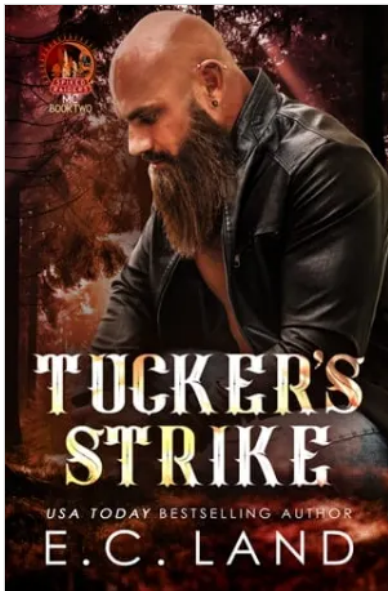




Tucker's Strike (Spiked Raiders MC #2)

Author: E.C. Land

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Nothing comes without a price. Not life. Not death. Not fate.

Lake

Living on the run is never easy. Everywhere I turn, an enemy is striking out at me. I don't know who to trust or why they're after me. I've been hunted for as long as I can remember, living on the edge of my seat, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

Until I found myself in the town of Redwich. There's something about this place that speaks to me. It's different, and I love it. I feel safe here, like I can finally settle. But then it's all ripped away from me.

Secrets are revealed in a big way I didn't expect, and I'm not sure I want to pay the heavy price of what's coming for me.

But meeting Tucker changes it all.

Fate has a wicked sense of humor and isn't done striking me down. It's a curse that only one man can save me from.

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Page 1

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Lake

Six Years Old . . .

“You’re a special little girl, my precious Lake,” Daddy says, soothing my hair, his touch warm. It’s always warm. Warm and safe. Daddy is all I’ve ever known.

Mommy died when I was born. Daddy told me that she was watching over me, though. I didn’t like that she was gone and I didn’t have a mommy like the other little girls in my class. They get to do things with their mommies, but I don’t get to. Their mommies do their nails and hair. They take them for mommy-daughter dates.

I get daddy-daughter dates. He also does my hair for me and makes me look pretty. He tells me just how pretty he thinks I am. He says the same thing. They’re all very protective of me.

“You always say that, Daddy.” I giggle and curl deeper into his warm body.

“Because it’s the truth, precious,” he states, snuggling his arms around me. “I want you to always remember that. No matter what happens in life. You’re special.”

“Why am I special, Daddy?”

“When you’re old enough to understand, I’ll tell you. If I can’t, one of your uncles will,” Daddy’s answer is always the same. “Just trust me that we’re always going to do what it takes to protect you. It’s important you’re always protected.”

“But I don’t understand why,” I whisper, not understanding.

“In time, my precious girl, you will,” he murmurs, kisses the top of my head, and climbs out of my bed. “Now get some sleep, Lake. Tomorrow will be here for you know it.”

“Okay, Daddy, love you.” I look up at him while moving to snuggle closer to where he’d been lying.

“Love you too. Night.”

“Night.”

Daddy switches off the light and closes the door behind him. The soft glow of my night-light flickering images of tigers on the ceiling, is all that shines in the room.

It’s the night-light I’ve had all my life, and Daddy says it’s because tigers are fearless and will protect. I love it when Daddy tells me stories of tigers. Especially the ones where the tiger turns into the prince. It’s way better than the frog prince story I heard in library at school.

Closing my eyes, dreams of tigers and the tiger prince follow me quickly.

Callum

“If we don’t move soon, they’ll find her,” my brother, Rohan, says, not waiting until I take my seat.

Lake was finally asleep, and I waited just outside her door until she drifted off. Each day, looking at her pains a part of me that I hope she’ll never understand or have to experience herself. Her mother was my mate, fated only to me, but I found her too

late. She was pregnant at the time, and our time together was too short.

“We’ll leave first thing tomorrow,” I tell him, looking at my other brothers sitting around the table.

Until Lake came along, I hadn’t seen them often unless one of us needed something. It’s part of who we are and being what we are. Tiger shifters don’t always seek to be around others unless they’re a part of their streak, their family.

Where other felines have prides or leaps, tigers call their family a streak.

