-ups he’d had with guys had never been like this. Victor was right in thinking people took one look at him and made assumptions. Not that he’d ever dared correct them.

Victor didn’t wait for an answer. Bending down, he thumbed the gorgeous globes of Zack’s ass apart and bent and licked a stripe down his crease. The answering moan was the sweetest music, and he wanted nothing more than to thrust his aching cock into Zack’s welcoming heat, but he had to be gentle. Zack might be a shifter, and could take Victor, but he didn’t want to betray the trust Zack was showing. He wanted to make him feel good. Zack moaned around Mo’s cock and Mo started panting. Little mewling pleas begging Zack. Mo’s mumbles grew louder, coherence had taken an exit sometime before dawn, but judging from Mo’s sudden gasp and shudder, Zack seemed to understand. Knowing their little mate was satisfied, and probably spent, Victor turned his attention to taking care of Zack. He had come in Mo’s ass twice but even though he thrilled at Zack’s submission, he never would have thought Zack would allow this.

Victor marveled again at the heat pouring off Zack and bent to kiss and lick his crease, anchoring Zack by keeping his hands on both of Zack’s hips. “Victor,” Zack whispered, but it wasn’t a stop, the sound carried breathless amazement. Victor wanted more. He’d exulted in Mo’s cries, but now he wanted to hear the same

satisfaction in Zack. A second later when he speared Zack's hole with his tongue, he was rewarded with a cry and a gush of delicious slick that Victor felt on his tongue—

Victor nearly faltered. He had lube ready, because Zack wasn't an omega. He...they...but Zack's second moan snapped his mind back to the present and what Zack clearly needed. Victor replaced his tongue with the head of his cock. He needed inside. Zack needed this. The bear was moving his hips in an almost enticing motion. Instinct ruling now, Victor lined his achingly hard cock up to Zack's entrance and pushed.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Zack almost chanted, mewling and panting for more. Victor slid home as if he belonged and the keening cry from Zack sent him over the edge. He thrust into Zack, snapping his hips, the alpha wolf in him that had managed to maintain a little caution for Mo completely losing that with Zack.

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“More,” Zack gasped, and from somewhere—fuck only knew where—Victor managed to find it. He thrust one more time and struggled to pull back. Stunned, he had a second to realize his knot had formed just before, with a final cry, Zack shuddered and came. Victor’s own orgasm seemed to take over his entire body without warning and for a moment, exquisite pleasure drove every other thought from his mind. He felt his fangs descend and zeroing in on the nearest patch of skin became as vital as breathing. The sudden taste of Zack’s blood combined with the cries from both his mates sent him over the edge. He just had the presence of mind to make sure Zack didn’t collapse on top of Mo when Zack’s trembling arms failed him, and to follow the big man down as they were still joined.

Sometime later, with two contented, sleeping mates beside him, Victor, even exhausted, couldn’t let his mind rest. He had knotted Zack. Knotted him. That didn’t happen unless Victor’s wolf was spurred on by the biological imperative to breed his mate.

And Zack might display submissive tendencies to Victor, but that was character, a need for a certain type of sex, it didn’t suddenly turn an alpha into an omega.

The thought startled Victor so much he reached down inside himself to where his wolf lay quietly, and he could feel the immense satisfaction from the animal. He knew he had pleased two mates and felt the protectiveness pouring off him. Victor’s wolf was as much an alpha as he was, but simpler. He had two mates that were protected and bonded—

And yeah, shit. Victor’s wolf had bitten them both, and he could feel the presence of both Zack and Mo in his mind. They were both sleeping so it was a simple awareness,

and part of Victor exulted in his new reality, part of him—the human part—wondered how on earth they would manage it.

He was surprised Zack hadn't felt the need to bite and claim Mo, another reason Zack's behavior was unusual, or maybe not. Victor knew that appearances were deceptive, of course he did. Had he not just made that exact point with Zack? But taking mistaken assumptions out of the equation, he knew all male bears were alphas. Everyone knew that. He assumed Zack was submitting to him because he was so dominant, but what if the bear wasn't an alpha at all?

He knew this mountain hid many secrets. Luke could turn humans into shifters. Riley was so empathic it verged on being psychic. Asher's tracking abilities were insanely good, Jax was a luna wolf, and Riley's little girl had abilities they had to be careful to keep hidden.

Victor thought harder. He remembered the heat that had poured off Zack. He'd thought it was transferred from Mo, but what if it wasn't? What if Zack had gone into heat? Victor had knotted Zack. His wolf hadn't just dominated him, he had treated him like an omega to be bred.

Was that possible? Could Zack be an omega? And if he was, what exactly did that mean?

Chapter Fifteen

Zack left as sleeping Mo tucked up under Victor's arm. They'd spent two full days and nights in bed and while some of it was a little vague, no, hell, nearly all of it had been vague. He hadn't known bears could go into rut—even alphas like himself—but that must have been what happened. He knew that since Victor had been looking after them both and Mo had been in full heat, they would both be exhausted. Guilt crept in, but Zack pushed it down. Victor had wanted to dominate them both, and what they

enjoyed in the privacy of their bedroom was their business. Victor hadn't apologized after checking that he hadn't hurt him, and he was relieved. That actually made him feel better. Because if Victor didn't regret what had happened then neither would he.

He paused as he reached the bottom step, seeing their office door open a crack. Good, Riley was actually who he was coming to talk to. Apart from the whole 'Mo was mated and knotted and if he was an omega, he could be pregnant,' Zack wanted to get together with all his brothers and work out a plan, or at least find out what had happened while they had been upstairs. A smile curved his lips as he remembered. His mind might be hazy, but his body had felt every second. They were both hotter than hell and, for some reason, were happy to include him.

And always include him from now on because Victor had bitten him. He pushed open the door, just in time to see someone ram the desk drawer shut. Not Riley. "Noah?" Zack smiled his patent, easygoing smile. He'd had no chance to talk to Noah at all and assumed the kid was probably wanting a snoop around while the coast was clear. Not that he blamed him. It was a natural self-protective reaction they were used to with some of the kids.

Noah flushed slightly and mumbled something about paper. Zack pointed to the rather obvious packs of plain paper for the printer. "Do you want lined as well?" he pointed to another shelf with large note pads on it. Noah mumbled again, grabbed a notepad, and ducked out. Zack reminded himself that the best thing was patience. He felt sorry for the kid, especially after being thrown into this mess. Foster care was hard enough without him thinking he wasn't safe from another type of threat.

Zack pulled the door closed behind him as he left the office, then headed for the kitchen. He could smell the coffee and while his brothers had kept them hydrated and provided snacks, he was hungry and desperately needed a caffeine fix.

He grinned as Riley looked up when he walked in and rolled his eyes at the whistle

from Asher. He reached over and shook hands with Martin, ridiculously pleased to see the now ex-FBI agent. Martin had retired, settled into their small community, and was kept really busy with being one of the kids' favorite uncles. He helped Luke and Oliver over at the school, and took many classes himself with the older children. Daniel was always thankful Martin kept an eye on things for him with his mates while he worked.

"It's alive," Asher mocked, looking him up and down. "We were worried. Thinking of sending in reinforcements."

Zack wasted no time grabbing a mug and filling it. "As I recall, you guys were a good three days yourselves and there were only two of you." He smirked. "Just goes to show you some of us can get the job done quicker when the experts handle it." He looked up when he didn't hear an immediate smart comeback from Asher or the others laughing at his teasing. He glanced at them. No one was laughing. "What? Can't take a joke?" He took another mouthful. His brothers always ribbed each other. It didn't mean that they wouldn't ever have each other's backs.

Asher tried to stifle a laugh. "Zack, do you know what day it is?"

Zack squinted in thought. "Thursday, Friday? What does it matter?" Then he sobered. "Everyone okay?" Shit, Mattie.

"They're all fine," Riley hastened to reassure him. "Having a blast camping just outside of Knoxville. There's a huge lodge there as well. Dad sent a ton of pictures, and Mom's having the time of her life. They're talking about it being an annual thing. I'll text you the pictures."

"Knoxville?" Zack frowned. "How the hell did he get there that fast?" He'd have had to drive nearly straight through, and with all the kids?

Martin put his own coffee down. “Zack, it’s Monday. They left last Monday. You guys have been upstairs for six nights.”

Zack was so shocked he nearly dropped his mug, but then irritation replaced it. “Sure. Very funny.”

“I swear,” Asher said, sobering up. “I wouldn’t joke about that. You guys were good to me when I brought Sai home.”

Sai—Asher’s mate—had been placed into the regular foster system without anyone realizing he was a shifter, and more so a male omega. Asher rescued him from a human psychiatric facility and Sai went into heat twenty-four hours later. As they hadn’t realized male omegas were even possible then, it had been a huge shock to them all. Luckily Asher hadn’t managed to screw everything up, and he and Sai were both silly in love, mated, and had given him another niece and nephew. He knew they were hoping for more when Sai next went into heat.

“We’re not playing around,” Riley said. “That’s what was with all the teasing. You guys have been up there six days.”

Zack gaped at Riley.

“Sorry,” Asher said quietly, genuinely, and Zack nodded. He remembered satisfying Mo. He remembered every delicious order Victor gave him. He remembered the bite... but then everything had gotten a little hazy. How the hell could he have lost at least three days?

He got up and went to shut the kitchen door, remembering Noah snooping around and, conscious of Noah, Tyler, Mac, and Alex all being able to hear them, he pulled out his phone to text them. Riley reached over and stopped him, shaking his head. “Office.”

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Zack nodded. It was soundproof, so they all four trooped out. Alex was sitting in the playroom with a book. “We’ve got some calls to make,” Riley said. “We’ll be in the office. Let Zack know if Mo or Victor come down.” He paused. “Talk later.”

Alex nodded, knowing they were going into the office so they had privacy from shifter hearing, and that Riley had just told him he would explain why later.

“Where’s Noah?” Zack asked, expecting him to be with Alex.

“Upstairs with Tyler on his PlayStation. They both have homework to start after that.”

“You good?” Riley asked. Alex grinned mischievously and cracked his knuckles.

Zack chuckled and followed the other guys into the office, each taking a seat. “You’d better update me.”

“We’ve told the school the family is coming down with flu,” Martin said. “Mo included. We have at least another week before the school might wonder where they are. Daniel’s doing his best, but we haven’t got any further.” Martin paused and Zack picked up on it immediately.

“What?”

“Two more of the missing kids have turned up dead,” Riley said.

“Shit,” Zack groaned.

“The only good thing is that no new ones, as far as we know, are missing.”

“Yeah, but didn’t Daniel say that these kids were the vulnerable ones? The ones people might not miss immediately.”

“Raschid went ballistic with his pack. Told them all that what had happened to Amelie Connors was the fault of the entire pack, not just her dad. Reminded them if she hadn’t been a hybrid, her absence would have been noticed immediately. Put the blame squarely on his and the pack’s shoulders and said that if he ever heard or saw hybrids being treated any differently, then the wolf at fault would be shunned and expelled from the pack. He’s bringing who he considers to be at-risk pack members into the pack house until this is sorted.”

Zack breathed out a sigh. Kids being hurt always sickened him, especially seeing the state some of them were in when they arrived in Hunter’s Creek. Then something else occurred to him. “How come we still have Noah? Wasn’t his dad getting back last week?”

Martin made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded like it had come from his wolf. “The bastard has gotten held upon business. He’s back today and coming to see Noah here, along with Helen Reynolds. Helen says they won’t know until he arrives if he’s a shifter or not.”

“Noah's still not talking?” Zack asked.

“No, but he’s keeping out of trouble, mainly because of Alex. I know he only had one session with Mo, but he seems to have taken to him. He’s asked every day where Mo is.” Martin continued. “Alex has told us he explained shifters and heats to him.”

“Alex did?” Zack repeated in astonishment.

“We didn’t know what he knew,” Riley added, “and I’m sure he thought we’d buried your bodies in the yard or something, so Alex and Mac gave him the shifter version of the birds and the bees.”

Zack winced. Asher shrugged. “I think it was better coming from them. I also think he’s got a huge case of hero worship for Alex.”

Zack scoffed. “Every kid we have has a huge case of hero worship for him. It’s like he’s a kid magnet. I can’t wait to see what he does after college.”

“FBI, so he says,” Martin said proudly. “Daniel’s taken him to work a few times, and they’re thick as thieves over colleges.”

“I thought he wanted to stay local like Mac.” Christ, he felt like he’d been missing six months, not six days.

“He does, and he’ll graduate with most of his AA credits under his belt. Daniel’s already talked to him about Quantico, and he’ll have to travel for that,” Riley pointed out.

Zack knew Alex was interested in a bachelor’s in cybersecurity, which meant his two-year job experience—another FBI requirement—could be done with the family.

Riley’s phone sounded with an alert and Zack realized he’d left his upstairs. “Alex says Helen Reynolds just called. She’ll be here with Pearson in an hour.”

Zack stood. “I’ll take some coffee upstairs and warn Victor.” Not that Victor needed any warning.

Martin and Asher left, but Riley lingered, then pushed the door closed. Zack groaned. “Not in the mood for the third degree.”

“Wasn’t gonna give you one,” Riley said. “Just wanted to say I’m really happy for you.”

Zack smiled despite himself. “You had to shut the door to tell me that?”

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“I just wanted to check that you were okay and if Victor was treating you right.” Zack gazed at his twin in confusion.

“Of course. Why—”

“Because we can see your bite mark.”

“Shit.” Zack had forgotten. “Everyone?” he asked weakly. They’d all seen it? Alphas nearly always bit their omega, not the other way around.

“Asher would never poke at anyone’s sore spots and Martin won’t understand the significance.” Riley shrugged. “None of my business. Just wanted to check in to make sure it was...consensual.” Even Riley winced at the word as Zack felt the flush heat his skin.

“I—” Zack sat back down. “Yes, it was, but I didn’t expect to want it.” Christ, could this conversation be any more uncomfortable?

Riley slapped him on the back good-naturedly. “I really don’t want details, trust me. I just wanted to check in. Make sure we didn’t have an alpha wolf to beat up.”

Zack grinned and stood back up. “Nah, I think Alex could take him.”

“The disturbing thing is,” Riley agreed. “It’s not going to be long until you’re probably right.”

Mo wasn't sure how he was supposed to stay awake for this meeting, but apparently Noah had requested him, so coffee it was. He hadn't even had a chance to process what had happened during their weeklong sex-fest, and guilt swamped him. If Khloe hadn't gone missing, he never would have met Zack or Victor and it was wrong that anything tied to her disappearance could make him so happy. Because he was. Both his mates were incredible. It was true that he loved Khloe and had spent a long time trying to find her, but this family was all he'd ever wanted when he finally acknowledged his own wasn't gonna cut it. Khloe would love them as well, or at least the Khloe he remembered would.

He looked up as Noah came in and sat down just as he heard a car in the driveway. "Just remember, nothing you feel is wrong."

Noah scoffed.

"And if you need some backup with whatever decision you make, just squeeze my hand."

"And sing songs?" Noah said.

"I see the sarcasm is strong with this one," Mo said in his best Yoda voice and for a moment Mo got a genuine smile. Or he did until Riley walked in.

"I'm subbing for Asher, who would normally take point, but as he's been away, we thought this would work better."

Noah shrugged as if he didn't give a crap, but Mo knew differently. He knew Noah was all bluster and defiance because he was nursing his heart, and Mo doubted his presence was going to help. He didn't know why Noah kept asking for him because the couple of times they'd spoken, Noah had seemed resentful. In fact, the only person... Mo opened his mouth before he judged the irregularity of it. "Noah, would

you like Alex to sit in? He wouldn't be able to participate, but—"

"Yes," Noah blurted out and without a word, Riley got up and left. In a few seconds, Alex returned with Riley and deliberately walked around the table to sit next to Noah.

"If Noah's father objects to your presence, you will have to leave."

Alex nodded once, then got up and helped himself to juice, getting one for Noah as well without asking, and setting it down. Mo just had time to take his seat as Asher showed Helen Reynolds and a man Mo knew was Sean Pearson into the kitchen, before Asher then left. He greeted Pearson friendly enough, but he didn't stand and neither did Riley. He was too busy watching for Noah's reaction. It was telling when he leaned a fraction closer to Alex.

He caught the subtle shake of Victor's head to tell him Pearson wasn't a shifter.

Then he acknowledged how obvious it was that Pearson was his father. One blue and one golden brown eye. Mo sighed internally.

Helen started. "Mr. Pearson, we're here to discuss the best thing for Noah going forward. Your business travelling and long absences are, I admit, my biggest concern." The only reason family services had any sway was because Pearson had on paper abandoned Noah.

Sean Pearson barely so much as flicked an eyelash, which to Mo seemed very strange. He expected the businessman to seem insulted when Helen didn't pull any punches, and apart from an off-hand greeting hadn't so much as tried to hug Noah. "Yes," he said mildly. "I realize I'm not in the position to offer the most stable home life for—" he hesitated, "a troubled teen, but as he is my son, I had no choice."

Mo gaped and shot a stunned look at Riley. The man just told Noah he was an

obligation, and nothing more, and if what they suspected had happened with Noah's foster-mom was true, Pearson was lying. He sensed Alex move slightly and knew if Alex was going to become the alpha everyone expected him to be, his protective instinct toward Noah would be off the charts.

Even Helen seemed a little taken aback. Riley cut in smoothly. "Then perhaps we can offer a compromise, with Noah's consent, obviously. As you know, Mr. Pearson, we are a fully registered foster home and have been for over twenty years. My suggestion is that Noah live here while your business commitments remain so pressing."

Helen frowned and Mo understood. People couldn't use the foster system as simple childcare when it was convenient, but Noah was a shifter and as such, needed to be with other shifters. Helen knew that. He assumed that while he'd been otherwise engaged upstairs, Noah still hadn't shifted, which meant they still didn't know what type of animal he was.

And for a long moment Mo wondered how his life had changed so much that he wasn't shocked that Noah would become an animal, but was more concerned with what type he would change into.

Sean Pearson flicked a glance at Noah, then seemed to focus on Alex. "I'm sorry, but why is another child here?"

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Mo felt Alex stiffen and could imagine what it was costing him to stay quiet.

“Alex is one of our permanent residents, and now a very much-loved adopted son,” Riley said. “I’m sure you’re aware that stable peers are instrumental in helping a new child settle in a strange environment.”

Pearson sneered. “That’s what you do here, huh?”

Mo saw Riley tense at whatever insinuation Pearson was going for, but this time Helen interrupted. “Hunter’s Creek has the full backing and trust of Montana Family Services.”

“Fine,” Pearson muttered and stood up. “What do I need to sign?”

Mo didn’t get angry very often. He’d been in many meetings just like this one. As a reading specialist, he often saw a different side of a child because he spent so much one-to-one time with them, and so he was often included in case management meetings. He’d seen parents that didn’t give a damn. He’d seen parents that loved their children but struggled with their own demons. He’d seen parents that were at their wit’s end because of whatever physical, emotional, or psychological problems their child was experiencing. He’d seen those that genuinely loved their kids and just needed help.

And he’d seen entitled assholes like Sean Pearson.

Mo stood and shot a look at Alex, who immediately understood and nudged Noah. “Let’s get out of here before we tackle homework, huh?”

Noah seemed frozen for a few seconds until he turned and followed Alex out. Neither son nor father said goodbye.

Alex led Noah straight to the mudroom and started pulling on boots. He knew Noah had been given a pair and didn't bother issuing instructions. Noah seemed to wait it out for a very long time, but then sighed and sat, pulling on his own boots. "Where're we going?"

Alex stood. "Out of here. I need to run, and I'm pretty sure you need to as well."

"Run?" Noah whispered, a wealth of meaning in his words.

Alex didn't bother with a useless confirmation. Noah knew exactly what he meant, and he was sick of Noah pretending he didn't. They both walked outside, and Alex jogged past Daniel's house and to the open forest. As soon as they were clear from prying eyes, he stopped and turned.

"I just need to know if you've shifted before."

Noah stared at him, but didn't attempt to pretend like he didn't understand. "Never properly."

Alex studied him. "What does that mean?"

"It means I was forced," Noah bit out.

Alex nodded. "By an alpha?"

Noah shuffled a little. "Yes," he said quietly.

"I bet that hurt," Alex said. It would. Your first shift was scary and painful. Having it

forced would be tons worse. He knew he was skating on thin ground. But he'd been here nearly seven years. Seen kids come and go. His best day was the one when he realized he was here to stay, and he wanted to give that to Noah.

And more. He needed to talk to Riley, or maybe Christopher, but Christopher wasn't here. "I hated this place when I first got here."

Noah stayed silent, even though Alex expected a sarcastic comment.

"In case you didn't know, I'm a wolf. Dad left the pack after Mom died and took me with him, then decided to leave me at a human police station. He said he'd be back, and that was over six years ago. I hung around in a group foster home until someone scented me and I was immediately transferred here. And I hated every second of it. I was convinced if I moved, Dad wouldn't be able to find me when he came back." Alex huffed. "Dumb, huh?"

Noah didn't respond.

"So, I'm guessing you have a choice, although I think your dad's a dick, but I understand he's your only blood relative."

Noah still didn't reply. Alex waited. Christopher had taught him patience, and it had been a hard lesson. He knew he was an alpha. He knew he wanted nothing more than to protect Noah. They were both kids in the eyes of most people, even though his eighteenth birthday was in four weeks. Noah certainly was. But Alex knew Noah was also something else that he didn't know what to do about.

"Let's run," he said and stripped, shifting smoothly. He watched Noah gape and knew he was looking at a large wolf, larger than most, large even for an alpha. Soon, when everything was back to normal, he was going to talk to Raschid as well. See what he thought. If he was honest, he was feeling more and more the call for pack. And he

didn't know exactly what that meant. He had no intention of leaving his family, but it was almost as if when Noah had walked through the door, Alex had scented pack. His pack. The urge to protect Noah was nearly overwhelming, but for now, Noah needed to connect with his animal. Alex waited and watched. He could tell the pull from Noah's animal was strong, but Noah was afraid. In an instant, Alex reverted back to human.

"You don't have to do anything. I wanted to show you the woods, but we can do that on two legs, not four."

Noah tried to hide the tremor, but Alex felt it. "We can also walk back," he said gently.

"I want to," Noah rasped, "but it hurt so much last time."

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Alex nodded. "It would have. No one should have their first shift commanded by an alpha." He knew it hadn't been his dad as he wasn't a shifter, but he'd like to know who had done it.

"But what if I can't?"

Alex leaned against the nearest tree. "Close your eyes." He tried desperately to tamp down the satisfaction when Noah obeyed, knowing the feeling came from his alpha wolf. "Tell me what you can hear."

Noah frowned but stilled. "There's mice under the trunk of the tree to your right."

"Very good," Alex praised. "Now tell me what you can smell."

"Grass. Trees," Noah said, then inhaled. "An animal to my right."

"Good," Alex praised again, wondering if he would scent the deer. "Can you tell what it is?"

Noah dropped a hand to his belly and Alex almost smiled, but then he saw a quick swallow of revulsion, which meant he was hungry, but maybe not a meat-eater. "Deer?" Noah said cautiously.

"Yes," Alex confirmed. "How many?"

Noah opened his eyes in shock. "How on earth would I know that?"

“Different, but nearly the same scent signatures. Close your eyes and try.”

Noah obeyed. Opened his mouth but closed it.

“What was that thought?” Alex asked.

“I thought three, but one seems smaller, if that’s even the right word. Like the scent is tiny.”

“That’s great,” Alex enthused. “It’s because one’s a fawn, and I can’t tell you how difficult it is to tell the difference between a similar scent in a smaller animal and the same scent but at a greater distance.” Alex grinned and was pleased at Noah’s answering smile.

“I heard the guys say you were going to be an alpha,” Noah stated abruptly.

Alex kept the easy smile on his face. “I’m already an alpha,” he said honestly. “I have a ton to learn, and I want to be as good an alpha as Raschid.”

Noah glanced down and then back. “But don’t you need a pack to be an alpha?”

Alex shrugged. “Yes and no. Victor is an alpha but chooses to submit to Raschid.” Noah seemed to think about that.

“Although,” Alex added. “I might have lots to learn, but I’m not submitting to anyone.” He knew that. Felt it in his bones.

Noah’s gaze was steady. “When you have your pack, will it just be wolves?”

“No,” Alex confirmed, knowing they were finally there. “I will be alpha to every shifter who submits to me.”

“I—I’m a deer,” Noah whispered, and Alex smiled. “My—” But Noah clamped his mouth shut.

“That’s great,” Alex said, guessing what he’d been going to say but ignoring it. “Deer can run really fast, probably faster than me.”

Noah looked skeptical, and Alex remained silent. He’d sensed the boy had kept his animal hidden for far too long and understood being scared. Of everyone, he should know. He stepped forward and let his hand fall gently on the younger boy’s back. “Be free, Noah. Let him out.”

Noah gasped and shuddered, curling into himself, and then arching his back as if something else was controlling him. Alex understood. He could teach him control. He could teach him to love his animal, love himself. It was a lesson he’d finally learned.

With a cry Noah grew fur, but what happened next shocked even Alex. For a moment Noah’s head changed shape dramatically, even before the rest of his body altered, and Alex watched in stunned silence as Noah finally stood before him, trembling, but fully in his shifted form.

Alex knew deep down that his first reaction would determine everything else. He was Noah’s alpha. He’d felt that the second Noah had walked through the door. Slowly, carefully, he reached up and smoothed the small patch of fur on Noah’s head.

The small patch between two massive antlers.

Because Noah Watkins had just transformed into one of the rarest shifters on the planet. Noah shook his fur out and bent his head, and Alex cupped his muzzle and instinctively accepted his submission.

Submission of the only true white stag he'd ever seen.

Chapter Seventeen

Noah shook in his shame and his misery. He desperately wanted Alex to accept him. He wanted to belong to his pack. There was a need in Noah that Alex filled that he didn't understand, but he wanted it desperately. Was this what family felt like? He had a similar feeling with Mo, and he knew where the shame came in. He wasn't just risking random adults now, he was betraying his alpha, and he had no idea what to do about any of it. His dad had proved he had the ability to hurt people he cared about. And Dad was the only one that knew what he was after bringing in a scary man that forced Noah to shift. When he'd seen he was just a deer he'd turned his nose up, and thankful he wasn't going to be of any use as a shifter, Noah had been happy.

But now he was being forced to do something else instead, but he wouldn't, couldn't let the one he was protecting be hurt, but he didn't think he could protect him anymore on his own.

They ran. The run was freeing, even if it didn't bring him the answers he needed. Then Alex's wolf paused on an outcrop of rock and lifted his face to the heavens, howling.

Peace came over Noah like a blanket. The alpha howl challenged everyone. Alex could protect him and was announcing it to the world. Alex turned to him as if he had spoken out loud and gazed at him as if he knew. It was time he told everyone. Noah returned the gaze as if a great weight had been lifted off him, and he followed Alex through the woods and on to Hunter's Creek. Alex gathered up their clothes just

before the woods ended and handed Noah's to him, making sure he was dressed before they walked back in on two legs. He realized Helen's car had gone and knew only the family was there.

Alex paused just before the door. "You're my pack and you're safe. Let's go explain."

They were all sitting at the kitchen table when Noah followed Alex in, and he paused until Alex took his hand and sat him down next to him. Asher, Riley, Zack, Mo and Victor all saw the move but didn't say a word. Martin got up and poured coffee and juice.

When everyone was sitting, Alex looked up and met everyone's gaze. "Noah is pack, and I'm his alpha."

The announcement was met with various astonished gazes, which Noah wondered about, all except for Martin's disapproving one. "Alex," Martin said cautiously. Even Mo hadn't said a word.

But Alex simply turned to the man and spoke. "I know how old we both are, and this isn't about that."

He met Martin's gaze unflinchingly until Martin nodded once and Noah felt the tension leave the room. Alex glanced at him. "I think it's time you explained. I trust them all."

It was time. He had been carrying this for so long. "I have a brother." Noah whispered. "Well, half-brother."

Riley frowned. "That's never come up on your records."

Noah twisted his hands together. “No.”

“Where is he?” Zack asked very gently.

“At my dad’s. He doesn’t walk or move so good.”

“How do you know he’s your brother?” Mo asked gently.

Noah ducked his head. “Because Pearson told me. Plus,” he looked up and waved at his face and knew everyone understood the eye color. “He’s three years older than me. It was Jacob that told me about shifters, because Pearson had found out when Jacob’s mom shifted when she was hurt.” Noah sighed. “He had these wild parties for his business friends, and she was one of the girls. Apparently, one of the guys slapped her real hard, and she fell and broke her wrist, and she shifted. Pearson ended up keeping her until after Jacob was born, then paid her and she left.”

“How does Jacob know all this?”

“Because our dad told him,” Noah whispered, his voice cracking. “Jacob told me Dad wanted him to see if he was going to shift, but he can’t.”

“Jacob is your half-brother? Pearson’s son?” Alex double checked.

Noah nodded. “But he can’t shift. He’s in a wheelchair. Something happened when he was born, something bad. I don’t know what, because Jacob never knew. My dad keeps him practically locked up.”

“You’re doing really well,” Mo encouraged.

Noah took a breath. “When I first went to live with Dad, he tried to be cool. Threw money around like he cared. Games, phone, clothes. Lasted a month until we got to

the questions...the hints that he knew something I didn't. I didn't have a clue what he meant. He was asking lame questions about how fast I could run. Did I feel weird in my own body. That sort of thing."

"But Pearson isn't a shifter," Victor said, "so he must have thought you inherited it from your mom."

"I was too busy wanting to get away to appreciate anything," Noah said. "I refused to wear the clothes he bought me. Ditched the school he tried to send me to. This went on for months with Pearson gone a lot until he came back for a longer time and two guys came around." He paused. "They smelled weird to me, but I didn't know why."

"Shifters," Riley said. "It's instinctual, even if you don't know the breed of shifter. That only comes with experience."

Noah swallowed a gulp of juice and really wished he was somewhere else. He could feel his breaths getting shorter. The need to run, which would soon get overpowering. And by "run" he didn't mean shift, he just meant get the hell out of there.

Alex turned to him. "Just tell it to me. No one else is listening."

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Safety washed over him. He was safe, wherever Alex was. He knew that instinctively, and the urge to run dissipated. And he decided he could tell Alex so he turned to face him. It didn't matter if anyone else heard. "One of the guys never tried to hide what he was. He just loomed over me and told me he was my alpha, then commanded me to shift." He felt the winces around the room but kept his gaze on Alex. "It hurt."

Alex nodded. "It would, but this afternoon didn't, did it?"

Noah shook his head.

Alex smiled. "You're doing really well." Alex's words warmed Noah and gave him the courage to carry on.

"Dad told me I was just a deer." Noah's face flushed. "I was glad when he was disappointed, and he left me alone for a while."

Alex looked up and around the room. "He's a white stag."

Noah felt the shock on everyone's faces running through his body and would have crumpled if not for the steady weight of Alex's hand. "Does that mean anything?"

Riley smiled. "There's not many of you is all, but nothing to worry about. And I'm guessing that's why you haven't been eating much." Mo shot a puzzled look at Zack.

"Vegetarian," Zack supplied.

"I eat meat," Noah said, a little defensively. "It just doesn't sit okay in my stomach."

Asher nodded. “It’s an easy fix and nothing to worry about.”

“Dad didn’t seem to care after that, and for ages nothing happened, but then I got curious.”

Zack huffed, but it was done with a smile on his face.

Alex seemed to be his center. He didn’t care about the others. “Go on,” Alex encouraged.

Noah sighed. “I could smell something after that shift. Something I couldn’t identify, but something I had to discover, and eventually snooping about—because his house is insanely big—I found another floor I didn’t know existed.”

“Sean Pearson’s house was built in 1912,” Asher said. “It was an old farmhouse originally, but the land was sold and the house was remodeled extensively. Pearson bought it twenty years ago when the original owner died with no immediate family,” and Noah looked at him in surprise. Asher grinned. “Five minutes on the internet if you know where to look.”

Noah returned the smile and felt better. He didn’t know Asher very well, but he seemed cool, and he didn’t make Noah feel like he’d done something wrong, and it made him brave enough to carry on. “Well, I found Jacob.”

Everyone was silent a moment and then Mo spoke. “I can’t believe how hard that must have been.”

Noah shook his head. “It was hard to keep it a secret, but Jacob was amazing.”

Mo nodded in agreement. “I have a sister, but I’ve always wanted a brother as well.”

“We met in secret, or I thought we did. Turned out he had hidden cameras.”

“Pearson?” Victor asked.

“Yep. Jacob’s in a wheelchair like I said. We talked for what seemed like forever. As soon as his nurse left, I would go up, and this carried on for weeks.”

Asher looked up from his phone. “There’s no Jacob Pearson registered anywhere.”

“Jacob said he didn’t exist,” Noah explained. “That he remembered his mom, but Pearson had paid her to go. He knew about shifters, but didn’t know why he was in the wheelchair.”

“So just to confirm,” Martin clarified. “Same father but different moms?”

Alex pushed his juice toward him and he took a couple of swallows, but nodded agreement.

“We were chatting one day and Sean just walked in through this panel in the wall. Like a secret door. I could hear the bottom door open, and I had time to hide, but he caught us from there.” Noah gulped, and he struggled to stay calm. “He left Jacob in his chair without a nurse to care for him for two days.” It had been a mess. He was sure from the sharp inhales that he didn’t need to spell it out. “They made me watch it on the camera, but they locked me in. I couldn’t go to him. Couldn’t help.”

It wasn’t just Alex this time, but Mo who got up and folded his arms around him, which made the burning in Noah’s throat way worse. “They said I had to come here,” he whispered. “Get you to like me.” He looked at Mo, and Mo smiled.

“Well good, because that was easy. We do like you.”

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Noah just gulped again, then jumped up and fled to the bathroom and Mo watched as Alex pulled his shoulders back and stared at Riley, Asher, and Zack. Mo wanted to intervene, but he knew this was about shifter children and he was out of his depth.

“I’m an alpha,” Alex started. “And I know Noah is pack. I also know he’s fourteen.”

Riley smiled. “And you’re not eighteen for another month.”

“Which is why I’m not in a hurry.” Alex paused. “I thought I might talk to Raschid.” He glanced at Victor when he said that, and Victor inclined his head.

“I can advise you on how to navigate submitting to another alpha. It takes a strength—”

“I won’t submit to another alpha,” Alex said. Not in any way a challenge, simply a matter of fact. He wasn’t even defiant, simply implacable. He turned to Martin. “And as I said, I’m fully aware of how old we both are, so you don’t need to worry about that. I just need to keep him safe. Rescue his brother,” Alex added.

Martin glanced at Riley, seeming out of his depth.

“I know,” Riley said. “I know you have his safety and wellbeing at heart. As an empath, I know that better than anyone. Just...”

Asher winced, but Alex’s gaze never wavered, “He has a serious case of hero worship for you.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Alex rejoined. “He recognizes his true mate even if he doesn’t know what that means.”

Mo watched as each shifter looked stunned but then nodded in acceptance. “It’s going to be incredibly hard for you,” Riley said.

“Not really,” Alex rejoined. “I just need to keep him safe and happy. I won’t claim him until he’s ready. He has a lot to work through and he needs to enjoy being a kid first, because I don’t think he’s had much of that.”

Martin leaned forward. “Alex, you’re still a kid.”

“I’m an alpha,” Alex rejoined. “And I’m lucky enough to live in a place with people who love me for that. I’ve had six years to grow. Don’t for one second think I wouldn’t allow my mate, who is the most important person to me in the entire universe, to do the same.”

Martin leaned back and gave him a rueful smile, then glanced at Riley. “You sure this kid’s only seventeen?”

Everyone laughed, but as Mo took in the faces around the table, he thought that they all looked a little shell-shocked, even for shifters.

Alex got to his feet. “I’m going to make sure he’s okay. Let me know when you have a plan.”

Chapter Eighteen

Victor watched Alex leave to find Noah, and it took everything in him not to follow. The alpha in him wanted to hunt down Sean Pearson and tear him apart for what he’d done to Noah and Jacob. The strategist in him knew they needed to be smarter than

that.

"We need to retrieve Jacob immediately," Victor said, his voice low and controlled despite the rage simmering beneath the surface. "If Pearson suspects Noah's loyalties have changed, Jacob's life might be in danger." He glanced around. "It's obvious he's a plant and when Pearson doesn't get whatever info he's hoping for, Jacob will be a target."

Riley nodded. "I'll contact Daniel. We need to coordinate with him before making any moves."

"Martin, can you get us floor plans for Pearson's house?" Victor asked. "If there's a hidden floor, we need to know exactly where it is and how to access it."

"On it," Martin confirmed, already pulling out his tablet.

"Something else," Riley said. "I know Alex won't leave but I think it's getting too risky for Mac and Tyler to stay."

"Will Mac go?" Asher asked doubtfully.

"He will if it's to help Tyler," Riley said. "I know Roxanne will take them both today, and Luke is already there."

Mo reached across the table and squeezed Victor's hand. The touch grounded him, pulling him back from the edge of his anger. "Noah trusted us with this information. We can't let him down."

"We won't," Victor promised, turning his hand to capture Mo's fingers. Through their bond, he could feel Mo's concern, his determination. He glanced at Zack and felt the same fierce protectiveness reflected there. His mates were as committed to helping

these boys as he was.

Asher looked up from his laptop. "I'm going through Pearson's business records. High profit margins across the board, but his trucking company seems to skirt the barely supporting itself line."

"Which makes sense if it's just a front for human trafficking or smuggling undocumented immigrants," Zack said.

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“Do we have anything to tie Pearson to Rigor Elkin?” Martin asked.

Victor glanced at him. “You think Pearson might be the brains and the money behind all of this?” It made sense. Martin nodded.

"It fits. Sean Pearson has the business connections, the money, and the international travel schedule that would make him perfect for running this operation. Rigor Elkin is just muscle."

“We need to keep Noah out of sight,” Riley said. “Warn Alex if he doesn’t already know, which I think he does.”

"I agree, but why, apart from the obvious?" Martin asked.

"He's a white stag," Riley said, his expression grave. "One of the rarest shifter types. In the old stories, white stags were considered magical, capable of leading hunters to other worlds or granting wishes."

"You think Pearson believes that?" Mo asked skeptically.

Riley shook his head. "No, but there are people who would pay a fortune for something that rare. And if they're experimenting on shifters, a unique specimen would be invaluable."

Victor frowned. “But that doesn’t make sense. If Noah is rare and therefore valuable, why on earth would Pearson let Noah out of his sight, especially to come here with the risk he’d likely shift.”

The kitchen fell silent as they considered the implications.

“You’re right,” Riley said. “It makes zero sense.”

“Son?”

They all looked at Zack’s phone. While they’d been talking, Zack had called Christopher, and the phone was on speaker. “Dad?” Zack said. “Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

Riley leaned forward. “You have to be somewhere no one can hear.” Victor knew that meant away from shifter ears.

“Hang on,” Chris said, and they heard him move, a door open and close. “Okay, all the master suites are soundproof, and I’m on my own.”

Zack quickly brought Christopher up to speed on Noah and Alex, and Noah’s shift.

“Wow,” Christopher said appreciatively.

“We just don’t understand why, when they knew what Noah was, how they’d let him go. Especially with us.”

Christopher chuckled. “That’s because they don’t know.”

Victor spoke up. “But they had an alpha force a shift on him.”

“Yes,” Christopher agreed, “but in the wild, a white deer is due to a condition called leucism, a genetic trait that causes a gradual reduction in pigmentation.”

“So, he just wasn’t old enough when the alpha turned him?” That was a huge stroke of luck.

“Not quite, Victor,” Christopher said. “While age is the determining factor in a wild animal, the shifter continues to display as a mottled white and red coat until they meet their mate.”

“Fuck,” Martin whispered, which was the first time Victor had heard the man swear, even if he felt like doing it himself.

“So, you’re saying that Noah shifted into a white stag because he met Alex?” Zack clarified.

“How did I not know this?” Asher griped, and Christopher answered with amusement in his voice.

“Because you three were always more interested in sports, games, and computers than in shifter history.” Christopher paused. “He must be protected,” he warned, “and I know we’re used to protecting kids with special gifts, but he won’t just be a target for certain shifters. If he’s seen, you’ll have human hunters in droves.”

Victor saw Riley pale. He had to tell his alpha. “I have to tell Raschid.” Raschid wouldn’t tell a soul.

Zack glanced over. “And Daniel.”

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"We need to talk to Noah again," Asher said. "Find out exactly what Pearson wanted him to do here."

"All Alex said they wanted was to get us to like him," Victor repeated.

Asher nodded. "But what's his end game?"

Pearson has the resources, connections, and now we know he has knowledge of shifters. Elkin is a two-bit criminal who wouldn't have the intelligence or means to orchestrate anything this complex," Martin said.

"Pearson as the puppet-master, makes sense," Riley agreed. "If Jacob is a shifter, he's been hiding one for years."

Mo shuddered. "Those poor kids they found. If they're experimenting with ways to control shifters..."

"Pearson will be expecting Noah to report back," Riley pointed out. "We need to buy some time."

"We can have Noah call him," Mo suggested. "Say he's making progress with us, that we trust him. It might give us the window we need to locate Jacob and get him out."

Victor nodded. "Good thinking. But we also need eyes on Pearson's house as soon as possible. I'll handle surveillance," Victor continued. "I can coordinate with some of Raschid's wolves, who won't draw attention."

Mo leaned forward, his face serious. "I need to be with Noah when he talks to Pearson. The boy trusts me, and I might pick up on something in Pearson's voice or reactions that could help us. Something even Alex won't."

"No," Victor and Zack said simultaneously, their protective instincts flaring.

"I'm not suggesting I go to Pearson's house," Mo clarified, holding up a hand. "Just that I be present for the call. Noah needs support, and I can help him stay calm."

Victor considered this, then nodded reluctantly. "Fine, but only a phone call. You don't go anywhere near Pearson."

"We need to get Jacob out quickly," Riley said. "I'm worried..." Everyone glanced up at the shift in Riley's tone. "I'm worried that Jacob, if he can't shift, is dispensable."

They all drew in a collective sharp breath. Victor's wolf howled in his head, and he curled his fists, surprised not to see them covered in fur, so great was the flare of anger.

The kitchen door opened, and Alex entered with Noah trailing behind him. The boy's eyes were red-rimmed, but he looked calmer, anchored by Alex's steady presence.

"We have a plan," Alex announced without preamble. "Noah will call his father tonight, tell him he's making progress with Mo especially, and that he thinks he'll be able to get the information they want soon."

Victor raised an eyebrow, impressed by the young alpha's initiative.

"That buys us time," Alex continued. "Noah says there's a nurse who cares for Jacob every day between seven and five. He leaves him alone at night, which is when Noah

was able to see him."

"Does this nurse know what's going on?" Zack asked.

Noah shrugged. "He wouldn't care. He just does whatever my dad says."

"Name?" Martin asked.

"Oscar O'Dowd. There was another up to three years ago, and Jacob said he'd complained about where Jacob was kept. He never returned."

Victor met Martin's knowing gaze.

"Is this him?" Martin asked and turned the screen so Noah could see.

Noah's lip curled. "Yes."

"Oscar O'Dowd is forty-nine. Healthcare assistant. Worked in two memory care facilities but was fired for gross neglect. Bounced around in some agencies that clearly don't have proper employee screening or don't care. Three divorces and seven kids he pays court-mandated support payments for." Martin shook his head. "When he's forced to." Martin pressed some more buttons and glanced at Noah. "How long has he worked for your dad?"