Rohan, Jair, Walker, and Trace are a part of mine. Our mother was mated and killed alongside our father well over a hundred years ago. We were old enough to take care of ourselves, but it hurt losing them both, no matter how old we were. To this day, I miss them. Our father’s teachings, his advice, the way he’d be an ass toward us. I miss the smiles my mom would give us, the smell of her cooking, and I even miss her temper. She could be more temperamental than anyone else. It’s part of who she was. She was a force to be reckoned with.

After our parents were killed, we separated and went our own ways. Only when Lake came along did I ask them to join me again. I need their help protecting Lake. She’s not mine by blood, but she’s mine regardless. She’s special, just as her mother was.

She is so special she doesn’t realize it. She’s just a little girl, and her life will never be easy, not without someone looking out for her. It’s my job to protect her. To see to it that she’s always protected.

“I don’t think we should wait, Callum.” Trace grunts, flexing his fingers, his claws coming from the nail bed. Some days, he’s more tiger than man, but he’d die to save Lake. The moment she came into this world, she wrapped her finger around all of my brothers’ hearts alongside mine. The bond I share with her is through the one I had

with her mother.

It wasn't until after I found her that Sapphire found out she was pregnant with Lake. I'd been the one to tell her she was carrying a child. At first, I was pissed, but I knew what happened and wherein she'd escaped from.

Sapphire explained it was of utmost importance that Lake never be found. If they got their hands on her, she didn't know what would happen, except she'd become a tool, a pawn for a man who is cruel to those he rules over.

My little Lake would be chained to a man who is as vile as they come. For the past six years—more than six, closer to seven—we've done everything we've had to do to protect her. To ensure her safety. We never stay in one place too long. We do, we chance being found.

"Why do you believe we should head out tonight?" I ask. If he senses something that I don't, then I'll listen to what he has to say.

"There's something in the air. I can't identify it, but it's there and doesn't sit well with me," Trace responds, eyes locking with mine.

"I feel it too," Rohan states, nostrils flaring. "I can smell it. I just can't figure out what it is."

"Same," Jair and Walker speak up at the same time.

I felt it as well, and we need to be getting out of here before it's too late. If we don't, I'll lose the most important person in my life.

There's no way in hell I'll let the King of Drakon get his hands on my little girl. He'd have to kill me first.

I glance around the table and stand. “Gather everything we need, and I’ll get Lake. We leave now. If we’re all feeling the same, then they’re close. I refuse to allow Drakon beasts to get ahold of her.”

We all must run before it’s too late. We’re not enough to go against the beasts. Not alone. To take them all on, to ensure my daughter’s safety, it’s best to run. Run for now, until the time is right. Only then can we strike out and take on the evil King of Drakon and his beasts.

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Tucker

Things are certainly changing around the clubhouse. With our President finding his fated mate, more or less her finding him, or more precisely, Dane bringing her to the clubhouse and the two of them finding each other at the exact moment, it's been interesting around here.

It's been a couple months since Corbin and Karsyn found each other. After the hell they both went through, none of us complained about the changes made. Karsyn not only deserves the respect, but she's also damn well earned it.

So, we didn't get pissed when Corbin changed shit up at the clubhouse about the Friday night parties. Things could get rowdy, and nothing was wrong with it, but he's declared fucking the doxies is to be behind closed doors. Karsyn didn't need to see that shit, and we all agreed.

Hell, in all honesty, I think a few of us are jealous of the connection Corbin and Karsyn have. Personally, if I knew where to find my fated mate, I would be out there looking for her, but I highly doubt I have one.

Felines rarely, if ever, find their fated mates. I don't think I've ever known a tiger shifter who has. It's why I hold no hope of this. I could easily choose a mate. There are plenty of women I could choose from, but that's not what I want. At least not right now.

Until I'm ready, I have no problem fucking my way through the doxies or random women or shifters that I pick out for whichever day of the week I want them.

“Tucker,” Karsyn calls my name, getting my attention as she makes her way toward where I’m manning the grill for the evening party.

Unlike the Friday parties, this one is for family and friends. Sage and her cousin, Jazmine, were running around here. Cyrus was even here with a few members of his club and his ol’ lady and mate, Harmony.