"Since before I went to live with him. Jacob says five years."

"What exactly did your father want you to find out from us?" Riley asked gently.

Noah looked down at his hands. "At first just to make you feel sorry for me. But then how it worked. Where you got kids like me from."

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The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. Victor exchanged a glance with Riley, both thinking the same thing. Pearson wanted fodder to continue his drug experiments.

"Did he say why he needed this information?" Martin asked.

"For Jacob," Noah said, his voice small. "He said he needed shifter blood so he could fix Jacob properly. Make him whole again."

Mo reached across the table and took Noah's hand. "You believed him?"

Noah's eyes flashed with anger. "No, and he knew it. That's when he said if I didn't do what he asked, he'd keep hurting Jacob until I did." Alex shifted subtly so he was closer to him.

Victor's jaw clenched as he fought to control his rage. "When was the last time you spoke with your dad?"

"Two days ago," Noah answered, his voice stronger now that he was sharing his burden. "I text every other day. I'm supposed to update him today on what I've learned."

"And what happens if you don't answer?" Alex asked, his hand resting protectively on Noah's shoulder.

Noah swallowed hard. "He said he'd know I betrayed him, and Jacob would pay."

Mo reached over and squeezed Noah's hand. "That's not going to happen. We won't let it."

"Noah," Riley said gently, "do you know anything about the layout of the house where Jacob is kept? Upstairs or down?"

"Jacob is in the attic, but there's something going on in the cellars."

"Going on?" Zack asked.

"I wanted to know everything," Noah admitted. "I saw three other doors, but they were always locked. There were weird smells, like chemical. Made my nose itch." Noah's voice dropped.

The adults exchanged grim looks. Victor could feel the tension radiating from everyone in the room.

"Okay," Zack leaned forward. "You're gonna go with Alex while I make us some food, and you're not to worry about this anymore. We're going to contact Daniel and Raschid and get Jacob out. Don't call your dad until we say."

Alex shoulder nudged Noah and Noah smiled for the first time. "Okay."

Okay. Victor met Mo's gaze and knew they were both thinking the same thing. That they hoped they could keep their promises.

Chapter Nineteen

Mo went upstairs supposedly for a shower, but really because he needed a moment to process everything that had just happened.

And remember he was still searching for Khloe. It was almost like she was forgotten in the middle of the huge, awful shit that was happening. No one had mentioned her since Daniel that one time. Have I forgotten her?

No.

Except he had no idea how to keep her alive in other people's minds when so many bad things were happening to so many kids.

The door opened and he looked up. Zack came in.

"You okay?" Zack asked, his voice gentle.

Mo shook his head, unable to find the words. Zack closed the door and walked over, sitting beside him on the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight, and Mo found himself leaning against Zack's solid warmth almost instinctively.

"I don't know how to feel," Mo admitted. "I'm happy with you and Victor, happier than I've been in... maybe ever. But Khloe's still out there somewhere, and with everything happening with Noah and Jacob, it's like she's been pushed aside."

Zack wrapped an arm around Mo's shoulders. "She hasn't been forgotten. Daniel's still working on finding her. We all are."

"But no one talks about her anymore."

"Because we don't have anything new to tell you yet," Zack said, his voice rumbling through his chest against Mo's ear. "But that doesn't mean we've stopped looking."

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Mo sighed, leaning more heavily against Zack. "I feel guilty. How can I be happy when she might be god knows where? How could I have been up here for nearly a week with no thought other than sex?"

"You know what I've learned from years of fostering kids? " Zack asked. "That guilt doesn't help anyone. It doesn't make you more effective at finding her, and it doesn't make her situation any better."

"That's easy to say—"

"And it wasn't just a week of sex," Zack said with a humorless laugh. "it's about what we are."

"It's a natural part of bonding," Victor said from the doorway. Mo hadn't heard him approach. Victor seemed to move silently even in human form.

Mo looked up, grateful when Victor came to sit on his other side. "What do you mean?"

"When a bond forms, it creates a...hierarchy of priorities," Victor explained, choosing his words carefully. "Your mate bond with us is fresh, intense. It's natural for it to temporarily overwhelm other concerns."

"But she's my sister," Mo protested weakly.

"And we will find her," Victor promised, his voice carrying that quiet certainty that always made Mo believe him. "But Noah's situation has given us information we

didn't have before. If Pearson is behind this, and he's experimenting on shifters, there's a possibility..."

"That Khloe could be one of his test subjects," Mo finished, his stomach dropping as the implications hit him. "God, Victor. What if she's being held somewhere like Jacob?"

Zack's warm brown eyes held his. "It makes sense. Pearson knows about shifters. He's keeping kids somewhere. It fits with what we know."

Hope bloomed in Mo's chest for the first time in weeks. "Then finding Jacob might lead us to Khloe."

"It's possible," Zack said cautiously. "I don't want to promise you something I can't deliver, but..."

"But it's more than we had before," Mo finished, feeling optimistic for the first time in what seemed like forever. He stood up, energy thrumming through him. "We need to move quickly then. For both of them."

"That's the plan," Zack agreed, rising to his feet. "Victor's already coordinating with Raschid's wolves for surveillance. We're going to get eyes on Pearson's place tonight."

Zack squeezed Mo's shoulder. "We'll do our best. But we need to be smart about this. Rushing in without a plan could put them both at risk."

Mo deflated. He'd been ready to run somewhere, anywhere. Tears pricked at his eyes. It was always the same. He'd get this amazing information then it wouldn't work out. It was like being on a permanent rollercoaster.

He caught the look Victor sent Zack. "I think our mate needs some stress relief." But he shook his head. He didn't deserve good when Khloe might be imprisoned. Zack's fingers trailed a line down his chest.

"I agree."

Mo tried to push away, but his mates' hands were too convincing, too soothing. "I can't," he whispered. "Not while Khloe—"

"Listen to me," Victor said, his voice firm but gentle as he cupped Mo's face. "You're carrying too much. Your body is still adjusting to the bond, and your mind is stretched in too many directions. You need to let us take care of you."

"He's right," Zack murmured, pressing a kiss to Mo's temple. "You'll be no good to Khloe if you're falling apart. Let us help you."

Mo felt the fight drain out of him as Victor's thumb brushed his cheek, wiping away a tear he hadn't realized had fallen. "I'm so tired," he admitted. He was exhausted, but didn't need sleep. He needed to let his mind go for a little while.

Zack pressed a tender kiss to the side of Mo's head.

Defeated, Mo let out a deep breath and allowed himself to be laid down on the bed. As Victor's strong fingers kneaded away the tension in his shoulders, Zack's lips brushed over Mo's neck, collarbone, and nipples, the sensation sending shivers down his spine.

"I know, baby," Zack whispered as he continued his tender exploration of Mo's body. "Just relax."

As Mo gave in to their touch, allowing warmth and pleasure to spread through him,

he couldn't help but feel a deeper connection forming with his mates.

Victor bent down and softly captured Mo's lips with his own. Mo could feel the commanding presence of his mate in that one kiss—all-consuming and powerful.

Simultaneously, Zack's hands worked at removing Mo's clothes piece by piece, each exposed area of skin receiving more attention from his skilled mouth.

“Let go,” Victor murmured against Mo's lips. “Just for now. Let us take care of everything.”

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Unable to resist any longer, Mo sighed with surrender as his body responded eagerly to their touch. Victor gently caressed his chest, with Zack teasing lower regions, both of them working together to bring him pleasure.

"So beautiful," Zack whispered as he moved lower, nibbling and kissing the insides of Mo's thighs.

Victor's eyes grew darker with desire as he watched Zack lavish their shared mate with adoration. "Turn over," he instructed softly, allowing Mo to experience new sensations from a different position.

As Mo turned onto his stomach, Zack continued to explore farther down his body—tongue lapping at the curve of his buttocks, teasing around the sensitive area beneath. All the while Victor held on to him at the top end of the bed—refusing to let him slip away from reality completely as he drowned in pleasure.

Mo arched his back as Zack's tongue teased his entrance, the pleasure making him gasp and clutch at the sheets. Victor's hands were in his hair, gently controlling his movements as he guided Mo's lips to his cock.

"That's it," Victor murmured, watching Mo take him in with hooded eyes. "Let us take care of you."

Between them, Mo felt himself floating away, his concerns temporarily suspended as his body responded to their touch. Zack's tongue was replaced by his slicked fingers, stretching him carefully while Victor fed his cock deeper into Mo's willing mouth.

"So perfect for us," Zack whispered against the small of his back, pressing kisses there as he worked a third finger inside. "So responsive."

Mo moaned around Victor's length, the vibrations making the alpha hiss with pleasure. Victor's hand tightened in his hair, not painfully but with enough pressure to remind Mo who was in control.

"Ready for more?" Zack asked, his voice husky with desire.

Mo nodded as best he could with his mouth full, and Victor slowly withdrew, allowing him to speak. "Please," Mo breathed, his voice wrecked. "Need you both."

The mattress shifted as Zack positioned himself, the blunt head of his cock pressing against Mo's prepared entrance. With gentle pressure, he pushed inside, giving Mo time to adjust to each inch.

"Breathe through it," Victor instructed, stroking Mo's face tenderly, but Mo didn't need to wait. He barely remembered the last time they had come together, just the heat and the sensations, and didn't understand why, but this time he wasn't missing a second.

Zack slid home with one smooth thrust, and Mo gasped at the perfect fullness. Victor moved to position himself in front of Mo, his hard length brushing against Mo's lips once more.

"Take us both," Victor commanded softly. "Let us wash everything else away."

Mo opened willingly, taking Victor's cock into his mouth as Zack began to move inside him with slow, measured strokes. The dual sensation of being filled from both ends sent waves of pleasure through Mo's body, driving all thoughts of worry and guilt from his mind.

Time seemed to blur as they moved together, finding a rhythm that had Mo moaning around Victor's length. Victor's hands remained in Mo's hair, guiding him, while Zack's strong grip on his hips kept him steady.

"That's it," Zack praised, his thrusts becoming more insistent. "So perfect for us."

Mo felt himself approaching the edge, his cock hard and throbbing. As if reading his thoughts, Victor reached beneath him, wrapping a firm hand around Mo's erection.

"Come for us," Victor ordered, stroking in time with Zack's thrusts.

The combined sensations were too much. Mo's body tensed as his orgasm crashed through him, his cry muffled by Victor's cock. Zack groaned behind him, his rhythm faltering as Mo's body clenched around him.

"Fuck," Zack gasped, driving deep one final time before spilling himself inside Mo with a strangled cry. Victor followed moments later, his release hitting the back of Mo's throat as Mo swallowed eagerly.

They collapsed together in a tangle of limbs, breathing heavily. Victor carefully maneuvered them until they were lying side by side, with Mo sandwiched protectively between his mates. The warm weight of their bodies against his was comforting, grounding.

"Better?" Zack murmured against Mo's shoulder, pressing soft kisses there.

Mo nodded, feeling the tension that had been coiled inside him for so long finally begin to unravel. "Thank you," he whispered.

Victor's arm tightened around them both. "We're going to find her, Mo. And Jacob too."

"I know," Mo said, and for the first time in a long while, he actually believed it. Whatever happened next, he wasn't alone anymore.

They lay in comfortable silence for several minutes before a gentle knock at the door pulled them from their peaceful bubble.

"Sorry to interrupt," Riley called through the door, "but Daniel just arrived with news. Whenever you're ready."

Victor sighed and pressed a kiss to Mo's forehead. "Duty calls."

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"Five more minutes," Zack grumbled, burying his face against Mo's neck.

Mo smiled despite himself. "The sooner we go down, the sooner we can make a plan to find them."

Chapter Twenty

Zack tightened his hold on Mo for a moment before reluctantly pulling away. "Let's get cleaned up and head down." He pressed a gentle kiss to Mo's temple before sliding out of bed.

As they dressed, Zack caught Victor watching him with an intensity that made his skin prickle with awareness. "What?"

There was something unspoken between them, questions about what had happened during their mating, which they hadn't had time to talk about. He didn't remember much, but—something that shouldn't have been physically possible—hung between them like an unacknowledged presence in the room.

He knew they had to talk, and doubts pushed in. He was a bear. He wasn't some delicate omega Victor could protect.

"We'll talk about it later," Victor said quietly, seeming to read Zack's thoughts. "After we deal with this."

Zack nodded, grateful for the temporary reprieve. Whatever was happening to his body could wait. Right now, Jacob and Khloe needed them more.

When they entered the living room, Daniel was pacing by the fireplace while Riley and Martin sat reviewing something on a laptop. Alex and Noah were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are the boys?" Mo asked, settling into an armchair.

"Alex's room," Riley answered without looking up. "Alex is keeping Noah occupied with video games, but Alex can hear what we say. He says Noah's hearing isn't that acute yet, probably because he hasn't shifted enough."

Daniel stopped pacing when he saw them. "Good, you're here. We have confirmation." He gestured to Martin, who turned the laptop around to show them footage of Sean Pearson's estate.

"This is from an hour ago." Zack leaned closer, studying the grainy footage. A silhouette could be seen briefly passing by one of the upper windows, the distinctive shape of a wheelchair unmistakable.

"I think we can assume that's Jacob," Asher said grimly.

Daniel nodded. "We've watched the house. O'Dowd arrived at seven and left at five, exactly like Noah said. There's a security system, but it's nothing we can't handle."

"What about Pearson?" Victor asked, his voice tightly controlled.

"Left for Seattle this morning. There's a big art gala he's sponsoring, and he's front and center. He's scheduled to return tomorrow evening."

Mo straightened. "So, we have a window."

"A small one," Daniel confirmed. "We go in tonight after O'Dowd leaves. Get Jacob

out before Pearson returns. Martin, I want you in the van monitoring communications, bearing in mind those of us shifted won't be able to wear any devices."

Zack saw Martin nod once and a slight hardening of his jaw. Martin had been permanently disabled in human form by a bullet that took out his knee while saving one of theirs. As a wolf he was unstoppable, but as a human he had a permanent limp. As an ex-FBI agent, Zack knew he hated to see his friends rushing into danger knowing he would have to stay behind.

At that moment Zack knew exactly how he felt.

"And the other rooms Noah mentioned?" Zack asked, thinking of Khloe and the other missing children.

Martin pulled up schematics of the house. "The original architecture shows one basement level, but we know its been extended."

"Hidden floors?" Victor asked.

"No way to confirm without access to thermal imaging.

"What if Khloe isn't there?" Mo asked.

Daniel's expression softened with understanding. "Then we keep looking. But right now, this is our best lead." He stared hard at everyone. "Shifters only. I can't involve anyone else in this, which means it's unsanctioned and off the books."

Mo gaped. Did that mean Daniel was risking his job?

"The intel we've gathered suggests Pearson's operation is extensive," Victor added,

his hand finding Mo's shoulder and squeezing gently. "If he's behind the disappearances, finding Jacob could lead us to the others."

"What's the plan?" Zack asked, leaning forward.

Daniel pointed to different areas of the schematics. "We'll enter here, through the service entrance. Security is lightest on this side of the property. Kent and some of Raschid's wolves, in their animal forms, will neutralize any guards while Victor, Riley and I locate and extract Jacob. My other agents will provide back up and security, but this is kept in-house for right now, as in no humans. Asher is leading the group to the basement."

"What about us?" Mo asked, gesturing between himself and Zack.

Daniel shook his head. "You two stay here."

"No way," Mo protested immediately. "If Khloe might be there—"

"Mo," Victor's voice was gentle but firm. "You're a professional. I wouldn't know where to start to help a child with reading difficulties."

Mo wrinkled his nose. "It's hardly the same."

Victor shrugged. "Then I'll put it another way. Are you strong enough to pick either Khloe or Jacob up, or even both of them, and run out of the house carrying them?"

Mo looked like he wanted to argue further but finally nodded. "Fine. But you call the second you find anything."

"I gotta ask," Zack said uncomfortably, wondering why he was being left behind.

“But is bringing them all here the best idea? Paints a pretty huge target on this house and all the kids.”

“Just Khloe and Jacob,” Daniel said. “We have a safe house set up for any others, plus we need you here as Mo, Alex, and Noah trust you, and you could get all three to safety if needed.” Even so, Zack thought uncomfortably, no one would be safe until Pearson was behind bars. And that still really didn’t address why he was staying here. He had to be the strongest of them all, even Riley.

"It's the safest option we have right now," Riley said, though Zack could see the concern in his eyes. "We'll have extra security in place. Raschid's wolves will form a perimeter around the property."

Victor reached over and cupped his chin. “I’m sorry, that was me. I can’t concentrate unless I know both of you are safe. It’s my fault you aren’t going.”

Zack stared into his eyes, and before he realized what he was doing, he’d agreed.

"And what about Noah's dad?" Mo asked. "He's expecting Noah to call him tonight."

"That's our advantage," Daniel replied. "Noah will make the call as planned. He'll tell Pearson he's making progress, that he's gained your trust. That should keep Pearson believing his plan is working while we extract Jacob."

Zack nodded, but something still felt off. This was too easy. If Pearson was as calculating as they believed, would he really leave Jacob so lightly guarded during his absence?

Victor seemed to share his concern. "It could be a trap."

"Possibly," Daniel acknowledged. "Which is why we're going in with full tactical

support and Raschid's wolves. If it is a trap, we'll be ready."

The rest of the day passed in tense preparation. Noah made his call to Pearson under Mo's careful guidance, managing to sound convincingly enthusiastic about his "progress" at Hunter's Creek. Pearson had seemed pleased, asking few questions and ending the call quickly because he said he was just getting on a plane.

Victor caught Zack just coming out of the bathroom and practically pinned him against the wall. "You are the only one I trust to keep our mate safe," he all but growled.

So that answered that. Zack couldn't resist snagging Victor's lips, and it was a very long minute until they joined the others.

"I—"

"I know," Victor answered. "I know this is more than just submission, but it doesn't make you less. It doesn't make us less."

Zack smiled, his big heart a little lighter.

By nightfall, the plan was set. Zack watched from the porch as Victor, Martin, Daniel, Asher and Riley prepared to leave, each checking their equipment one final time.

"Be careful," Zack said as Victor approached him for a final goodbye.

Victor's eyes softened slightly. "Always am." He leaned in, pressing a firm kiss to Zack's lips. "Keep Mo safe. Don't let him out of your sight."

"I won't," Zack promised. "Just make sure you all come back in one piece."

With a final nod, Victor joined the others in Daniel's unmarked SUV, and they disappeared down the long driveway into the darkness. Zack knew Raschid's wolves were still protecting the property, even if many of them were backing up Daniel and the others tonight, there were still plenty to guard the house.

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Zack returned inside to find Mo pacing the living room, his anxiety palpable. Noah and Alex sat quietly on the couch, Noah's expression tense, while Alex maintained a protective presence beside him.

"They'll be okay," Zack assured them, though he couldn't quite shake his own unease. "Daniel knows what he's doing."

Mo nodded absently, continuing to pace. "I know. I just... I can't help feeling like we're missing something."

"Like what?" Zack asked, guiding Mo to sit down.

"I don't know. It just seems too... convenient. Pearson leaving town right when we discover Jacob's location."

Zack had been thinking the same thing. "Daniel and Victor are aware it might be a trap. They're prepared."

An hour crawled by with excruciating slowness. Alex eventually took Noah upstairs to try to get some sleep, though Zack doubted either of them would manage it. Mo refused to rest, instead sitting by the window. "Zack?" Mo said slowly, standing up. "What's that?" Zack peered out of the window toward the town. He could see the red glow in the distance.

"Shit," he spat. His phone rang. It was Raschid.

"Zack, I'm having to pull some of my wolves. The school has a concert this evening

for their senior class and according to what I'm being told, some idiotic disgruntled kids set three classrooms on fire, and there's some people trapped. The local fire department is already responding to a multi-vehicle pile-up on the interstate."

"Go," snapped Zack, "we'll be fine."

"I've still got a dozen wolves there. No one will get through," Raschid assured him, then rang off.

"What is it?" Alex and Noah appeared, and Zack told them.

"They should have called by now," Mo said, his voice tight with worry as he glanced at the clock. It had been well over an hour since the team left.

Zack moved to stand behind him, placing his hands on Mo's shoulders and massaging gently. "These things take time. They need to be careful."

Mo leaned back into Zack's touch, some of the tension leaving his body. "I know. I just—"

Zack went still, his bear's senses immediately on alert which silenced Mo immediately. There was a faint sound coming from outside—not from the direction of the driveway, but from the back of the property. "Stay here," he said quietly, moving toward the back door.

"Zack—"

"Just stay put. I'll check it out." But before Zack could move, every light went out.

Alex's low growl filled the darkened room. "Someone cut the power."

"Get upstairs," Zack ordered, immediately moving toward Mo. The security system would have a backup generator, but it would take precious seconds to kick in. Seconds they might not have.

"No," Alex said firmly. "I'm staying. Noah, go to my room and lock the door."

Noah hesitated, his eyes wide with fear in the dim emergency lighting that had automatically activated. "But—"

"Go," Alex insisted, his voice carrying the unmistakable command of an alpha. "I'll come for you when it's safe."

As Noah reluctantly headed upstairs, Zack pulled Mo close, positioning himself between his mate and the potential threat. His bear was restless beneath his skin, sensing danger.

"It's a diversion," Mo whispered. "The fire in town, the power—they wanted to draw everyone away."

"And where's Raschid's wolves?" Alex snapped, but Zack didn't have time to answer. The sound of glass shattering came from multiple directions at once. Zack shoved Mo behind him and lunged toward Alex.

"Down!" he shouted as the first canister burst through the window, spewing a thick cloud of gas that immediately burned Zack's eyes and throat.

Zack's bear roared inside him, desperate to protect, but he fought the shift. If they were being attacked by humans who knew about shifters, shifting would only make him a bigger target.

Mo started coughing violently behind him. Zack turned, wrapping an arm around

Mo's waist as his mate's knees buckled.

"Alex," Zack rasped through the thickening smoke. "Get to Noah!"

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Alex was already halfway to the stairs, his shirt pulled over his nose and mouth. The young alpha paused, torn between protecting his mate and helping Zack.

"Go!" Zack ordered, pushing Mo toward the kitchen, where the air seemed clearer. "We'll be right behind you!"

The front door splintered open with a deafening crack. Zack glimpsed dark figures wearing gas masks pouring through the doorway. Mo staggered, his eyes streaming as the gas took effect.

"Run!" Zack shouted, shoving Mo toward the back door. He turned back to face the intruders, determined to buy Noah and Alex enough time to escape.

The first attacker came at him with a stun baton. Zack dodged, his bear's reflexes giving him an edge despite the disorienting gas. He grabbed the man's arm and twisted, hearing a satisfying snap as bones broke. The man screamed behind his mask.

"Tranq him!" someone shouted.

Zack felt a sharp sting in his shoulder. He reached back and yanked out two darts, but already his limbs were growing heavy. Whatever they'd hit him with was designed for shifters—working fast despite his bear's metabolism.

He fought through the encroaching darkness, desperate to reach Mo, who was now crawling toward the kitchen, barely conscious, a dart sticking out of his shoulder. Two more attackers closed in on him. Zack roared, partially shifting his arms to

swipe at them with clawed hands.

One went down, blood spraying from deep gashes across his chest. The other backed away, raising what looked like a modified rifle. Zack lunged, knowing he needed to take this one down before—

Another dart hit him in the chest. Then another. The world tilted sideways as Zack's legs gave out beneath him.

"Got the big one," a voice said, sounding distant and muffled through the ringing in Zack's ears.

"What about the other three?" Someone kicked Zack in the ribs, but he barely felt it now.

"Leave them. This is the one we want."

Rough hands grabbed Zack's arms, dragging him across the floor.

"No," Zack slurred, trying to shift.

"This one's fighting the sedative. Give him another dose."

Another dart. The darkness swallowed Zack before he could make another sound.

His last thought was of Victor. Victor would find them. Victor would come.

Then nothing.

Chapter Twenty-One

By the time they got to the estate, Raschid's wolves were ready to engage the guards. Riley winced as twelve wolves immediately subdued twenty guards without even one of them getting a shot off. He knew the house itself wouldn't be so easy.

Daniel nodded, his expression grim behind his tactical gear. "Keep your eyes open. We stick to the plan, but be ready for anything."

They entered through the service entrance as planned, Kent and Asher taking point while Victor, Riley, and Daniel covered the rear. Three guards were almost too easy to take out, but the first floor was empty—no staff, no security. Daniel's surveillance had reported Pearson leaving with a driver and two men that they assumed were his personal protection.

"Is that it?" Victor whispered, his wolf's senses straining to detect any hidden threats. He could smell a faint scent of shifter, but not strong enough to identify what breed.

"Upstairs," Riley pointed. "I can sense someone."

They moved silently up the grand staircase, weapons ready, while Asher and Kent peeled off to the basement. Victor's wolf was growing increasingly agitated, sensing something fundamentally wrong about the situation. The scent of the house was clinical, antiseptic—nothing like a normal home should smell.

The attic door was locked with an electronic keypad. Daniel made quick work of it with a specialized device, and the door clicked open.

The room beyond was nothing like what Victor had expected. Instead of a bedroom, they found what looked like a medical observation room. A hospital bed sat in the center, surrounded by monitoring equipment. And in the bed, connected to various tubes and wires, lay a thin young man with sandy blond hair.

"Jacob," Riley confirmed, moving quickly to the bedside.

Victor stood guard at the door while Riley checked the boy's vital signs. Jacob's eyes fluttered open, confusion giving way to fear when he saw the strangers surrounding him, the recognizable blue and brown eyes confirming who he was.

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"It's okay," Riley said gently. "We're friends of Noah's. We've come to get you out."

Jacob's eyes widened. "Noah sent you?" His voice was weak, raspy from the drugs.

"Yes," Riley said, already working to disconnect the monitoring equipment. "We need to move quickly."

"It's a trap.," Jacob whispered. "It's a trap. He knew you'd come."

Victor's blood ran cold. "What do you mean?"

"My dad—he wanted you to come here. He said Noah would lead you right to me."

Riley cursed under his breath. "And while we're here..."

"Hunter's Creek," Victor finished, already pulling out his phone. No signal. "They're jamming communications."

Daniel's face hardened. "We need to move. Now."

"Riley, get Jacob out of here," Daniel ordered, then spoke through his earpiece. "Martin, try and get in touch with Hunter's Creek, get back up if you can't. Get hold of Raschid."

"What about you two?" Riley asked.

"We're going to check on Asher in the basement," Victor said, his wolf howling to get

back to his mates, but knowing they couldn't leave other victims behind.

"Be careful," Riley said as he carefully unhooked Jacob and lifted him from the bed. "This whole setup feels wrong."

Victor nodded grimly. "Fifteen minutes. If we're not out by then, get Jacob to safety and send in reinforcements."

As Riley disappeared with Jacob, Victor and Daniel made their way down to the main floor and found the entrance to the basement. Just a simple door.

"Ready?" Daniel asked, but the door wasn't even locked. Victor stepped in and stared at the very wide open, very empty space. As they took it in Asher and three wolves ran in. "There's no one here. We've done a full check of all the other rooms."

The only items in the large space were a desk and a single computer monitor. Daniel went over and woke it up and they all stared at the screen showing a live feed—of Hunter's Creek.

"Fuck," Victor snarled, watching in horror as masked figures swarmed through the house on the screen. The timestamp in the corner showed this was happening right now. "We need to get back. Now."

Daniel was already moving toward the exit, but Victor paused, noticing something on the screen. The attackers weren't taking everyone. They were focused on a single target.

Zack.

Victor watched, helpless, as his mate fought off several attackers before succumbing to multiple tranquilizer darts. The sight of Zack being dragged away sent a primal

rage coursing through Victor's body.

"It was never about Jacob," Victor realized as they sprinted back up the stairs. "Pearson wanted us away from the house so he could get to Zack."

"But why Zack specifically?" Daniel asked as they raced through the empty house.

Victor's mind was racing. The knotting. The heat. The impossible thing that had happened between them. Somehow, Pearson knew.

"We need to move faster," was all Victor said, already pulling off his clothes to shift. His wolf would be faster than any vehicle.

Daniel nodded, understanding. "Go. I'll bring backup."

Victor shifted in one fluid motion, his wolf more ferocious than usual, driven by the desperate need to reach his mates. He tore through the night, another ten wolves behind him, following the scent trail back toward Hunter's Creek, praying he wouldn't be too late.

Mo regained consciousness slowly, his head pounding and his throat raw from the gas. He blinked in the dim emergency lighting, trying to piece together what had happened.

"Mo! Thank god," Alex's voice came from nearby, and Mo felt strong hands helping him sit up. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so," Mo rasped, his voice barely audible. "Where's Zack?"

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Alex's expression darkened. "They took him. I tried to stop them, but—" He gestured to a nasty gash on his forehead.

"Took him? Who?" Mo struggled to his feet, panic rising in his chest. "Noah?"

"Noah's okay. It was shifters in masks who took Zack. They had weapons designed for shifters—tranquilizer guns, stun batons. They knew exactly what they were doing." He paused. "It was hard to tell at first with the smell of the smoke that they were wolves, but I can now. They took out Raschid's men with the darts. They knew what they were doing."

Noah appeared at the top of the stairs, his face pale with shock. "This is my fault. They came for him because of me."

"No," Mo said firmly, despite the tremor in his voice. "This is not your fault. It's Pearson's."

Alex moved to Noah's side, placing a protective arm around the younger boy's shoulders. "Did you see which way they went?"

"Toward the town," Noah said. "Three black SUVs. I saw from the upstairs window."

Mo staggered to his feet, fighting a wave of dizziness. "We need to call Victor. Tell him—"

"I already tried," Alex said grimly. "Phones are dead. They must have some kind of jammer."

The sound of breaking glass from the back of the house had them all freezing. Alex immediately pushed Noah behind him, his body tensing as he prepared to shift.

"Get upstairs," he whispered to Mo and Noah. "Hide."

"I'm not leaving you," Noah protested.

Before they could argue further, a massive black wolf burst through the kitchen doorway, hackles raised and teeth bared. Mo nearly collapsed with relief as he recognized Victor. "Victor!" Mo cried out.

The wolf's eyes locked onto Mo, relief visible even in his animal form. Victor shifted back to human form in one fluid motion, not bothering with modesty as he strode toward them.

"Are you hurt?" Victor demanded, his hands running over Mo's body, checking for injuries.

"I'm fine," Mo assured him. "But they took Zack."

Victor's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in his cheek. "I know. I saw it on Pearson's security feed. It was a trap from the beginning."

"Jacob?" Alex asked.

"Safe. We got him out." Victor pulled on the clothes Alex hastily grabbed from the bin in the corner. "Daniel's bringing him."

Mo clutched Victor's arm. "Why would they take Zack? Why not all of us? And I thought Raschid's wolves were protecting us?"

Victor's expression darkened. "I don't know—"

The front door burst open as Daniel arrived with Raschid and several of his wolves. The alpha's expression was thunderous as he surveyed the damage.

"Three of my wolves are dead," Raschid growled. "The others were tranquilized."

"Shifters," Alex confirmed. "They knew exactly what they were doing."

Raschid snarled. The threat was obvious, even from a human throat.

Daniel moved through the house with military precision, checking each room. "We need to make sure this place is secure. They might come back. Raschid, can you take Mo—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Mo said firmly. "Not without Zack."

Victor placed a hand on Mo's shoulder. "Mo—"

"No," Mo interrupted. "He's my mate too. I'm not abandoning him."

"We're not expecting you to," Riley said. "We just need to know what we're walking into and plan accordingly."

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"I need to be doing something," Mo insisted, pacing the kitchen floor. "I can't just sit here while Zack is out there somewhere."

Three very long hours later, they all sat around the huge kitchen table drinking coffee to stay awake. Jacob had been brought here and was asleep in Noah's room after Riley had checked him over, or at least enough until they could get a doctor to see him tomorrow. He hadn't been able to give them any more information and Riley had decreed Jacob and Noah both needed sleep. Alex had waited until they were both settled before he had joined them.

"I still think they should be moved," Martin said.

"Actually," Asher said. "The obvious decoys aside, this is still the safest place for them to be."

"Except this was the place they were taken from," Martin countered.

Raschid grunted his disapproval, but Martin met his gaze square on, and Mo didn't blame him. Raschid had guaranteed their safety. But Alex had been quick to confirm it had been wolves that attacked them. In such a large pack, ordinary gammas wouldn't recognize individual scents and would have assumed any shifters were pack.

Or at least until they got close enough to hit them with the darts and by then it would have been too late.

"I heard them say," Alex chimed in, "'This is the one we want' before they took

Zack, but why?"

Riley met Victor's gaze. "Ideas?"

Victor wanted to put his fist through something.

Riley paused. "Okay, this has to be said. Zack's wearing your mating mark."

Victor stilled. He stared at Riley. "He submitted to me." He knew it was very rare for alphas to wear one, but in their relationship, it had seemed natural at the time, and he didn't know about bears. They still had to talk about it, though. The knotting in particular. No, the heat as well. He'd been blind. Deliberately fooling himself.

Riley nodded. "I'd have to check with Noah to find out exactly what he said—"

Everyone heard the growl from Alex, and Riley sighed. "I know it wasn't his fault, Alex, but what was our fault was that we never asked Noah to repeat exactly what he'd told his father, especially in the week of their heat." He laid a hand on Alex's arm. "No one's blaming Noah."

Victor swallowed with difficulty. "What has that to do with why they targeted Zack?"

Riley gazed at him, but he knew, or could guess. It just didn't make sense. "We know shifters were involved," Riley said. "We know Pearson has knowledge of shifter society. You were upstairs for nearly a week mating, and afterwards, Zack wore your mating mark."

"So did I," Mo said.

Riley glanced at him and smiled. "Except you are a human omega. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but it makes Zack—if he is a shifter omega—a better bet."

“A better bet for what?” Mo whispered.

Riley sighed. “This was a theory,” he started. “I don’t know these kids, but from what Raschid told me”—he looked to Raschid, who nodded grimly—“all of them demonstrated omega traits. There are shifters at the school who have never been targeted, and Raschid has confirmed those are shifters demonstrating alpha tendencies.”

“Are you saying these drugs work better on omegas?” Martin asked.

Riley shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “But what’s the one thing shifter omegas can do that no human male can?”

Victor felt the blood leave his face.

“Wait,” Asher said in astonishment. “You think Zack’s an omega?” He stared at Riley, then whispered. “And he could be pregnant?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Zack woke to darkness and pain.

His first instinct was to shift, to let his bear's strength protect him, but when he tried, nothing happened. A cold weight encircled his wrists and ankles—metal restraints, he realized groggily. Something about them blocked his ability to shift.

"Don't bother," a voice said from somewhere in the darkness. "The cuffs are silver-lined. Quite effective against shifters, I've found."

Zack blinked as lights suddenly flickered on, revealing a sterile, white room that looked like a cross between a laboratory and a hospital. He was strapped to a padded

table, medical equipment surrounding him.

"Where am I?" Zack demanded, his voice hoarse. "What do you want?"

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A man stepped into view—tall, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit. Sean Pearson. Noah's father.

"Mr. Hunter," Pearson said with a thin smile. "Thank you for joining us. I apologize for the rather...dramatic means of bringing you here, but I find that willing test subjects are hard to come by."

"Test subjects?" Zack pulled against his restraints, the silver burning his skin. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Pearson walked around the table, studying Zack with a clinical detachment. "You're quite unique, you know. A male omega bear shifter who's successfully conceived. Do you have any idea how rare that makes you?"

Zack froze. "What?"

"Oh." Pearson's eyebrows rose in mock surprise. "You didn't know? How interesting." He picked up a tablet from a nearby counter and turned it to face Zack. On the screen was what looked like an ultrasound image. "Congratulations are in order, I suppose."

Zack stared at the image, unable to process what he was seeing, even though all he could see was barely a black dot. "That's not possible."

"And yet, here we are." Pearson set the tablet down. "Male omegas are extraordinarily rare in shifter communities. Most are identified early and claimed by alphas before they ever come to my attention. But you..." He smiled coldly. "You

slipped through undetected. A bear shifter who never knew what he truly was."

Zack's mind was racing. There had been something Victor had wanted to talk about, but Zack had assumed he meant the bite.

"And Noah was very helpful. Of course, I soon realized he was torn between wanting to protect his brother and not wanting to betray you all." He sneered. "He told me what he thought was inconsequential. The length of time you were bonding for. Your mating bite. He didn't realize, of course, how significant that was."

"What do you want from me?" Zack asked, fighting to keep his voice steady. He didn't blame Noah.

"Progress," Pearson replied simply. "Humanity has tried and failed to harness the extraordinary abilities of shifters. Regeneration. Enhanced strength. But the ability to transform genetic material—to actually change one's fundamental biology—that's the holy grail."

He gestured to the equipment surrounding Zack. "Imagine what we could do with that knowledge. Cure genetic diseases. Enhance human capabilities. Create perfect soldiers who could heal from battle injuries."

"Someone already failed at that," Zack slurred, wondering why he was struggling to speak.

"Ah yes, I am aware of the shortsightedness of the idiot who attempted to create shifters from human subjects that you successfully defeated last year."

"Shor...sight...dness?" Zack struggled. Fuck, he was so tired. He realized he'd closed his eyes, and it seemed to take a gargantuan effort to open them.

Pearson chuckled. "I don't need to create shifters. You can successfully manage to copulate on your own. Controlling them, however, is a delicious thought. I'm sure you realize the governments of this world are already salivating over getting their own shifter armies. But what no one is considering, and I must say I find this incredibly foolish even if it's a golden opportunity that will make me billions, is how to stop them."

Zack thought the words stop them but his lips seemed numb and making them form words was too much of an effort.

"Exactly," Pearson said, as if Zack had answered. "In their small minds the superpowers of the world will just fight might with might. Boys and their toys," he chuckled. "But what I'm going to offer is a drug to neutralize the effectiveness of shifters. Sap their strength." He leaned forward. "Stop them from procreating or cause them to birth regular babies without shifting abilities." Alarm flooded Zack, even if he didn't seem to be able to react.

"I've managed to experiment on shifter children, but up to now I've been unable to get my hands on an embryo."

An embryo?

"Now, I'm sure you are feeling weary. The drugs currently pumping through your system are taking care of that, but there are two doctors on their way to see how your embryo reacts specifically." He smiled. "After all, we don't want to kill it...not yet, anyway."

Zack fought to stay conscious, but the drugs in his system were too powerful. As his eyes slid shut, one thought burned in his mind: Victor and Mo would find him. And when they did, Pearson would regret the day he ever heard of shifters.

When he woke again, the lighting in the room had changed. Shadows stretched across the floor, suggesting hours had passed. His mouth felt like cotton, and a dull ache had settled in his abdomen. Zack tried to shift his position, but the restraints held firm, the silver burning against his skin.

Two figures in white lab coats stood at a computer terminal across the room, their backs to him. A woman's voice, clinical and detached, floated over to him.

"The embryo's vitals are strong despite the sedation. Remarkable resilience."

"Pearson wants tissue samples," a male voice replied. "Can we proceed without risking termination?"

"I believe so. The abdominal sac is forming nicely. We should be able to extract what we need without disturbing development."

Zack's heart raced. They were talking about his baby—their child. A child he hadn't even known existed until Pearson told him. He strained against the restraints again, panic lending him strength.

The doctor turned, noticing his movement. "He's awake again."

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"Increase the sedative," her colleague said without looking up from the computer.

"No," Zack managed to rasp out. "Don't touch my—" He couldn't bring himself to say the word.

The woman approached, her face expressionless as she checked the IV line running into Zack's arm. "Try to remain calm, Mr. Hunter. Stress isn't good for your condition."

"My condition," Zack repeated bitterly. "You mean the pregnancy you're planning to experiment on?"

Something flickered in the woman's eyes—discomfort, perhaps even guilt—but it disappeared quickly. "We're simply gathering data. The embryo won't be harmed."

"Yet," Zack added, remembering Pearson's words.

She didn't respond to that, instead adjusting something on the IV pump. Almost immediately, Zack felt a new wave of drowsiness wash over him.

"Wait," he slurred, fighting the medication. "How is this...possible? I'm not an omega."

The woman paused, studying him with clinical curiosity. "That's precisely what makes you so valuable, Mr. Hunter. You're what we call a latent omega—a shifter whose omega traits remained dormant until triggered by the right alpha." She glanced at her colleague, who was still absorbed in the computer data. "It's exceptionally rare.

In most cases, latent omegas never discover their true nature."

Zack's thoughts were becoming foggy again, but he forced himself to focus. "And the baby?"

"Is developing normally, though at an accelerated rate." She hesitated. "The bear shifter genetics seem to be dominant, though interestingly, there are markers from both the alpha and the human in the fetal DNA. Quite unprecedented."

"Both?" Zack slurred, confusion cutting through the fog in his brain, trying to remember his school biology and failing.

The doctor seemed to realize she'd said too much. "Rest now, Mr. Hunter. We'll continue our discussion later."

As the sedative pulled him under again, Zack tried to make sense of her words. She had to mean Victor and Mo. But how could Mo's DNA be present when he hadn't come inside him?

The next time Zack woke, he was alone. The restraints remained, but someone had adjusted his position slightly, relieving some of the pressure on his back. His body ached all over, a bone-deep ache that felt different from the soreness of his captivity.

He tried to focus, to assess his surroundings. The laboratory was dimly lit, suggesting it was night. How many days had passed? He couldn't tell. Time had become a blur of sedation and brief, confusing moments of consciousness.

Something felt wrong. Beyond the obvious horror of his situation, his body was sending warning signals. A fever seemed to be building, his skin alternately flushed and chilled. His heart raced despite the sedatives, and the ache in his abdomen had intensified.

"Victor," Zack whispered to the empty room. "Mo. Please find me."

As if in response to his words, a sharp pain lanced through his abdomen. Zack gasped, instinctively trying to curl around the pain, but the restraints held him still.

The door opened, and Pearson entered, followed by the female doctor. She immediately noticed his distress and moved to check the monitors.

"His vitals are destabilizing," she reported, her professional demeanor cracking slightly. "Temperature 102.3 and rising. Heart rate elevated."

Pearson frowned. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," she said. "It could be a reaction to one of the drugs. We will have to separate each one individually to confirm. It could also be the separation from his bonded mates is triggering a physiological response. We've seen this in other omega subjects, but never this rapidly."

"Will it affect the pregnancy?" Pearson asked, and Zack wanted to snarl at the man's obvious concern for the experiment rather than the suffering he'd caused.

"If we don't stabilize him, yes. The fetus will be at risk." She was already preparing an injection. "This will help with the symptoms, but it's not a long-term solution. Mating sickness is progressive."

Zack's vision blurred as another wave of pain washed over him. Mating sickness. He'd heard of it—a condition that could affect bonded shifters when separated from their mates for too long. But he'd always thought it was just an old wives' tale, something to keep newly mated pairs close to home.

"How long?" Pearson demanded.

"A few days at most before permanent damage occurs," the doctor replied. "The pregnancy complicates matters. His body is trying to maintain the bond connection for both himself and the developing fetus."

Pearson cursed under his breath, pacing the sterile floor. "We need more time. The tissue samples haven't yielded enough data yet."

The doctor hesitated, her eyes flickering to Zack's face. For a moment, he thought he saw compassion there. "There might be a way. If we could simulate the presence of his mates—perhaps with pheromone therapy or even if you could get the human mate here—"

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"No," Pearson cut her off. "That's too risky. It took too much work to get the bear here." He stopped pacing, his expression calculating. "How stable is the embryo right now?"