I’m sure Big Daddy is ecstatic to be able to enjoy something like this without the hostility between his sons. Corbin made it known that they weren’t enemies any longer, that the rivalry was in the past, but they weren’t going to be best buds either. Just as Corbin ran our club his way, Cyrus had his own way of doing things. It wasn’t any of my business as long as it didn’t affect the club.

“Yeah,” I yell out, seeing my Prez following behind his mate, eyes on her. I glance down to see her hand resting over her rounded stomach protectively. Or more like soothingly because she honestly doesn’t have anything to fear here. Each and every one of us would give our lives for her. “You need something?”

Karsyn stops and looks at me closely. “Something is coming, and you need to be prepared for it,” she announces and looks to Corbin, who nods at her.

“What do you mean I need to be prepared for it? What’s coming?”

“It’s not a what, it’s more of a who,” she answers, whispering. “The Moon Goddess came to me.” I knew this had happened once before. No one talks about it because, honestly, even in a world full of shifters and other supernaturals, it’s freaky as hell. “She had a message for you.”

“And that is?” I prompt.

“Your mate is coming, and on her tail is danger, something that if you don’t protect

her from it, then it'll take her from you forever," Karsyn utters soft enough that no one else in the vicinity would be able to hear her. She's definitely learning when it comes to shifters, we all have sharp hearing. She might be a hybrid, but she wasn't raised among shifters, so there's more for her to learn.

"Come again?" I balk and stare at her in disbelief.

"She's in danger, Tucker. If you don't strike now, you'll lose her before you even have her."

Well, shit.

This is not what I expected by a long shot.

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Chapter One

Lake

Present day . . .

“Come on, Lake, you’re a twenty-six-year-old woman. You need to stop all this mess,” I mutter to myself, unpacking my few possessions out of the box.

I’ve been on the road for so long, running, never looking back, that I don’t know how not to run. It’s all I’ve done all my life. A life where I’m constantly looking over my shoulder. For what exactly? I don’t know.

Up until my thirteenth birthday, I had my dad and uncles to look out for me. To help me. But one by one, they were killed. Dad made sure I knew about safety precautions to look out for, but I was never more than just a step ahead of the danger following me.

What I don’t understand is what exactly I have chasing me. I haven’t ever seen it before. Only felt the panic rise inside me as something came closer. I’ve gone all over to get away from it. Across oceans, never staying in a place longer than needed.

That is until I entered into the town of Redwich. The first time I crossed into town, it was like a sense of ease for me. I felt safe for the first time in my life. It somewhat hurts to think this way because I thought with my dad and uncles, I would always be safe, but I lost them all.

I swear I'm cursed. I've lost anyone who I've ever cared about. Anyone who helps me seems always to wind up being killed. Or that's the only thing I can think of happening. Nobody is left where I'd last seen them—only blood. Enough so, I'm sure no one could survive with the amount of blood lost.

I sometimes look to the sky and plead . . . to who . . . I don't even know, but I just want someone to listen. To help me. To save me. To give me back the ones I love most.

But I'm alone. Always alone.

I guess that's why coming to Redwich and getting a sense of security within the town eases some part inside me. There's a lot still to do. I have a job to make up the money I've spent so far from being on the run constantly. I'm never in one spot long enough to hold down anything permanent. It's usually something under the table and quick earning.

My dad had made sure I had money, and I did. I didn't like dipping into it unless it was a must. It's important that I make it last for as long as I can. What I'm able to make, it's never more than a hundred or so.

Maybe that's why I'm hoping with how this town makes me feel, I can stay long enough to recoup. With the possibility of hopefully getting some rest.

I pull the night-light that I've had forever out of the box and set it down next to the bed. Plugging it in, I tilt my head back to look at the ceiling. A sense of ease washes over. Just as it does any other time I look at tigers. They're beautiful creatures. Sometimes, I wish I were one of them. If I were, my dad and uncles wouldn't have been taken away from me.

No matter how different I was from them, they never treated me as such. To my dad,

I was always his special little girl. My uncles, I was their little fighter. If I'd been like them, I wouldn't be running from something I don't know about. They never told me about it. Just that I was special and that I wouldn't understand because I'd been so young. What they did was tell me that I needed not to ever come in contact with a shifter of any kind.