A chill ran through Zack that had nothing to do with his fever. He knew what Pearson was considering.

"I don't recommend extraction, if that's what you're thinking," the doctor said quietly. "Perhaps in another week. The research value of observing the full gestation—"

"I'm aware of the trade-offs, Doctor," Pearson snapped. "But if the host dies, we lose everything. Prepare for extraction tomorrow morning if you are unable to stabilize him. We'll continue our research with the embryo in vitro."

Zack fought against the restraints with renewed desperation, ignoring the burning of the silver against his skin. "No!" he gasped, his voice raw. "You can't!"

Pearson turned to him, seeming almost surprised that Zack was coherent enough to follow their conversation. "Mr. Hunter," he said, his tone maddeningly reasonable. "Surely you understand your situation. Without your mates, you'll die anyway. This way, at least your contribution to science will be preserved."

"It's not a contribution," Zack snarled, summoning his remaining strength. "It's my child. Our child."

Something cold and calculating settled in Pearson's eyes. "It's fascinating how

quickly shifters form attachments to their offspring, even before birth. Another trait worth studying." He nodded to the doctor. "Increase his sedation. I don't want him conscious for this. His anxiety may bring on further complications."

The doctor moved toward the IV, but hesitated, her hand hovering over the controls. "Mr. Pearson, I'm worried the increase in sedation could put the embryo at risk. If this is mating sickness, the embryo will not be at risk until the bear dies. He will suffer, certainly, but we have time before the embryo is in danger."

Pearson chuckled. "What happened to 'do no harm?'"

She flinched at his words. "I'm trying to preserve the integrity of your research, Mr. Pearson. That's all."

"Yes, well, I appreciate your dedication to the scientific method." Pearson straightened his already immaculate suit jacket. "Monitor him closely tonight. If his condition deteriorates further, we'll initiate the extraction." He paused. "Do we have any idea of a timeline for mating sickness?"

She nodded. "From the data I've seen, mating sickness is in most cases strongest after an initial bonding, then peters out when the bond is strong and established. Successful absences have been noted, even survival after the death of a mate. It does, as I said, depend on the length of the bond. However, the bear is already displaying protective instincts. He knows his own death would cause the death of his child, so it would be interesting to see how long he can fight his own instincts to remain alive for the embryo."

"For the full pregnancy?" Pearson asked, betraying his sick excitement.

"I doubt it," the doctor replied, "but it definitely isn't an emergency requiring immediate extraction." She glanced at the readout from her machines. "As I've said,

he will suffer, but so far the embryo doesn't seem to be in any immediate danger." She hesitated and lowered her voice. "There is my other research, of course."

Pearson frowned. "I thought that was still experimental?"

"But isn't everything?" she murmured. "I think it's safe to at least accelerate the development of the embryo another month."

As they exited the room, Zack let out a shuddering breath. The pain was getting worse, radiating outward from his core. He'd never felt anything like it—as if his body was trying to tear itself apart from the inside out.

Mating sickness. The words echoed in his mind. He'd heard stories, of course, but wasn't sure he'd believed them. But with his bond to both Victor and Mo was so new, so intense...

A fresh wave of pain crashed over him, and Zack bit back a scream. His bear roared inside him, desperate to break free, to find his mates, to protect their cub. But the silver restraints held firm, burning against his skin whenever his desperation triggered even a partial shift attempt.

Their cub. The reality of it still hadn't fully registered. He was pregnant. Somehow, impossibly, he was carrying their child. A child that Pearson planned to cut out of him if Zack couldn't keep him or her alive.

"No," Zack whispered fiercely to the empty room. "I won't let that happen." No matter what pain he had to endure.

He had to escape. Had to find Victor and Mo. But how? The restraints were unbreakable, the door locked, and his body was growing weaker by the hour. For the first time since his capture, true despair threatened to overwhelm him.

Then, through the haze of pain and fever, a memory surfaced. Something the doctor had said about his condition. The pregnancy complicated matters. His body was trying to maintain the bond connection for both himself and the developing fetus.

The bond. Could he use it somehow? Shifter bonds were more than just emotional connections—they were psychic links, especially between alphas and their mates. Zack had always been able to sense Mo's and Victor's emotions, but the drugs were complicating everything.

Closing his eyes, Zack tried to focus through the pain. He reached for that thread of connection he'd felt with Victor since Victor had shown his wolf, now strengthened by their mating bond. And then for the newer, but equally powerful connection to Mo.

Victor. Mo. Find me. Please.

He poured every ounce of his remaining strength into that silent plea, visualizing his mates, picturing the sterile room, the medical equipment, anything that might help them locate him. The effort left him gasping, pain clouding his brain, darkness beckoning.

And for the first time, he didn't fight it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ninedayslater.

Mo paced the length of the kitchen, his phone clutched tightly in his hand. Nine days. Nine days since they'd taken Zack, and still no concrete leads on his location. He felt like he was losing his mind.

"Mo," Victor's voice was gentle but firm. "You need to rest."

"I can't," Mo said, not breaking his stride. "Every time I close my eyes, I see him in pain. I feel it, Victor."

Victor moved to intercept Mo's pacing, placing his hands on Mo's shoulders. "I feel it too."

The bond between them had intensified in Zack's absence, as if their bodies were trying to compensate for the missing piece. But instead of comfort, it only brought them shared anguish—flashes of Zack's pain, his fear, that hit them at random intervals throughout the day and night.

They'd all argued the merits of going to the humans on this, and brought in Christopher for advice. He was also losing his mind because his son was missing, but agreed if Daniel went higher up it could well be taken out of their hands, and they weren't a hundred percent certain it would even be authorized.

They heard Riley coming downstairs with Dr. Adams, a shifter pediatrician, so Mo immediately got coffee for them both.

"Good news," Riley reported as he entered the kitchen.

Mo's head shot up. It was about time they had some.

"Possible good news," Korbin Adams corrected, and accepted his coffee gratefully. "You all are aware that the biggest problem is that Jacob should be in a spinal unit, or a neurological one. I'm a pediatrician, but we currently have no shifters qualified as neurologists or neurosurgeons. Riley has done his best healing-wise, but the problem is Jacob has never shifted, nor can our mobile scans detect an injury."

"So basically, we have no idea why Jacob is paralyzed below the waist," Riley finished. "We know he's a shifter, but Jacob himself has no memories of anything other than growing up with Pearson. He was told his mom left him."

"How old is he?"

"Seventeen," Riley replied.

"And Noah?" Mo asked, knowing the boy had barely left with Alex standing guard.

"Processing," Riley sighed. "The guilt is eating him alive, even though none of this is his fault."

Victor's jaw tightened. "Pearson will pay for what he's done to those boys. And to Zack."

Mo leaned into Victor's solid warmth, drawing strength from his mate's certainty. "The bond feels...different today," he whispered. "Weaker somehow."

Victor stiffened almost imperceptibly. "He's fighting. Our mate is strong."

But they didn't know what Pearson was doing to him.

"The lab results came back on the blood samples we found at the house," Daniel announced as he entered, tablet in hand. "They managed to isolate a compound that's unique to Pearson Pharmaceuticals' research division."

Victor's eyes sharpened. "So, we have proof it was Pearson."

"Yes, but that doesn't tell us where he's keeping Zack," Daniel replied grimly. "Pearson has facilities in six states and two countries."

"We've already searched his Seattle location," Raschid added, reaching for the coffee. "Nothing."

Mo felt the familiar wave of helplessness threatening to overwhelm him. "Then where? Where would he take him?"

"Somewhere secure, isolated," Victor bit out. "Somewhere he could conduct experiments without arousing suspicion."

Mo thought hard about everything they knew, his thoughts returning to Khloe. Was he destined to always lose his family? "What about Rigor? Has anyone heard from him?"

Daniel frowned. "Elkin's gone underground since the raid. We've had alerts out for him, but nothing so far."

Mo's mind raced, an idea forming that he knew Victor wouldn't like. "What if we draw him out? Use me as bait?"

"Absolutely not," Victor growled immediately, his eyes flashing alpha red.

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"Hear me out," Mo insisted, turning to face his mate. "Pearson wanted Noah to get close to us, to find out how we operate. What if I let it be known I'm looking for Khloe and Zack? Make it clear I'd do anything to find him?"

"It's too dangerous," Victor said, his voice brooking no argument.

"I agree with Victor," Daniel added. "Pearson's already shown he's willing to use lethal force. We can't risk putting you in that position."

Mo stood his ground. "I'm already in this position. Every second Zack is gone, I feel him slipping away." His voice broke slightly. "We're running out of time, Victor. I know it. You know it."

"Slipping away?" Korbin almost pounced on that phrase. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Getting weaker," Mo croaked out. He looked at Victor. "Could they be moving him?"

Victor enveloped Mo in his arms, but Mo heard him speak to the others. "We know distance doesn't affect the bond."

"How long ago did you three mate?" Korbin asked immediately.

Riley hissed in a breath. "Two, three weeks ago." Mo turned around and caught the look Riley sent to the doc.

“What? What is it?”

Riley looked at Victor. “Do you feel the same?”

Victor nodded once.

“Then I think we have an even more serious problem,” Korbin said. “This is rare, but as you’ve just mated and your bond is so fresh, there is a chance, as you have explained, that Zack is a latent omega, and that means he could be showing signs of mating sickness.”

Mo heard the collective gasp. Victor frowned.

“Is that even real?”

“Very,” Riley confirmed.

“What’s mating sickness?” Mo asked.

“Riley,” Victor clipped out warningly, but Mo squeezed his arm.

“No, I have a right to know. Tell me,” he ordered.

“It usually affects only newly bonded mates and is rare. If a shifter is separated from their mate immediately after bonding, the mate can get sick.”

“But Victor isn’t sick.”

“No,” Riley agreed and speared Victor with a stare. “Scared out of his mind and not wanting anyone to know, but not physically sick. Because he still has you and he’s not an omega. And you,” Riley continued, “are a human omega, not a shifter one.”

You exhibit traits, like your heat, but you will never shift and also, you still have Victor.”

“But Zack doesn’t have anyone,” Mo whispered.

“If this is true,” Victor ground out. “How long do we have?”

Riley shook his head. “We need to find him.”

“Wait,” Mo said. “How sick can Zack actually get?” But from the looks he got, he knew the answer. “Okay then,” Mo said. “Tonight, I’m going back to the bar they caught me in when all this started. I’m going to start showing people pics of Khloe and won’t be shy about it.”

Victor growled, but Mo turned back to him. “If it was me, wouldn’t you do anything you could?”

“Zack will never forgive me for putting you in danger,” Victor said. Mo smiled, knowing his big growly wolf was going to capitulate. “I’ll be there,” Victor decreed.

“Actually, you can’t if we’re doing this,” Daniel said. “Rigor might not be a shifter, but he may be accompanied by them. We can’t risk any shifters being close enough for them to scent us. It will have to be humans.” Daniel turned to Martin. “You’ve got some good people?”

Martin nodded. “Excellent and retired, so they aren’t going to worry about their jobs.”

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“This is insane,” Victor spat out.

“No one's suggesting for one moment that we won't be close,” Asher said. “There's no way we'd let Mo be taken, but Daniel's spot on. If Rigor has shifters with him like the ones that attacked us at home, the plan won't work.”

Victor couldn't help the growl from his throat as he sat in the van watching the security feed showing Mo sitting alone at a table. Even through the black and white footage, he could see the tension in his mate's shoulders, the careful way he was showing Khloe's photo to anyone who would look. They'd agreed not to mention Zack unless someone took the bait with Khloe as too many locals might know Zack.

"He's doing fine," Martin assured him, adjusting his earpiece. "My people have eyes on every entrance and exit."

Victor swallowed the next growl. Humans. "This is taking too long. He's been out there for over an hour."

"Patience," Riley counseled from the seat next to Daniel. "He's doing well, and they aren't going to rush. They might have people keeping an eye out and it would take time for them to report Mo is there."

Victor knew they were right, but the bond between him and Mo was humming with anxiety. Or perhaps that was just his own fear bleeding through. And underneath it all was the increasingly faint pulse of connection to Zack—weakening by the hour in a way that terrified him.

"Movement at the south entrance," Martin reported suddenly, his voice sharpening. "Two men matching the description of Rigor's known associates."

Victor tensed, every instinct screaming at him to go to Mo, to protect his mate. Riley placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"Trust the plan," Riley murmured. "Trust Mo."

On the screen, Victor watched as the two men entered the bar, scanning the crowd before their eyes landed on Mo. One nudged the other, and they began making their way toward him.

"We've got company," Martin spoke quietly into his comm. "Two approaching the target. Stand by." Victor knew the three men playing darts were all Martin's. One laughed, then sat down and picked up his beer. Close enough to hear if he was a shifter.

Mo looked up as the men approached his table, his expression carefully neutral, though Victor could feel his spike of fear through their bond.

"Heard you've been asking questions," the taller of the two said, sliding into the seat across from Mo without invitation.

"I'm looking for my sister," Mo replied, sliding Khloe's photo across the table. "And now my partner, too."

The second man leaned forward. "Word is you're connected to those freaks at Hunter's Creek."

Victor's hands clenched into fists at the slur, but he remained silent, watching.

"You know about them?" Mo asked. "My—" Mo lowered his voice "—mate is missing. And I'll do anything to find Zack and my sister. Anything."

"So how come you're out here on your own?"

Tears sprang to Mo's eyes, and they were genuine. Victor lurched to his feet, but Daniel caught his arm. Mo swallowed. "I've left. They can't help me. It puts the kids in too much danger for me to stay there."

The men exchanged looks. "Might be we know someone who can help," the first one said. "For the right price."

"Name it," Mo replied without hesitation.

The taller man chuckled. "Not that kind of price. Boss wants to meet you. Alone."

"When and where?" Mo asked.

Victor tensed. This was moving too quickly.

"Now," the man said, standing. "We'll take you."

They saw Mo hesitate. Daniel had warned him not to appear too eager. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"My boss has a grievance with those that are bringing too much attention to certain types of people," he said carefully. "He wants it stopped."

"Very clever," Daniel said. "Makes it look like there's someone else involved that might be persuaded to join forces." Mo nodded and stood up, following the men to the bar. This was it. They would take these two goons and find out what they knew.

Find out where Zack was.

Victor watched intently as the men guided Mo toward the exit. The taller one had his hand on Mo's back—a seemingly friendly gesture that Victor knew was meant to control his movements.

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"Now?" Victor growled, his patience at its breaking point.

Daniel held up a hand. "Wait for them to clear the main area. We don't want civilians caught in the crossfire."

The seconds stretched like hours as they followed Mo's progress on the security feed. When the three men finally reached the alley behind the bar, Daniel nodded.

"Go."

Martin's team moved first, emerging from their positions with practiced efficiency. The two playing darts abandoned their game, while another rose from his table near the exit, all converging on the alley.

Victor was out of the van before Daniel could stop him, moving with his alpha's preternatural speed despite his human form. The night air carried Mo's scent to him—fear mingled with determination—and Victor followed it like a beacon.

As he rounded the corner, he saw Mo being shoved toward a waiting SUV with tinted windows. The taller man had Mo's arm twisted behind his back while the second opened the vehicle's door.

"Get in," the man was saying. "Boss doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Mo struggled, playing his part perfectly. "Let go of me! You're hurting me!"

The distraction was all Daniel's team needed. The shorter man went for his gun,

proving he was a human, but never completed the motion. Daniel and Asher pounced, but the third grabbed Mo. "Back off or he gets it!" he shouted, pressing the barrel against Mo's temple.

Victor's world narrowed to a pinpoint focus. His mate was in danger. The wolf inside him howled for blood, but Victor maintained control. He couldn't shift here, not with Martin's human team present.

Instead, he moved silently along the shadows of the building, using the distraction of the standoff to circle behind the gunman. Mo's eyes widened fractionally as he spotted Victor, but he gave no other indication.

"Easy," Daniel called, emerging from the opposite side with his FBI badge visible. "You're surrounded. Let him go, and we can talk."

The gunman's grip tightened on Mo. "I said back off! I'll—"

Victor struck with blinding speed, one hand clamping around the man's gun wrist while the other locked around his throat. With a precise application of pressure—just enough strength to incapacitate without revealing his shifter abilities—Victor forced the man to drop his weapon.

The gunman struggled, but Victor's grip was unbreakable. "Don't move," Victor hissed in his ear, "or I'll snap your neck."

Mo stumbled free immediately, but he was jubilant. It had worked. They got them. Now they had to find out what they knew. Mo closed his eyes and searched for the special place in his heart and mind where he could feel Zack and couldn't stop the tears from falling this time. Barely a flicker. He could barely feel Zack. Mo let out a sob and rushed to where Victor was shoving one of the men in the van. Zack was dying. Mo knew he was. They had to get to him, and they had to get to him now.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Victor bundled Mo into the van after the two men were secured, his arm tight around his mate's shoulders as Mo trembled with barely contained emotion.

"We don't have time for standard interrogation procedures," Victor said to Daniel, his voice low and dangerous. "Zack is running out of time."

Daniel nodded grimly. "I'm aware." He turned to the two handcuffed men. "You have one chance to tell us where Pearson is keeping our friend."

The taller man spat on the floor of the van. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Victor's patience snapped. He lunged forward, grabbing the man by his shirt collar and lifting him partially off the bench seat. "My mate is dying," he snarled, not caring that his eyes had shifted. "And you're going to tell me where he is, or I'll show you exactly what a shifter can do when his family is threatened."

The man's eyes widened in fear as he realized what Victor was. "I—I don't know! I swear! We just got orders to grab him," he jerked his head toward Mo, "and bring him to a meeting point. Rigor handles all the details!"

"What meeting point?" Daniel demanded.

"Warehouse 12 on Grafton Avenue," the second man blurted out, clearly even more intimidated than his partner. "Rigor's waiting there. That's all we know, I swear!"

Victor released the first man, who slumped back against the van wall. "If you're lying—"

"I'm not," the man insisted. "Rigor never tells us anything. We're just muscle."

Victor turned to Daniel. "Warehouse 12. Now."

Daniel was already signaling to the driver. "On it."

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Mo gripped Victor's hand tightly as the van lurched into motion. "He's fading," Mo whispered, tears tracking down his cheeks. "I can barely feel him anymore."

Victor pulled Mo against his chest, his own heart constricting with fear. Through their bond, he could feel it too—the once-strong connection to Zack now just a faint, flickering pulse.

"We'll find him," Victor promised, pressing his lips to Mo's temple. "Hold onto him, Mo. Don't let him go."

Mo nodded against Victor's chest, his eyes closing in concentration as he mentally reached for that tenuous thread connecting them to their missing mate.

The warehouse loomed dark and imposing against the night sky as they approached. Daniel's team moved with practiced efficiency, surrounding the building while Victor, Daniel, and Riley prepared to enter.

"Stay in the van," Victor ordered Mo.

Mo shook his head vehemently. "No. I need to be there. What if he can sense me? What if that helps?"

Victor hesitated, torn between protecting Mo and acknowledging the truth in his words. If Zack was suffering from mating sickness, having Mo and him both close might strengthen the bond enough to keep him alive until they could get him proper help.

"Fine," Victor conceded, "but you stay behind us at all times."

"I promise," Mo said, relief evident in his voice.

Daniel raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. He'd seen enough of shifter bonds to know better than to question Victor's judgment where his mates were concerned.

"Riley, you and Martin cover the back entrance," Daniel directed. "Victor and I will take the front. Mo stays with us." He handed Mo a bulletproof vest. "Put this on."

Mo quickly donned the vest while Victor checked his weapon. Though he preferred his claws in a fight, the gun would allow him to maintain his human appearance if necessary.

"Ready?" Daniel asked.

Victor nodded, his senses already stretching out, searching for any trace of Zack's scent or presence.

They moved silently toward the warehouse, the night air thick with the smell of rust and stagnant water. As they approached the entrance, Victor caught another scent—familiar, unwelcome.

"Rigor's inside," he murmured to Daniel. "And he's not alone."

Daniel signaled to his team through his comm unit, then counted down with his fingers. Three, two, one—

They burst through the door, weapons raised. The warehouse interior was dimly lit by overhead fluorescents, creating pools of light and shadow across the concrete floor. Stacks of crates and shipping containers created a maze-like layout.

"FBI!" Daniel shouted. "Come out with your hands up!"

For a moment, silence. Then a slow, mocking applause echoed through the cavernous space.

"Well done," Rigor Elkin's voice called out. "I was wondering how long it would take you to find me."

Victor tracked the voice to a raised office platform at the far end of the warehouse. Rigor stood there, leaning against the railing with casual insolence. Another smaller man stood next to him, holding a gun.

"Where is he?" Victor demanded, his voice carrying across the space.

Rigor smiled. "Your pet bear? Not here, I'm afraid. But I'd be happy to arrange a reunion. For a price."

Victor started forward, but Daniel placed a restraining hand on his arm. "What price?" Daniel called back.

"Simple," Rigor replied. "I walk away. Clean slate, new identity, the works."

"Not happening," Daniel said. "But cooperate, and I can ensure you're not charged as an accessory to kidnapping and human experimentation."

Rigor laughed. "You think I care about charges? Pearson will have me killed the moment I'm in custody."

"We can protect you," Daniel countered.

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"Like you protected those kids?" Rigor scoffed. "No thanks."

Mo stepped forward, ignoring Victor's attempt to hold him back. "Please," he called, his voice breaking. Rigor sneered. "Want your sister as well? I know where she is."

"Victor!" Martin hissed in his ear. "It's a trap. At least ten heavily armed men approaching from all directions."

Victor laughed, loudly. "So, you arranged for us to have a welcome committee?"

Rigor frowned. "What?"

"There's an army approaching. Either humans with guns or shifters with fangs and claws. Either way you don't get out of this alive."

Rigor paled. "It wasn't me! Pearson is nuts. I know where they are, but you have to get me out—" But just as Rigor stepped forward the smaller man next to him turned and shot Rigor point blank. The man jumped from the platform just as Victor got to him. He had the gun out of his hands and his claws around the man's throat before he could squirm free.

But the man raised tired eyes. "Doesn't matter. Pearson is paying for my little girl's cancer treatment. The only job I was asked to do was shoot Rigor if he threatened to spill. I don't know anything." His eyes grew misty. "I had no choice."

"Victor," Martin said calmly. "There's no one else here."

Twenty minutes later Victor shoved the guy in front of him as he walked in the house. "Start with a name," he growled.

"David Carson," the man replied, his voice steady despite Victor's menacing stance. "I'm sorry about your friend, but as I said I honestly don't know where Pearson keeps his test subjects." They'd interrogated him on the way home.

Mo stepped forward, his face pale but determined. "You said Pearson is paying for your daughter's treatment. What hospital?"

Carson hesitated, confused by the question. "St. Jude's Children's in Portland. Why?"

"Because Pearson wouldn't risk his operation by using his real name for the payments," Daniel said, understanding Mo's line of questioning. "He'd set up a shell company or foundation."

"The Artemis Foundation," Carson confirmed. "They cover all of Lily's treatments."

Asher was already typing furiously on his laptop. "Got it. The Artemis Foundation owns several properties, including—" his eyes widened "—a former research facility about forty miles north of here. It was supposedly closed three years ago, but the power usage is consistent with an active facility."

"That's it," Victor said, his certainty absolute. The faint bond he felt with Zack seemed to pulse slightly stronger at the mention of the location.

"It has to be," Mo agreed, clutching Victor's arm. "I felt something just now. Like Zack heard us."

Riley glanced at Carson. "Your daughter—how old is she?"

"Seven," Carson replied, his shoulders slumping. "Acute lymphoblastic leukemia. We couldn't afford the experimental treatment she needed. Pearson approached me after the third doctor turned us away." He swallowed. "I was infantry, seventeenth battalion. Retired. Millie was a surprise." He smiled. "Diane's forty-six, and we'd given up trying ten years ago."

"We'll make sure your daughter continues to receive treatment," Daniel promised. "But right now, we need everything you know about the facility."

"I've never been there," Carson insisted. "Rigor handled all the site operations. I just..." he swallowed hard, "I just did what they told me to keep my little girl alive."

Victor felt a flash of sympathy despite his rage. A parent desperate to save their child—he understood that motivation all too well.

"The satellite images show a perimeter fence with guard posts," Asher reported, turning his laptop so they could see. "Main building has three visible entrances. And obviously the basement."

"How many guards?" Daniel asked.

"Hard to tell from the satellite feed, but I count at least twelve on the perimeter."

Victor's mind was already formulating a plan. "We go in tonight. No more waiting."

"Victor," Daniel cautioned, "we need to plan this carefully. We can't risk—"

"He's dying," Victor cut him off, his voice breaking. "Every minute we wait reduces our chances of getting him back alive."

Mo stepped between them, placing a hand on each man's arm.

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"Both of you are right," Asher said. "We need to go now. But we can't go in blind. Daniel, can your team get detailed schematics of the facility? Riley, can you tap into their security system?"

Daniel nodded sharply. "I'll call in every favor I've got. We'll have the plans within the hour."

"I can try to access their security," Asher said, already typing. "If they're connected to any external network, I'll find a way in."

Victor paced the room, his wolf clawing at his insides, desperate to run to his mate. The bond with Zack felt so tenuous now, like trying to hold onto smoke. He caught Mo watching him with worried eyes.

"I need air," Victor muttered, striding toward the back door.

Outside, the night air was cool against his skin. Victor tilted his head back, breathing deeply, trying to center himself. When he heard the door open behind him, he knew without looking that it was Mo.

"He's still with us," Mo said quietly, coming to stand beside him. "I can feel him holding on."

Victor turned, pulling Mo into his arms, burying his face in his mate's neck to breathe in his calming scent. "The bond feels like it's unraveling thread by thread, and I never told Zack how I feel," he admitted, his voice rough with emotion he rarely allowed himself to show. "I can't do anything to stop it."

Mo's arms tightened around him. "Yes, you can. We're going to find him tonight. And then we're going to bring him home."

Victor pulled back slightly to look into Mo's eyes. "I've never been so afraid," he confessed. "Not in all my years." Not even when he found his mom and sister slaughtered.

"I know," Mo whispered, reaching up to touch Victor's face. "But Zack is strong. He's fighting to stay with us. We just need to get to him."

The back door opened again, and Riley stepped out. "We've got something," he said. "Asher managed to access their external security cameras."

They hurried back inside to find everyone gathered around Asher's laptop. On the screen, grainy footage showed the exterior of a concrete building surrounded by a fence.

"This is the old Northstar Pharmaceuticals research facility," Asher explained. "It was supposedly shut down after failing FDA inspections three years ago, but clearly that was just a cover."

"Can you get inside the building?" Victor asked.

Asher shook his head. "Not yet. Their internal security is on a closed system. But I can see who comes and goes easily enough." He clicked through several more camera angles. "According to their payroll the guards work twelve-hour shifts. These guys came on at noon, so they change at midnight."

"Three hours from now," Daniel noted. "That gives us time to prepare and move into position."

"What about the doctors?" Mo asked. "The ones who would be...experimenting on Zack?" His voice faltered on the last words.

Asher pulled up another image. "I've identified two regular visitors—a Dr. Helena Mayer and a Dr. Edward Chen. They usually work eight until five, but Mayer has been staying late. She's still there now."

Victor studied the image of a woman in her fifties with steel-gray hair pulled into a severe bun. "She's the one in charge of whatever they're doing to him?"

"According to their employment records, Dr. Mayer specializes in reproductive biology and genetic engineering," Asher confirmed. "Dr. Chen is an expert in reproductive biology."

Mo's face paled. "Reproductive biology?"

Riley and Victor exchanged a dark look.

"That's why they want him," Mo whispered. "For the baby."

The room fell silent as the full horror of the situation sank in. Not only was Zack suffering from mating sickness, but he might also be carrying their child—a child Pearson would see as nothing more than a scientific specimen.

"We need to move," Victor said, his voice deadly calm. "Now."

Daniel stepped forward. "Riley you're obviously needed with the extraction team. Victor, you'll lead the team with Raschid's wolves for backup. Martin will be here in case we need anything."

"I'm coming too," Mo said firmly.

"Mo—" Victor began.

"No," Mo cut him off. "You said it yourself—having both his mates close might strengthen the bond enough to keep him alive. I'm coming."

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Victor wanted to argue, but he knew Mo was right. "You stay with me at all times. No heroics."

Mo nodded solemnly. "Promise."

The next two hours passed way too slowly. Victor felt the tension coiling tighter within him as midnight approached, his wolf prowling just beneath his skin, ready to tear apart anyone who stood between him and his mate.

"The guards are changing in fifty minutes," Asher announced, eyes fixed on his screen. "Now's our window."

Victor nodded to the team. "Let's move."

The drive to the facility took twenty agonizing minutes. They parked a half mile away, continuing on foot through the dense forest surrounding the building. Victor moved silently, Mo close behind him, with Raschid's wolves fanning out to either side.

As they reached the edge of the tree line, Victor could see the facility clearly and he stopped, dragging Mo to him and taking his gorgeous lips in a kiss that just about stopped his heart. "I haven't said it, but I love—" He stopped because Mo's fingers were pressed against his lips.

"No," Mo shook his head, "Don't you dare say it like a goodbye. You say it when we're all together." Mo shook him. "You hear me?" he hissed.

"I will," Victor promised, his eyes never leaving Mo's. "For all of us."

The facility loomed before them, a stark concrete monolith against the night sky. Victor signaled to the team, and they moved into position as the guard shift change began.

"Now," Victor whispered into his comm as the main gate opened to admit the relief guards.

Two of Raschid's wolves, in human form and dressed in tactical gear, moved with preternatural speed. They subdued the departing guards before they could raise an alarm, while Daniel's team disabled the incoming shift. Within moments they were tied up and gagged.

"Main gate secured," came the whispered confirmation through Victor's earpiece.

Victor turned to Mo. "Stay close. Remember what we discussed."

Mo nodded, his face set with determination as he adjusted the bulletproof vest Daniel had insisted he wear. Even Dr. Adams was on standby.

And for a godawful moment Victor doubted himself. He might be a wolf, but he wasn't some special ops guy. Some trained soldier. Daniel had training but Riley was here because of his healing ability, and Asher might be FBI, but he was a tracker. What if he did something wrong? What if his mistake cost him Zack?

Then he felt the squeeze of Mo's hand on his shirt, and it settled him.

They moved through the compound with a stealth belonging to the predators inside them, taking out two more guards before reaching the main building. The access card they'd taken from one of the unconscious guards got them through the first door.

"Asher, we're in," Victor confirmed into his comm, his wolf stirring as he caught the faintest trace of Zack's scent, and he growled. "He's here."

They moved through the sterile corridors, the artificial lighting casting harsh shadows. At the security office, Raschid's wolves created a diversion in another part of the building, drawing the guards away from their posts.

"Elevator requires a keycard and code," Victor observed as they reached the central hub.

"Try 0-9-7-1," Asher suggested. "It's Pearson's birth month and year."

The elevator hummed to life, descending smoothly to the underground levels. Victor's heart hammered against his ribs, the bond with Zack growing minutely stronger with each floor they descended.

As the doors opened, they were met with another sterile corridor, this one lined with heavy metal doors. Lab facilities, Victor realized, his rage building.

"Which one?" Mo whispered, his eyes scanning the numbered doors.

Victor closed his eyes briefly, focusing on the bond. "This way," he said, moving toward the end of the corridor where the pull felt strongest.

Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Zack drifted in and out of consciousness, each return to awareness bringing fresh waves of agony. Dr. Mayer had administered the new drug hours ago—or was it days? Time had lost all meaning in this sterile hell.

"Remarkable progress," he heard her clinical voice somewhere above him. "The embryo's development has accelerated significantly. What would normally take weeks has occurred in days."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:45 am

"And the host?" A male voice—Dr. Chen, Zack thought dimly.

"Deteriorating, as expected. The mating sickness is progressing faster than anticipated. His system is prioritizing the pregnancy over his own survival."

Zack tried to focus on their words, but the fog in his mind made it difficult. He understood enough to know what was happening—his body was keeping their child alive at the cost of his own.

The pain had changed, spreading from his core throughout his entire body. Every heartbeat felt like it might be his last, each breath a struggle. The silver restraints no longer burned his skin—he was too weak to even attempt a shift.

"How much longer can he last?" Chen asked.

"Hard to say. Bear physiology is remarkably resilient, but the combination of mating sickness and the accelerated gestation is putting an incredible strain on his systems. At this rate, I'd estimate 48-72 hours at most."

"And the embryo?"

"Developing perfectly. Another week, and it should be viable for extraction. We just have to keep him alive for a week."

Zack wanted to scream, to fight, but his body wouldn't respond. A week. He wouldn't last a week. And when he died, they would cut their child from his body and continue their sick experiments.

No. He couldn't let that happen.

With monumental effort, Zack focused on the bond, that fragile thread connecting him to Victor and Mo. It felt impossibly thin now, like a single strand of spider silk stretching across an endless void. But it was still there.

Find me, he pleaded silently, pouring what remained of his strength into the bond. I'm here. Our baby is here.

A new pain lanced through him, sharper than before, and Zack gasped. Something was wrong—beyond the mating sickness, beyond the experimental drugs.

Dr. Mayer must have noticed the change in his vitals, because suddenly she was beside him, checking the monitors.

"Pulse is erratic. Blood pressure dropping," she reported, her voice tense. "We're losing him."

"The embryo?" Chen demanded.

"Still stable, but if he dies now, we lose everything. Pearson was clear—he wants both the subject and the offspring."

Hands moved over Zack's body, attaching new monitors, injecting new drugs. The pain receded slightly, but the darkness at the edges of his consciousness grew deeper.

"Come on," Dr. Mayer muttered, more to herself than to Zack. "Not yet. Just a—" But the alarm that sounded drowned out whatever she was going to say.

Alarms blared throughout the facility, red emergency lights flashing as a mechanized voice announced, "Security breach, level two. Containment protocol activated."

"Move!" Victor ordered, shoving Mo behind him as armed guards poured into the corridor from a side entrance. Victor shifted partially, his claws extending as he met the first guard head-on, tearing the weapon from his hands before throwing him against the wall. Daniel took out the two nearest him, and Raschid's wolves engaged the remaining guards. The narrow hallway filling with snarls and shouts. Mo pressed himself against the wall, Riley using his body as a shield as chaos erupted around him.

"Victor!" Riley yelled over the din, pointing toward a door at the end of the hall. "That one!"

Victor fought his way through the melee, his focus narrowing to that single door. The bond with Zack pulsed weakly but distinctly now, calling to him like a beacon.

"Cover me!" Victor shouted to Daniel, who nodded grimly as he took down another guard.

Victor reached the door—a heavy metal barrier with a keypad and retinal scanner. "Asher, we need access to lab 7!"

"Working on it," Asher's voice crackled through the comm. "Their security just went into lockdown. Give me thirty seconds."

Those thirty seconds felt like an eternity as the fighting continued behind them. Mo slid along the wall to join Victor, his face pale but determined. Riley right behind them.

"I can feel him," Mo whispered, pressing his palm against the door. "He's right there."

The lock disengaged with a heavy click just as another wave of guards appeared at the far end of the corridor.

"Go!" Daniel shouted, positioning himself and his wolves to hold them off. "We'll keep them back!"

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Victor didn't hesitate, pulling the door open and rushing inside with Mo close behind him. Riley following. The laboratory was blindingly white, filled with advanced medical equipment surrounding a central examination table.

And there, strapped to the table with silver-lined restraints, was Zack.

"Oh god," Mo choked, tears immediately filling his eyes.

Zack looked barely alive. His skin was ashen, his body glistening with sweat. IV lines ran into both arms, connecting him to various machines that monitored his vitals. His chest rose and fell in shallow, labored breaths.

A woman in a lab coat—Dr. Mayer, Victor recognized from the photos—stood frozen by a computer terminal, her eyes wide with shock at their sudden entrance. The second doctor took one look and ran in the opposite direction through another door.

Riley moved incredibly fast, but the second he touched Zack's restraints, he hissed in pain. "Get these restraints undone," he boomed.

Victor's wolf surged forward, a ferocious growl tearing from his throat as he stalked toward her. "What have you done to him?"

Mo didn't hesitate. He simply climbed on the bed and pressed himself to every part of Zack's body he could reach. "I'm here baby. We're both here."

The monitors around Zack suddenly erupted in a cacophony of alarms. The steady beep of his heart rate monitor flattened into a single, continuous tone that pierced the

air.

"He's coding!" Dr. Mayer exclaimed, professional instinct momentarily overriding her fear of Victor. "Get off him!" she shouted at Mo.

"No!" Mo cried, clinging tighter to Zack. "I'm not leaving him!"

Riley grabbed Mo's hand. "Let go, or I can't do this."

Victor was at Zack's side in an instant, tearing at the silver restraints with his bare hands despite the burning pain as the metal seared his skin. The restraints snapped under his desperate strength.

"Riley!" Victor roared at him, his eyes blazing red as his partial shift intensified. "Save him!"

Riley placed both his hands on Zack's chest and closed his eyes. The doctor screeched as wolves ran in and secured her.

Victor placed his hand over Mo's where it pressed against his own heart, and in his mind he reached out to touch Zack. The bond between them, though faint, still existed. Victor closed his eyes, focusing every ounce of his strength on that connection.

"Zack," Victor called, not with his voice but with his soul, pushing his energy through their bond. "Fight. Come back to us."

Mo seemed to understand instinctively what Victor was doing. He closed his eyes as well, adding his own strength to Victor's, calling to their mate through their shared connection.

Something shifted in the air—even as Riley sagged to the side, Daniel just managing to catch him.

The monitor gave a single weak beep. Then another.

"How are you doing that?" Dr. Mayer whispered, staring at the readings. "He was coding."

Riley heaved a breath. "Victor, Mo, get in next to him. Touch him." Riley took a shuddering breath. "It's not safe to make him shift."

Victor didn't need telling twice, and they got on the bed pressing themselves to each side of Zack. Zack's heartbeat slowly stabilized, each beep of the monitor growing stronger. His chest rose with a deep, shuddering breath.

"That's it," Victor encouraged, his voice thick with emotion. "Come back to us."

Asher, and a dozen of Raschid's wolves, raced into the lab, quickly securing the doctor despite her shrill protestations of science and the greater good, but Victor drowned them all out, and kept hold of Zack and Mo. He heard Daniel and Asher clear the room, and then they dragged a trembling man in a white coat in there.

"I want all the drugs stopped immediately," Daniel ground out, and practically threw the doc toward the bed. Hands shaking, the doc did exactly as instructed and removed all the IV lines. "Why can't he shift?" Daniel asked, looking at Riley.

Riley smiled weakly. "Because the baby's too far along."

Daniel frowned, but then tapped his earpiece and listened intently. "Understood. I'll let him know." Mo had yanked his out, wanting to concentrate on Zack. Daniel grinned. "Pearson was just about to climb into his helicopter to escape. Raschid

shifted and got to him before they took off.” He paused, eyes sparkling with unrestrained glee. “He doesn’t have much of a throat left. Well, any really.” He glanced at Mo. “We’ve also found five shifters chained downstairs. Khloe’s alive.”

Mo gasped. “Alive?”

Daniel nodded. "They’re all being taken to an appropriate medical facility then a safe house while we sort out where they want to go, but Khloe’s in reasonable shape and will be brought to Hunter’s Creek as soon as the docs have checked them over.”

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Victor nodded once, and when Mo's hand reached over Zack's chest to clasp his, he whispered, "Can I say it now?"

Mo's smile was huge.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mohadn't left Zack's bedside in over twenty-four hours since they'd brought him home. The journey back to Hunter's Creek had been tense, with Riley monitoring Zack's vitals constantly while Asher drove like a man possessed. Daniel had to stay behind to clean up the mess. Now, sitting in the soft lamplight of their bedroom, Mo watched the steady rise and fall of Zack's chest with profound gratitude.

"Any change?" Victor asked quietly as he entered with a tray of food and fresh coffee.

Mo shook his head. "Still sleeping, but Riley says that's normal. His body is healing." He accepted the mug Victor offered, breathing in the rich aroma. "The bond feels stronger though. Don't you think?"

Victor nodded, setting the tray down before coming to stand behind Mo, his hands gently massaging Mo's tense shoulders. "Much stronger. And the baby's heartbeat is steady."

The word "baby" still sent a shock through Mo. Their child—all three of them connected in this miracle none of them had anticipated. Riley had confirmed it: Zack was indeed pregnant, the embryo developing at an accelerated rate even for a shifter

due to the drugs Pearson's doctors had administered.

"Riley says the drugs they gave him to speed up the pregnancy have mostly worn off," Mo said, leaning back into Victor's touch. "The baby's development should return to a more normal pace now."

"Good," Victor murmured, bending to press a kiss to the top of Mo's head. "You should rest too. You've barely slept, but the car bringing Khloe will be here in a few minutes."

Mo knew now Victor was here he could safely spend a few minutes with his sister. "I will. Soon." Mo was torn, desperate to see Khloe, but hating to leave Zack, not when every moment of Zack's steady breathing felt like a gift they'd nearly lost. He inhaled a sob and pressed his lips together.

"Breathe," Victor murmured, his thumb stroking reassuring circles on Mo's hand. "She's safe now. They both are."

Mo nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat. He'd spent so many months searching, hoping, praying—and now his sister was minutes away from being back in his arms.

Five minutes later, Mo and Riley were stood on the front porch as a minivan drew to a halt. The vehicle door opened, and Daniel stepped out first, followed a moment later by a slender figure Mo hadn't seen in way too many years.

Khloe.

She looked thinner than Mo remembered, her once-vibrant curls now cut short against her head. But her eyes—their mother's eyes—were the same, widening as they landed on him.

"Mo?" Her voice was barely audible across the distance between them.

Mo was moving before he realized it, racing down the steps and across the gravel. Khloe broke into a run at the same moment, and they collided in the middle, arms wrapping around each other with desperate strength.

"You found me," Khloe sobbed against his shoulder, her entire body trembling. "You actually found me."

"I never stopped looking," Mo choked out, tears streaming freely down his face as he held his sister tight, afraid she might disappear if he loosened his grip even slightly. "Not for one second."

They stood like that for what seemed like forever, clinging to each other as years of fear and separation poured out in shared tears. Finally, Khloe pulled back just enough to look at Mo's face, her hands coming up to frame his cheeks. "You look different," she said, studying him with a teary smile. "Stronger."

Mo laughed softly. "A lot has happened."

"Daniel told me some of it," Khloe said, her expression sobering. "About the shifters, about what Pearson was doing." She shuddered. "We didn't understand. We thought at first it was trafficking." Her eyes filled. "I've been so stupid." Mo knew she meant with Rigor and her rebelling against their asshole father.

"Hush, it's okay. You're safe now."

She sniffed. "Daniel told us about your mate."

"Mates," Mo corrected gently. "Two of them. And yes, Zack was...hurt badly. But he's recovering."

Mo looked up as a second young woman stepped out of the car but held back shyly. Mo glanced at her then back to Khloe. Khloe extended her arm, and the young woman ran to her.

“Mo, this is Honey. She was taken by Pearson as well, and well, we’re together.”

Mo beamed and opened his arms to include Honey as well, thrilled for his sister. Asher came over and took Khloe’s bag. “Let’s get you inside and I’ll show you two to your room.”

“We’ll talk later,” Mo promised. Khloe nodded.

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“Go.” She nodded to the house. “I get it, and we have lots of time.” Mo brushed a kiss on her cheek then raced back inside.