That's something I didn't understand either. I thought because they were shifters I could, but they were adamant I was to never come in contact with any other shifter. None whatsoever. Uncle Jair once said it's because I was special, and life depended on secrecy. Until the danger was gone, I was to stick to the shadows.

Sighing, I shake my head and look at the time, blinking bright green numbers. It's just after one in the afternoon. There is plenty of time to explore the town and find the grocery store. Maybe scope out places with the potential for me to work at.

I make a mental list of what I need for groceries. Not much. Mainly milk, eggs, bread, and some lunch meat. I don't know how to do much, but I've learned to cook eggs on a stove. Add in lunch meat, it makes for a good meal. It's better than going hungry, which I've done a lot while in hiding, not knowing when the best time to go out would be. To which I learned was afternoon. No chance of me being caught out when the day meets the night and vice versa.

Those are the times I really feel the danger closing in on me.

I don't know what else to think or how to behave in some cases when I think of the danger. At the end of the day, though, all I do is run. I never turn back and fight. I never stand up for myself. Not once do I wait to see the dark void coming for me. The depths of evil want me so badly, I can feel it before it can ever get close enough to touch.

Walking through town, I keep my head down not wanting to draw attention to myself.

I have a lot of reasons to want to keep to myself. Mostly, it's what I learned when I first explored the town.

Redwich is a shifter town. How do I know? I'm not sure, but I'd seen a group of guys out on bikes passing by, and just the looks of them screamed shifter. As long as you knew what to look for. Another thing I found in exploring the town is that some of the names of businesses as I passed them had names similar to what you would think of as werewolves, like Moonlight Ink or Club Heat. I didn't need to go into the tattoo parlor or the nightclub. There was one other place I found called Dyrk. The vibes were definitely darker than that of anything else. The place screamed danger and I knew I best steer clear of it.

All of them, if I can.

Regardless of all the shifters, it's the first time I've felt secure in one place. I'll be happy if I can keep feeling this way for just a couple weeks. Long enough for me to regain my strength. For months, I'd felt myself waning away and losing hope. The determination to keep going was weakening inside me.

Being in this town, I'm hoping that I'll be able to find both hope and determination once more.

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Chapter Two

Tucker

“Your mate is coming, and on her tail is danger, something that if you don’t protect her from it, then it’ll take her from you forever.”

Karsyn’s words swirl around in my head for the hundredth time since she said it a little over a week ago. A part of me doesn’t want to believe her. It would be stupid to do so. Karsyn isn’t just an earth witch. She’s more than that. Only one person knows exactly what she is, and that’s her mate, my Prez. Sure, we all know she’s special and has sight.

I witnessed it once. When she’d first gotten to the clubhouse and showed Corbin. Because of her gifts and that she’s Corbin’s mate and ol’ lady, she’s to be protected at all times. We can’t let anything happen to her especially now that she’s carrying an alpha pup inside her.

The club can’t allow anything to happen to her or the babe. Just as we can’t allow anything to happen to Corbin’s daughter, Sage. She’s just as special, and only a few know just how much so. Sage is also just a little girl—a shifter who has yet to grow as she will.

Shifters don’t shift for the first time until they’re thirteen. It’s a slow process for shifter pups and cubs. First, they have to get their sense of smell and strength at ten years old. They’ll also grow in speed. This gives them a chance to learn control before the first shift. At sixteen, once they’ve had time to learn to control themselves

as a fully shifted shifter, they'll be able to half-shift.

I never understood the reason for entirely shifting before being able to half-shift, but I'm sure it has to do with earning the connection with the beasts within us.

From the moment Karsyn spoke those words about my mate, the tiger within my very skin has been more than ready to go in search of her. Find her. Claim her. Protect her. Keep her. It's what he demands. She's in danger, supposedly so. But I've no way of knowing who she is. What she looks like. Who she's in danger from. It could be nothing at all.