Two days later, a soft knock at the door preceded Riley's entrance. Riley walked to the bed and laid a hand on Zack's.

"How is he?" Victor asked after a long minute where they knew Riley was checking out all Zack's systems.

Riley smiled, the first genuine smile Mo had seen from him in a while. "Better than I expected. The drugs are exiting his system, and the mating sickness is definitely retreating now that he's back with you both. I think he'll wake up soon. Maybe today.

Mo's heart leaped. "Really?"

"Really," Riley confirmed. "Just keep doing what you're doing—stay close, maintain physical contact. The bond is doing most of the healing work now."

"And the baby?" Victor asked, his voice carefully controlled.

Riley's expression softened. "Strong. Resilient, like its parents. He glanced at the curve on Zack's belly. The baby's now the equivalent of three months along."

"Is that dangerous?" Victor asked, his protective instincts flaring.

"It's not ideal," Riley admitted, "but now that we've stopped the acceleration, things should stabilize. Male shifters typically have shorter pregnancies than even female

shifters because they don't have a uterus—about five months rather than nine. Zack had already lost weight before this started, so it will be up to you two to monitor him.”

Mo smiled with determination. Zack was going to be spoiled rotten.

“The baby appears healthy, just developing faster than normal.” Riley grinned. “When Jax and the family arrive back tomorrow, Jax’ll be able to check and see what sex and designation you’re having if you like.”

After Riley left, Mo crawled carefully onto the bed beside Zack, curling against his side. Victor joined them on Zack's other side, their hands meeting across Zack's chest so they were all touching. “I’m going to spoil you so hard,” Mo vowed. “And I don’t care whether it’s a cub, a pup, or just a baby. They’ll be loved whatever they are.”

“That a promise?” Zack mumbled followed by a weak groan. His eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first, then sharpening as they found Victor and Mo.

"You're here," he rasped, his voice barely audible.

"We're not going anywhere," Victor promised, bending to press his forehead against Zack's. "Here to stay."

Mo leaned in from the other side, his fingers gently stroking Zack's cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck," Zack managed, attempting a weak smile. "But better now that you're here."

Mo choked back a sob, relief washing over him in waves as he pressed a gentle kiss to Zack's lips. "We were so scared," he whispered. "We almost lost you."

Zack's eyes suddenly widened with alarm. "The baby—"

"Is fine," Victor assured him quickly, his hand moving to rest protectively over the small swell of Zack's abdomen. "Riley's been monitoring both of you. The baby is strong."

Zack relaxed slightly, his eyes drifting to the slight curve beneath Victor's palm. "It's real," he murmured. "I thought I might have hallucinated it."

"Very real," Mo confirmed with a watery smile. "And apparently developing faster than normal because of the drugs they gave you. Riley says you're essentially three months along already."

"Three months?" Zack looked stunned. "But we only mated a few weeks ago."

Victor's jaw tightened. "Pearson's doctors were accelerating the pregnancy. Riley says now that you're off those drugs, things should stabilize."

Zack absorbed this information silently, his hand moving to join Victor's over his abdomen. "I can feel it," he said softly. "Not just physically, but... here." He tapped his temple. "My bear knows. Has known from the beginning, I think."

"What about you?" Zack looked at Mo.

"Actually," Mo said carefully, "I'm not pregnant, Zack. It's just you."

Confusion clouded Zack's features. "But the heat. You're an omega."

"I went into heat because I'm mated to two shifters, but I don't have the biology to get pregnant," Mo teased. He'd spent a while talking to Riley as they'd both watched Zack sleep while Victor organized the long-term protection of the house. Victor had

no intention of ever letting something like Zack's kidnapping ever happen again.

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“But—” Zack swallowed and looked guilty. Mo took his hand. “Sweetheart. Don’t think for one moment that I’m disappointed. I’m going to be a dad. Victor’s going to be the growly protective one. I’m going...” He stopped, knowing exactly what he wanted, then smiled. “When our baby is safely delivered and growing like a weed, I’m going to visit Luke.”

“What?” Victor gaped, echoing Zack’s apparent surprise as well. Mo grinned. “I want a wolf. I’ve no intention of letting you two guys shift and have fun without me. And then,” he leaned down pressing a kiss to Zack’s lips, “maybe I’ll have our next baby.”

“I can’t believe we’re all here, and I can’t believe I’m pregnant,” Zack said. “They kept calling me a latent omega. They said it was unprecedented.”

Mo squeezed Zack's hand. "Riley thinks that's why Pearson wanted you specifically. Not just any shifter, but a male omega bear."

“But how did he know?”

“Noah,” Victor said. “He feels dreadful about what he told Pearson.”

Zack's expression darkened. "Pearson. Did you—"

"He's dead," Victor stated flatly. "Raschid made sure of it." Riley appeared a moment later, sensing Zack was awake, and they spent the next hour filling Zack in on everything. Mo insisted on hand-feeding Zack the protein-rich meal Riley had brought with him.

Zack managed to stay awake for about an hour before exhaustion claimed him again. As his eyes drifted closed, Victor and Mo exchanged worried glances.

"Is this normal?" Mo whispered, his hand still entwined with Zack's.

"Riley said he'd sleep a lot," Victor reminded him, though concern shadowed his features. "His body is healing from both the mating sickness and whatever drugs they pumped into him."

Mo nodded, his thumb tracing gentle circles on Zack's palm. "I just keep thinking about how close we came to losing him. To losing both of them."

Victor reached across Zack to cup Mo's cheek. "But we didn't. He's here. Our child is here. And nothing is going to separate us again."

An hour later, a soft knock at the door drew their attention. Alex stood in the doorway, his expression uncertain.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said quietly. "Noah wanted to know if he could see Zack. Just for a minute. He's..." Alex hesitated. "He's having a hard time."

Victor and Mo exchanged a look. Noah had been devastated upon learning how his father had used information he'd unwittingly shared to target Zack.

"Of course," Mo said. "But just for a moment. Zack's asleep and he needs his rest."

Alex nodded gratefully and disappeared, returning moments later with Noah trailing behind him. The boy looked pale and drawn, his eyes red-rimmed from crying.

"Hey," Mo said gently, waving him in. "Come sit with us for a bit."

Noah approached the bed hesitantly, his gaze fixed on Zack's sleeping form. "Is he going to be okay?" he whispered.

"Yes," Victor said firmly. "He's already much stronger than when we found him."

Noah swallowed hard, tears welling in his eyes. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. If I hadn't told my father—"

"Stop," Mo interrupted, his voice gentle but firm. "Noah, none of this is your fault. Your father manipulated you. He would have found another way even if you hadn't said anything."

"But—"

"No buts," Victor said, surprising them all with the gentleness in his tone. "Zack doesn't blame you. Neither do we."

Noah wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "How can you not hate me?"

"Because you're family," Mo said simply. "And family sticks together."

Noah's composure crumbled at those words. Alex was immediately at his side, wrapping a protective arm around his mate's shoulders.

"Why don't you come back when he's awake?" Victor suggested. "He'd want to tell you himself."

"He wants to tell him now," Zack said smiling as he opened his eyes.

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Noah choked out an apology, but Zack simply held out his arms and Noah scrambled onto the bed and practically threw himself at him. “It’s okay,” Zack soothed. “You had no choice. If it had been Riley or one of my mates I’d have done exactly the same thing.” Noah sniffed. “I get you need us to leave. I’m gonna get a job—”

The low growl from Alex was audible and Mo did his best not to smile. Noah turned to stare at him in shock. Alex tried to cough to cover it up.

Zack smiled. “Okay, this is what’s going to happen. You are officially part of our family, and we have a very big family.”

“And growing,” Alex remarked, raising a cheeky eyebrow at Zack.

Zack shook his head, but didn’t hide his smile. “You and Jacob are staying right here for as long as you need to, and you won’t have time for a job between school and chores—which you’ll get an allowance for—because we will expect you to take it in turn to look after the younger kids. That’s how it works around here. We’re a big family.”

Noah nodded eagerly then let Zack go as Mo said he needed rest, but at the door he turned back and grinned. “I can’t wait.”

Zack lay back and groaned. Mo was on the bed in an instant. “Baby, what is it? Are you okay? Should I fetch Riley?” Victor snorted because he saw right through him.

“No,” Zack gasped, “There’s only one thing that will cure me.”

Mo caught on right away. "A sponge bath?"

"Mmm," Zack murmured approvingly. "How about we start with a cuddle and go from there?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Zack didn't know how he felt. He supposed he was shocked, but he was having trouble believing everything that had happened, or maybe he was just having trouble believing he was an omega. Not that he didn't love kids. He adored Mattie and couldn't wait until he and the others got home. He just...he didn't know. In his head, he still felt like he should be an alpha, and even though he was ecstatic about the baby, somehow he still felt less. Like he'd let both Victor and Mo down. Victor had left him at the house to protect Mo and he'd failed. What if they both got sick of him? What if they just felt guilty he'd gotten hurt?

He was staring out the window when Victor walked in with a tray. "I brought lunch," he announced, setting it down on the bedside table. "You're still not eating enough."

Zack nodded, forcing a smile he didn't quite feel. "Thanks."

Victor's eyes narrowed, studying Zack's face with the intensity that always made Zack feel like his mate could see straight through him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Zack said automatically, then sighed when Victor gave him a look that clearly said he wasn't buying it. "I just... I'm processing."

Victor sat on the edge of the bed, taking Zack's hand in his. "Talk to me."

Zack stared at their joined hands, struggling to put his jumbled thoughts into words. "I always thought I knew who I was," he finally said. "A bear shifter. Strong.

Protective. And now I find out I'm..." he trailed off.

"A strong omega?" Victor finished gently.

Zack looked at him, nonplussed, swallowing hard. "It feels like everything I believed about myself was wrong."

"Zack," Victor said, his voice unusually soft, "being an omega doesn't change who you are. You're still the same person—still strong, still protective. Look at how hard you fought to keep our baby safe."

"But I failed," Zack whispered, the words he'd been holding back finally breaking free. "You left me to protect Mo, and I couldn't even protect myself. What kind of mate does that make me?"

Victor's eyes flashed, not with anger but with fierce protectiveness. "It makes you a mate who was drugged and outnumbered by people who specifically targeted you because of how special you are." His grip on Zack's hand tightened. "No one could have fought them off alone."

Zack looked away, unable to meet Victor's intense gaze. "What if...what if this changes things between us? What if being an omega makes me..."

"Makes you what?" Victor prompted when Zack trailed off.

"Less," Zack admitted in a whisper. "Less than what you and Mo need."

Victor made a sound somewhere between a growl and a sigh. He shifted position, moving to cup Zack's face between his palms, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"Listen to me," Victor said, his voice low and fierce. "There is

nothing—nothing—about you that could ever make you less in my eyes or Mo's. You being an omega doesn't diminish your strength or your worth. If anything, it makes you even more remarkable."

Tears pricked at the corners of Zack's eyes. "But I'm supposed to be the protector, not the one who needs protecting."

"We protect each other," Victor said firmly. "That's what being mates means. Sometimes you'll be the one doing the protecting, sometimes it will be me or Mo." He fell silent but kept his eyes on Zack. "When Mama and Cecily died, don't you think I felt the same thing? Helpless? If I hadn't gotten caught by the gamma doing unsanctioned hunting, I would have been at home to protect them. They would still be alive."

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Zack shook his head. "You were twelve. It's not the same thing."

Victor reached over and cupped Zack's cheek. "It's my fault you got taken."

Zack's eyes widened. "Of course it wasn't," but he could see the glittering moisture in his alpha's eyes, and that made him pause. "Why do you say that?"

Victor swallowed heavily. "Because I didn't want you to stay here just to protect Mo. I made you stay because I couldn't put either of you at risk, and I failed spectacularly. I thought the wolves from the pack would be enough to keep you safe because I trained them. I knew every one of them." He leaned forward and brushed his lips over Zack's. "That's my failure, and I don't know how I'm going to live with that."

"Baby," Zack murmured, reaching out and drawing Victor into his arms. "What a pair we make."

Victor pressed his forehead against Zack's, their breaths mingling in the quiet of the room. "I love you," he said, the words he'd been holding back now flowing freely. "All of you—the bear, the omega, the man. Every part of you is precious to me."

The door opened, and Mo appeared with a tray of his own, stopping short when he saw the emotional scene before him. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Zack said, extending his hand toward Mo. "I think I am. We were just talking about...well, about me being an omega."

Mo set his tray down and climbed onto the bed, completing their circle. "And how do

you feel about that?" he asked gently.

Zack glanced between his two mates, drawing strength from their presence. "Confused. Scared. But...maybe a little relieved too."

"Relieved?" Victor questioned.

"Yeah," Zack admitted. "It explains things I never understood about myself. The way I've always felt around you both. How right it felt to accept the mating bite when everything I thought I knew said alphas didn't do that."

Mo snuggled into Zack's arms and looked at Victor. "I was just coming to tell you Raschid's here." He reached out and caught Victor's hand. "You know anything you decide is okay with us both, don't you?"

Victor nodded and smiled, but he knew he wasn't fooling either of them. He pressed a kiss to both their lips, then left. He was going to have to resign. There was no way he could be Raschid's beta commander and give both his mates the attention they deserved, and he couldn't take either of them away from here, even if the pack was close. He wanted to be a good mate, and he wanted to be a good father to Mattie and their unborn child. Something had to give.

But guilt clawed at him. Raschid had just about saved his life. Given him purpose. And this was how he was repaying him?

"Victor?"

He glanced over at Riley, who was just coming out of their office. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, before you get the urge to rip me apart," Riley grinned, his smile wide. "I just wanted to let you know that I examined Zack again earlier, and the baby's

development hasn't slowed down."

Victor's pulse picked up. "What does that mean?"

"He's fine, they both are, but more importantly, the baby could survive now on his own, should Zack go into labor." Victor breathed a huge sigh of relief. Miscarriage had still been a huge concern after what Zack had gone through, which was why Riley wasn't so much as leaving the house to go into the woods to shift. He'd told Victor privately about his concerns and agreed not to share it with Mo or Zack. Victor thanked Riley and carried on to see Raschid.

Raschid was in the kitchen with Alex. They were on their own, which surprised him. He bared his neck for his alpha briefly as a sign of respect, then wondered what to say. How to start.

"Victor, how's Zack?"

That brought a smile to his face. "Better. But Riley says no shifting. The baby has developed at such an alarming rate, Riley's worried a shift might hurt him."

"Him?"

"No idea, and I really don't care," Victor replied, then helped himself to a coffee and at Raschid's nod, sat down.

"I was coming to confirm that Pearson's lab and all the associated experiments have been destroyed. Asher and Riley have been able to go through the computers and do the same. Both doctors have lost their licenses, and have agree to no jail time in exchange for a gag order. I have no idea how Riley and Daniel managed that, but they won't be able to practice anymore."

Victor blew out a relieved breath. He didn't want it to ever happen again. His alpha glanced at Alex and then back at Victor. "We have an interesting development."

Victor guessed it was about Alex, but not what. They hadn't had much time to talk about Alex's developing alpha abilities.

"I have a new command for you."

Victor gazed at Raschid. A new command? He glanced at Alex, who met his gaze unflinchingly, then back to Raschid. "My alpha?" Victor prompted.

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“You have stood by me every moment since we were both teenagers. You’re an alpha yourself, yet you chose to submit to me, and that takes a special kind of strength.” Raschid nodded to Alex. “Alex will be a very strong alpha, but he needs the sort of steadying hand I was lucky enough to get in you. We have talked and Alex would very much like you to be his right hand. He needs someone with your experience to teach him to grow.” Victor’s lips parted in astonishment.

“I know I’m young,” Alex said, “and as such, you may feel it isn’t appropriate for you...” Alex squirmed a little and Victor’s eyebrows shot up. He’d never seen Alex look uncomfortable, but he knew what he was asking.

“You mean,” he glanced at them both, “for me to submit to Alex. For him to become my new alpha?”

Raschid inclined his head and then looked at Alex. So did Victor. This was a test of sorts. Alex swallowed but put his shoulders back. “Yes. I would be your alpha, but I desperately need a mentor. Everyone here has taught me and continues to teach me to be a better person, but I need someone to teach me to be a better alpha.”

Victor met Alex’s unflinching gaze. And Victor knew Alex could never submit to Raschid, so that sort of relationship was a non-starter.

“I haven’t decided about college or anything. I thought I knew what I wanted, but since feeling the call for pack, and with Noah, it’s become way more complicated.”

“And if he had a steadying hand here,” Raschid continued, “he could still pursue those goals. Alex has shared he is reluctant to leave his family without knowing they

are protected.”

Victor transferred his attention to Raschid. “This is your will?”

Raschid chuckled. “I like the idea of having my neighbors secure. Until the time comes for Alex to build his own pack, I am going to send a contingent of wolves here. There’s enough space for housing, but they will need organizing.”

Victor drew in a delighted breath. It was perfect. He could stay here, mentor Alex, and keep his family safe. Raschid stood. “I’m going to leave you two to discuss things.”

Victor stood as well. “Raschid, I—” But he didn’t finish whatever he was going to say, because his alpha drew him in for a firm but brief hug. “Making sure the next generation of wolves is secure is the most important thing you can do for either pack.” He slapped Victor on the back and nodded to Alex, then left.

Victor sat, stunned, but then he realized Alex hadn’t spoken, and focused on him. “My alpha, I would be honored to be your beta commander.”

Alex flushed, but his eyes sparkled. “I know I’m going to make lots of mistakes.”

“As will I,” Victor said, but then because Victor was a wolf submitting to his new alpha, he slowly bared his neck.

Alex's eyes flashed red, and his hand came up to gently touch Victor's throat, accepting the submission. The moment felt significant, like a torch being passed, though both wolves knew the real work lay ahead of them.

"Thank you," Alex said, his voice steadier than Victor expected. "I accept your submission, and I'll do my best to be worthy of your trust."

Victor straightened, studying the young alpha before him. He saw so much potential there—strength tempered with compassion, confidence balanced with humility. Raschid was right. The next generation of pack would be in good hands. Victor felt the subtle shift in their bond, the acknowledgment of a new hierarchy. It was strange but not uncomfortable—Alex had earned his respect through his actions, not just his potential.

"We'll start tomorrow," Victor said. "There's a lot to discuss, including how to integrate Raschid's wolves with the existing household."

Alex nodded eagerly. "I've been thinking about that. We'll need to establish clear boundaries, especially with the kids here. And with Zack's pregnancy—"

Victor felt a surge of pride at how quickly Alex was thinking of the practical considerations. "Exactly. But first—" He smiled, something he'd been doing more of lately. "I need to tell my mates about this new arrangement."

When Victor returned to their bedroom, he found Mo sitting on the bed beside Zack, reading aloud from a dog-eared paperback while Zack rested with his eyes closed, though Victor could tell he wasn't sleeping.

"How did it go with Raschid?" Mo asked, setting the book aside.

Victor leaned against the doorframe, taking in the sight of his two mates safe and together. The relief of it still hit him anew each time.

"It went...unexpectedly well," Victor replied, moving to sit on Zack's other side. The bed dipped under his weight. "I have news."

Zack's eyes opened fully, alert despite his lingering fatigue. "What kind of news?"

Victor took both their hands in his. "I've accepted a new position. As Alex's beta commander."

Mo's eyebrows shot up. "Alex? As in, our Alex?"

Victor nodded, a small smile playing at his lips. "Raschid suggested it. He's sending a contingent of wolves to strengthen the security here, and he wants me to mentor Alex as he grows into his alpha role."

"So, you're staying," Zack said, his voice thick with emotion. "Here. With us."

"Always," Victor promised, squeezing Zack's hand. "I was going to resign, but instead I've submitted to Alex as my alpha."

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Mo looked momentarily confused. " But he's just—"

"A young alpha who needs guidance," Victor finished. "Raschid believes, and I agree, that Alex has the potential to become an exceptional leader. But he needs someone with experience to help him develop those skills."

Zack covered Victor's hand with his own, tears welling in his eyes. "Are you sure? I know how important your position with Raschid is to you."

"It is," Victor assured him. "But this is more important. Being here, with both of you, with our family." His hand drifted to the small swell of Zack's abdomen. "With our children."

Mo's eyes shimmered with tears as he leaned across to kiss Victor softly. "I'm so proud of you."

"Besides," Victor added with a wry smile, "it's not as if we're going far. Raschid's territory borders ours, and this way, I can ensure our home remains protected."

"What about Alex?" Zack asked. "How did he take it?"

"Like an alpha," Victor replied, respect evident in his voice. "He understands the responsibility. He's young, but he has good instincts."

Mo laughed suddenly, the sound bright in the quiet room. "Our little family just keeps growing, doesn't it? First Noah and Jacob, then Khloe and Honey, now a contingent of wolves, and soon a baby."

Victor smiled. It was utterly perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They were all downstairs later, even Zack and Jacob, because the family was coming home, and Mo knew Zack was desperate to see his son. Mo had gotten Mattie a gift, and it had arrived that morning. He'd also found out that Jax, Riley's mate, was a luna wolf, which meant not only could he tell what their baby was going to be, but also whether they were going to be an alpha, omega, or a beta. He was excited. He also wanted to speak to Luke about his own plans. He wasn't in a hurry though, because the first time he shifted, he wanted to be able to share it with both his mates and Zack was currently banned from shifting.

He grinned as Khloe and Honey entered the living room, and Khloe practically danced with excitement as she skipped over. "I just spoke to Aunt Janelle."

"Wow," Mo grinned back. He hadn't had a chance to even think about their newly discovered aunt with what was happening with Zack. They'd briefly been told their mom had a falling out with her father about a boy, not Mo's dad, and had left the pack.

"She's an alpha," Khloe shared, her eyes huge, "and she's invited us both to visit. I told her it would be a while for you, but would you mind if Honey and I went?"

Mo hugged her. "Of course not."

"How are you planning on getting there?" Victor immediately asked, and Khloe chuckled. "If someone could get us to the Canadian border, Aunt Janelle will send her own enforcers to meet us." Victor nodded his agreement, then Mo noticed Daniel had arrived and was making a beeline for him. He took one look at Daniel's carefully controlled demeanor and his stomach dropped. Victor moved in close, obviously

feeling the same. Zack looked up and narrowed his eyes.

"I wondered if I could have a talk with you?" he nodded to the office and Mo stood, clasping Zack's hand.

"Just tell me," Mo whispered as soon as Daniel had closed the door.

"I'm sorry, but yesterday afternoon, your father got shanked in the prison yard. By the time they got him to the infirmary, he was dead. Of course I'll tell Khloe, but—"

Mo put his hand up. "No, I will."

Zack and Victor surrounded him. "I'm sorry," Zack whispered.

"Why?" Mo asked, still in shock. "He was a bastard to us."

"He was," Victor agreed, his arm tightening around Mo's shoulders. "But he was still your father."

Mo leaned into Victor's solid strength, surprised by the complex emotions swirling through him. Relief, guilt, a strange emptiness where anger had lived for so long.

"I should feel something more," Mo admitted quietly. "But all I can think is that he can't hurt Khloe anymore. Or anyone else." He looked up at Daniel. "Do they know who did it?"

Daniel shook his head. "The investigation is ongoing, but prison murders are notoriously difficult to solve. Most inmates won't talk, and cameras are often conveniently malfunctioning in these situations."

Zack took Mo's hand, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on Mo's palm. "Do you want

us to be there when you tell Khloe?"

"Yes, but later." Mo inhaled and stepped back a little. "I may have to process this some more." He shrugged. Or maybe not. Did it make him a bad person to feel such relief? No, he didn't think it did.

"Is Alex down yet?" Daniel asked.

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“I think he’s helping Noah with Jacob,” Victor said.

Daniel huffed. “I wanted to let him know he was on the money about the assistant coach. He was arrested an hour ago for identity fraud.”

“Come on, I want to meet Mattie and show him his present.”

“You got him a present?” Victor said, a little panicked. Mo grinned. “I got him one from you too.” He'd found a child-sized jeep that Mattie could actually drive around the property, with a remote-control override for when adults needed to take charge.

"He's going to lose his mind," Zack chuckled, knowing what it was, his hand resting on the noticeable curve of his stomach. "And probably run everyone ragged asking to drive it."

They heard excited voices from the kitchen when they opened the door and rushed to follow everyone else to the door where three large minivans were pulling into the driveway. Then it seemed like everyone was hugging and kissing and talking all at once. "Daddy!" Mattie's voice rang out, and Zack's face lit up with joy as the small boy broke away from the group and raced toward them.

Zack knelt, arms open wide, and Mattie crashed into him with the full force of a two-year-old's enthusiasm, his little arms wrapped tightly around Zack's neck.

Mo watched as Zack closed his eyes, holding his son close, the emotion on his face raw and unguarded. After everything they'd been through, this reunion felt like a missing piece sliding into place.

"I missed you too, buddy," Zack murmured, his voice thick. "More than you know." Then, much to Mo's consternation, he stood with Mattie still clutched in his arms, not able to hide the wince. Riley's head whipped around to his brother immediately, even as he was being greeted by his husband Jax and their kids. Victor noticed and reacted quicker than Mo could, and before Zack knew what was happening, he was sitting at the kitchen table with Mattie still clinging to him, insisting he was okay.

Mo relaxed. Mattie was adorable. He immediately put on Mo's gift—a t-shirt saying "Big Brother" in huge letters that Mo couldn't resist trying to help him spell out.

Then he opened the jeep and, of course, all the kids had to take a turn in it.

Zack sat and watched them all indulgently, until Daniel, Luke, and Olli decided to take their family home. Christopher disappeared with his wife and the rest of the kids, and just as he was deciding that bending down and lifting Mattie hadn't been kind on his back, both Riley and Jax appeared in front of him. Victor and Mo arrived as well, and he knew Jax was waiting for Zack to ask what he was having. "So," he said carefully. "I don't care what it is. I think I'd rather be surprised."

Jax chuckled. "Well, at least you don't have to wait long to find out."

Zack rolled his eyes but nodded. "You'd know more than me, but so long as everything's slowed down properly, then it could be another eight weeks, I'm guessing."

Jax and Riley looked at each other and Riley shook his head. "Try eight hours."

Jax snorted. "More like two."

Zack felt the color drain from his face. "What?"

“You’re in labor, buddy.”

“No,” Zack said, his voice rising in panic, and thankfully Alex appeared and lifted Mattie up, asking if he wanted to show him how to drive the jeep. “I can’t be. It’s too early.”

Riley bent down. “It’s okay. He’s going to be okay. He’s able to survive on his own.” He looked at Victor. “Let’s get him upstairs, yeah?”

“Upstairs!” Mo shrieked. “But we need an ambulance. What do you mean upstairs?”

Riley gazed at him. “Mo, he’s a guy—”

“I know,” Mo screeched. “But I also know you haven’t got a surgical area upstairs and Dr. Adams isn’t here.”

“Surgery?” Victor said. “What—”

“Because he needs a c-section,” Mo snapped, like Victor was the most stupid person on the planet.

Riley grinned and moved to Zack’s other side. Between him and Victor, they got him upstairs.

“Mo,” Jax said calmly when it looked to Zack like Mo was going to tear his hair out. “He doesn’t need a c-section. He’s going to give birth naturally.”

Mo paled. “What do you mean?” He waved a hand at Zack. “I’ve seen all that man has, and trust me, he’s a hole short.”

They all laughed and if Zack hadn’t had been struggling with his breathing, he might

have enjoyed the stunned look on Mo's face as Jax explained.

Mo flushed bright red. "You guys are never gonna let me forget this, are you?"

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Riley and Jax sprang into action, and soon Zack was back in bed. Jax had shown Mo where the protective mattress cover was and the clean sheets. Riley had given Victor a list of things to do simply to stop Victor leaning over them and growling because halfway up the stairs Zack's first contraction had hit, and Victor didn't like his mate in pain.

"Is it normal for it to happen this fast?" Mo asked, holding Zack's hand as another contraction rippled through him.

"For male shifters, yes," Jax replied, laying out sterilized instruments on a tray. "Especially bears. Once labor starts, it's usually quick and intense."

"But we thought we had more time," Victor said, returning with the supplies Riley had sent him for. His voice was steady, but Mo could feel his anxiety through their bond.

Riley patted Victor's shoulder reassuringly. "The accelerants they gave him at the facility are mostly out of his system, but they did their job. The baby is fully developed and ready to come. This is actually good—no more waiting and worrying."

Zack grimaced as the contraction eased. "Easy for you to say," he muttered, but there was no real heat in his words. His hand moved to rest on his belly, trying to calm down. "It's really happening."

"It really is," Mo whispered fiercely, pressing an intense, loving kiss to Zack's forehead. "And you're going to be phenomenal."

Zack met his gaze, eyes aflame with worry. "What if he isn't okay?"

"Zack," Riley cajoled. "Do you really think either Jax, who is the best midwife in the world, or I, who am the superior twin—" he teased, "—would let anything happen to either of you?"

The labor progressed faster than any of them had anticipated. Victor paced at the foot of the bed while Mo remained steadfastly at Zack's side, murmuring encouragement and wiping his brow with a cool cloth.

"You're doing great," Riley assured Zack, checking his progress. "You're already at eight centimeters. Won't be long now."

Zack gripped Mo's hand so tightly that Mo winced, though he never complained. "I can't believe this is happening," Zack panted between contractions. "We haven't even gotten the nursery ready."

"Don't worry about that," Mo soothed. The next contraction hit before Zack could respond, more intense than the previous ones. He arched up from the bed, a low growl escaping him as his bear responded to the pain.

"Breathe through it," Jax coached, his calm presence a counterpoint to the tension in the room. "That's it. Your body knows what to do."

When the contraction passed, Zack slumped back against the pillows, sweat beading on his forehead as he labored to control his breathing through the intense pain. "I need to push," he gasped, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and determination.

Riley checked him again and nodded. "You're fully dilated. On the next contraction, I want you to push."

Victor moved to Zack's other side, taking his free hand. "I'm here," he murmured, pressing his forehead against Zack's temple. "We both are."

The next contraction built quickly, and Zack bore down with a guttural growl, his face flushing with the effort.

"Good," Jax encouraged. "That's perfect, Zack. I can see the head."

Mo squeezed Zack's hand. "You're doing it, love. You're amazing."

Victor's eyes were wide with awe as he watched. His wolf was near the surface, his protective instincts heightened as his mate labored to bring their cub into the world.

"Rest a moment," Riley instructed as the contraction eased. "The next one should do it."

Zack panted, his eyes meeting first Mo's, then Victor's. "I love you both," he whispered. "So much."

"We love you too," Mo replied, tears streaming down his face.

The final contraction built, more powerful than all the others combined.

Zack's roar echoed through the room as he pushed with every ounce of strength he possessed, his body trembling with the effort.

"That's it," Jax encouraged. "Shoulders are coming... and—"

A tiny, indignant cry filled the room, cutting through the tension like a knife. Jax cradled the squirming newborn in his hands, a broad smile spreading across his face.

"It's a boy," he announced, his voice thick with emotion. "A healthy baby boy."

Mo let out a sob, his hand flying to his mouth as he stared at the tiny red-faced infant. Victor seemed frozen, his eyes wide with wonder as he took in the sight of his son for the first time.

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Riley quickly cleared the baby's airways before placing him on Zack's chest. "Here you go, Daddy. Meet your son."

Zack's arms came up instinctively to cradle the newborn, his tears flowing freely as he gazed down at the perfect little face. "Hi there," he whispered. "We've been waiting for you."

The baby's eyes blinked open—deep brown like Victor's—and seemed to focus on Zack's face for a moment before closing again, his tiny fists waving in the air.

"He's perfect," Mo breathed, reaching out to stroke the baby's downy, dark hair with trembling fingers. "Absolutely perfect."

"What are we calling him?" Mo asked.

Zack shook his head. "No idea." It had happened so quickly they'd never given a thought to names.

"Just a thought," Victor said. "Neither Mo nor I want him to have any association with our dads, but what about yours?"

"Christopher?" Zack asked.

"It suits him," Mo declared, so Christopher it was.

Epilogue - Six weeks later

Just about everyone was sitting in the yard, even Victor's wolves, or technically Alex's, but Victor knew Alex wasn't bothered. He was interested and had been involved as much as he could, but today was his eighteenth birthday party and many of them had a different sort of celebration to have tonight.

Mo cuddled Christopher after feeding him his bottle. He was nervous and excited and could feel his mates trying to soothe him through their bond. His best form of being soothed—not counting being in the middle of a naked body sandwich—was cuddling their son, so that was what he was doing. He was getting a wolf today, thanks to Luke, and would be shifting for the first time.

Jacob was also there because he too was getting a wolf. He hadn't spent too much time downstairs, as being cooped up in one room with barely anyone talking to him for much of his life had triggered severe anxiety when he ventured out. He was getting better though, and even though Luke had offered to visit him on his own, without an audience, Jacob wanted this very much.

Jacob had been told he was a shifter by Pearson repeatedly because his mother was one. Unfortunately, Jacob hadn't gotten the shifter gene, and an inexperienced Noah had no idea he could only smell his half-brother, not a shifter. Victor and Daniel had traced every so-called nurse Jacob had, and had found the first one, who had confirmed Jacob had actually been born in that house, but because his mom had been trapped for months by Pearson after he got her pregnant, she'd tried escaping the only time he'd relaxed security, which was during labor.

She'd fought his men and shifted in the middle of labor, harming Jacob, and because he wasn't a shifter baby, the damage had been irreparable.

Lucas could give Jacob a wolf. The problem, even if Jacob shifted successfully, they had no idea if his legs would work in that form. They couldn't use Martin as an example because he'd received his injury as an adult. He might run free in his wolf

form, but as a human, he still limped.

Noah had been a mess when they'd found out, and Jacob had told him to stop crying because none of it was his fault either, and "at least I'm alive." That simple statement had made Alex growl because he considered Jacob pack, and the look he'd given Victor had said it all.

"You ready?" Luke asked, approaching where Mo sat with the baby. His smile was gentle, reassuring.

Mo nodded, handing Christopher to his grandfather, who cradled him against his chest. "As I'll ever be."

Victor helped Mo to his feet, his hand lingering on the small of Mo's back. "Remember what we discussed. Don't fight it. Let the wolf's instincts guide you."

"And don't be afraid," Zack added softly. "We'll be right here waiting for you."

Mo kissed them both before following Luke to the clearing they'd prepared at the edge of the property. The area was enclosed by trees, giving them privacy for what was about to happen. Several of Victor's—Alex's—wolves had already formed a protective perimeter, ensuring no one would stumble upon them.

Jacob was already there, sitting in his wheelchair with Noah and Alex behind him, hands resting supportively on his shoulders. The young man's face was a mixture of fear and hope that made Mo's heart ache.

Mo gave Jacob a reassuring smile. "Nervous?" he asked, crouching beside the wheelchair.

"Terrified," Jacob admitted with a shaky laugh. "But in a good way, I think."

Luke approached them, his expression serene despite the enormity of what they were about to attempt. "We'll start with Jacob," he said. "Since this is a first-time shift for both of you, I want to give each my full attention."

Mo nodded and stepped back, joining Victor and Zack, who had followed at a respectful distance.

"Remember," Luke said to Jacob, "it's going to feel strange sharing your mind, but don't forget, your wolf only wants what is best for you."

Jacob nodded and looked up. "Like Noah and Alex." Noah squeezed his shoulder gently.

"What if—" Jacob started, then swallowed hard. "What if I still can't walk? As a wolf, I mean."

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Luke met his gaze steadily. "Then we'll know, and we'll adapt. But don't focus on that now. Just focus on meeting your wolf."

Luke placed his hands on either side of Jacob's face, his eyes shifting to that luminous silver that marked his unique abilities. The surrounding air seemed to thicken with power, a palpable energy that raised the hairs on everyone's arms.

"Close your eyes," Luke instructed softly. "Feel for the connection."

Jacob obeyed, his expression tightening with concentration. For several long moments, nothing seemed to happen. Then Jacob gasped, his eyes flying open—now a startling amber instead of their usual blue and brown.

"I can feel him," Jacob whispered in awe. "He's...waiting for me."

Luke nodded encouragingly. "That's right. Now reach for him, invite him forward."

Jacob's breathing quickened, his fingers gripping the arms of his wheelchair. A soft whimper escaped him, not of pain but of wonder.

"That's it," Luke murmured. "Don't fight the change."

The transformation began subtly—a shimmer in the air around Jacob, his features seeming to blur. Then came the shift in earnest, his body folding and reforming in that mysterious way of shifters that never ceased to amaze Mo.

Where Jacob had sat in his wheelchair now stood a sleek wolf with a coat of rich

chestnut brown fur, his amber eyes wide with shock and delight. For a heartbeat, he remained perfectly still, as if assessing this new form.

Then, tentatively, he moved one paw. Then another.

A collective breath was held as Jacob took his first hesitant step away from the wheelchair. His movements were unsteady, almost wobbling, but he was standing. Moving. His tail gave an experimental wag as he took another step, then another.

Noah dropped to his knees beside the wolf, tears streaming down his face. "You're doing it," he whispered. "Jacob, you're walking!"

The chestnut wolf took a few more cautious steps, gaining confidence with each movement. His gait wasn't perfect—there was a slight hitch to his movements that suggested the underlying damage wasn't completely erased—but he was mobile in a way he'd never been before.

Alex let out a joyful whoop, unable to contain his excitement. Jacob's head swung toward him, amber eyes bright with emotion, before he suddenly broke into a loping run, circling the clearing with growing speed.

"It worked," Zack breathed, squeezing Mo's hand tight. "Look at him go!"

Victor's arm tightened around Mo's waist. "That's the power of the wolf," he murmured. "Incredible."

Jacob completed his circuit of the clearing and returned to Noah, bumping his head against his brother's chest, tail wagging furiously. Noah wrapped his arms around the wolf's neck, burying his face in the thick fur.

"I'm so happy for you," Noah choked out. "So, so happy."

Luke was watching with a satisfied smile, though Mo could see the slight strain around his eyes that suggested the gift had taken something from him. "Your turn?" he asked Mo.

Mo nodded, suddenly breathless with anticipation. He stepped forward into the clearing as Jacob continued to explore his new form, Noah and Alex following him at a distance, giving him space to test his new mobility.

"Are you ready?" Luke asked, his voice gentle.

"Yes," Mo replied, surprised by the steadiness in his voice despite the butterflies in his stomach. "I want this."

Luke placed his hands on either side of Mo's face, just as he had with Jacob. The touch was warm, almost electric. "Close your eyes," Luke instructed. "And reach inside yourself. There will be a space there that feels...empty. Waiting."

Mo did as instructed, his eyelids falling shut. At first, he felt nothing but his own racing heartbeat and the gentle pressure of Luke's hands. Then, gradually, he became aware of something else—a presence, distant but distinct, like an echo of himself.

"I feel it," Mo whispered, not daring to open his eyes.

"That's your wolf," Luke confirmed. "I'm going to connect you now. Don't fight it, no matter how strange it feels."

A tingling sensation spread from Luke's fingers, flowing into Mo like warm honey. It traveled down his spine, branching out through his limbs until his entire body hummed with energy. Then came a sudden rush—like plunging into deep water—as something Other slipped into his consciousness. Mo gasped, overwhelmed by the sudden connection. The wolf felt ancient and new all at once, familiar yet entirely

foreign. It carried with it a sense of wild freedom, of forest scents and moonlit runs.

"Hello," Mo replied silently, amazed at how natural it felt to communicate this way.

I've been waiting for you, the wolf said. For so long.

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The change began before Mo could respond further—a rush of sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced. His skin tingled, bones shifted and reshaped, muscles stretched and contracted. There was a moment of discomfort that bordered on pain, but it passed quickly, replaced by an exhilarating sense of rightness.

When Mo opened his eyes, the world had transformed. Colors were muted, but scents exploded around him—the rich earth beneath his paws, the lingering traces of Jacob's passage, the distinctive markers of his mates standing nearby. He could smell their emotions—Victor's pride, Zack's joy, both tinged with love so strong it made his new heart stutter.

"Beautiful," he heard Victor murmur, his voice different to Mo's wolf ears but still achingly familiar.

Mo looked down at himself, seeing sleek legs covered in silver-gray fur. He took an experimental step forward, then another, marveling at the fluid strength of his new form. The wolf's instincts guided him, making movements that should have been awkward feel natural and graceful.

Jacob bounded over, his chestnut fur gleaming in the dappled sunlight. He woofed softly in greeting, tail wagging. Mo responded instinctively, touching his nose to Jacob's in a gesture of friendship.

Let's run, his wolf urged, excitement bubbling through their shared consciousness.

Mo glanced back at his mates, seeking their approval. Victor nodded, understanding without words what Mo was asking. "Go," he encouraged. "Experience it fully. We'll

be right behind you."

With that permission, Mo launched himself forward, Jacob keeping pace beside him. The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever known—the ground flying beneath his paws, muscles working in perfect harmony, the wind rushing through his fur. Freedom, in its purest form.

They ran together through the trees, instinct guiding them along safe paths. Mo's wolf knew exactly how to navigate this territory, how to avoid holes and low branches, how to leap fallen logs with effortless grace. Jacob kept up admirably, his gait showing only the slightest unevenness that did nothing to hamper his joy.

He knew the wolves running beside him were Victor and Alex, then from out of nowhere came a majestic white stag, protected by a huge black bear.

After what might have been minutes or hours—time seemed different in this form—Mo felt a gentle tug through his bond with his mates. It was time to return. With a soft bark to Jacob, he turned back toward the clearing.

When they emerged from the trees, Mo saw that his mates had already shifted and were pulling on clothes. Baby Christopher was cradled in Luke's arms, watching the returning wolves with wide, curious eyes.

Mo slowed his pace, suddenly uncertain. Shifting back seemed more intimidating than the initial transformation—what if he couldn't figure it out?

Just let go, his wolf advised. Think of your human form.

Mo closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation of standing on two legs, of fingers instead of paws, of speaking rather than barking. The change rippled through him, not quite painful but intensely strange, like his entire body was being redrawn.

When he opened his eyes, he was human again, kneeling naked on the soft grass. Victor was already draping a blanket around his shoulders while Zack approached with clothes.

"That was..." Mo began, struggling to find words adequate for the experience. "Incredible. I had no idea it would feel like that."

"Like finding a piece of yourself you never knew was missing?" Zack suggested with a knowing smile.

"Exactly," Mo breathed, leaning into Victor's steady support as he rose to his feet on shaky legs. "Everything was so clear—the smells, the sounds. And running..." He shook his head in wonder. "I've never felt so free."

Jacob had shifted back as well, now dressed and sitting in his wheelchair again. But his face was transformed, radiant with joy as Noah and Alex hovered protectively nearby.

"I walked," Jacob said, his voice trembling with emotion.

And for a moment, Mo was sad that his wolf hadn't enabled Jacob to walk in his human form, but then he realized that it didn't matter. The wheelchair didn't take anything from the young man. It didn't change his personality; if anything, it enhanced it. Jacob was an incredible young man, clever, eager, and full of love. He would make an amazing mate for someone one day.

Mo joined his mates and their son, and watched as the barbecue was lit and the sound of laughter filled the air. He listened as Victor discussed building a house for them to straddle both Hunter's Creek and the pack lands. He loved the idea of a house close to the pack, as he was now going to split his time between the pack school and Hunter's Creek so he could help those kids that needed extra help, and he couldn't wait until their family grew even bigger.

He looked around the yard they had walked back to. There was barely a spare inch of space, but he knew they would always make more. And for the first time in his life, Mo knew he was exactly where he was meant to be.

Home.