Earlier today, I felt something while riding with my brothers through town, heading back from Dyrk. I couldn't put my finger on it or stop to investigate it. We had to get back to the clubhouse and prepare a shipment going out tonight with Abel, Dane, Jackson, and Salem. Club business has to come before all else, it's what matters to me. They took me in when I didn't think I'd be able to keep myself sane after watching those within my streak slaughtered by blood witches.

I never understood why I was spared that night. I lost my sisters, mother, and even my two brothers, who were just little cubs who couldn't protect themselves. It's my reason for hating witches.

Granted, since meeting Karsyn and even Harmony, Cyrus's mate, they've helped focus that hate on those who deserve it.

"You good, Tuck?" Dane asks, slapping a hand on my shoulder and motions to Hips to get him a drink.

"Yeah, I'm good," I mutter and shift slightly on my seat, not liking his attention on me right now.

I would prefer to be left to myself so I can get my mind off the fact my mate is out there and in trouble. A mate I know nothing about.

Dane looks at me closely, brows furrowed, nostrils flaring.

Damn wolf.

Setting the drink down on the bar, I get to my feet. "I'm gonna head out," I tell him. "See you later."

"Later," Dane calls out, his tone knowing. He knows I'm going to go riding again. I won't see him or the others before they ride out to handle the order they're delivering to another club we're allies with, the Moon Howlers MC.

The only thing about finding her is I can't sense her. Not really. Earlier today, I thought I sensed something, but I can't be sure what it was. It could've been anything. I don't know what she looks like, but I'm sure I should be able to sense her if she's close enough.

Karsyn had said she was coming, and I needed to be ready. She hadn't exactly stated when she was coming, only that she was. For all I know, she could already be here, and I wouldn't even know it.

Shaking the thoughts away, I make my way out of the club.

"Tucker, hold up."

I do so and slowly spin around to face my Prez. "What's up, Prez?"

"Wanted to check on you," he remarks, stopping in front of me. His eyes shielded behind the dark sunglasses he wears, but I don't have to see them to know he's got

them narrowed.

Since Corbin found his mate, he's been constantly on alert. More so since Sage told her about what she sees, the gift that girl has is something I didn't know was possible.

"I'm good." Was I, though? I'm a tiger shifter who supposedly has a fated mate. Having a mate that isn't chosen is a big deal for tiger shifters. It's rare that we have them. I guess knowing I do, it's fucking with my head. It's driving me up the wall not being able to find her.

"Karsyn asked me to give you this." Reaching into his back pocket, Corbin pulls out a slip of paper. "Says it might help you find her."

I take the paper from Corbin's outreached hand and look at it.

It's an address.

"Appreciate it." I nod, lifting the paper in between two fingers.

"Didn't do anything, brother, except give you the message." Corbin shrugs. "She wanted to give it to you herself but wasn't feeling good."

"She okay?" I ask, seeing the grimace crossing his features.

"She will be. Just needs to rest. I've got a call into a healer. Waiting for them to come so we can have her looked over," he explains and lets out a ragged breath.

"You know your woman is gonna be fine. She's a fighter."

It was nothing but the truth. Karsyn was a survivor. She might be dainty and petite, but she's a fighter.

Corbin nods, then shakes his head. “Enough with the pussy talking shit. Let me know if you find her. Bring her back here, and we’ll find out what the fuck she’s running from. We don’t need any surprises.”

“If she’s there.” I nod. Hell, she might not be. This could be just a dead end.”

If the tiger inside me weren’t clawing at my insides to find her, I wouldn’t even bother. I’ve been alone other than my brothers this long. It’s not like I need anyone in my life who isn’t already a part of it.

This club, they’re my family. They might not replace the ones I lost, but they’re there for me, and the same goes for me.

I pivot on the toe of my boot and make my way to my bike. I didn’t have to see the address again to know where I was heading. The little house that the address belongs to isn’t just any place in this town. I know where it is because it’s a property that belongs to me and is managed for me by a company in town that deals in rentals as well as selling houses.

Even better. I already have the key to the place. It means whoever it is that moved in will be shocked to find me walking in if they’re home.

Chapter Three

Lake

Someone's inside.

My heart races, beating wildly. Someone is in my house.

I stare at the door to the tiny little home I rented. The doors closed, but I can feel there's a person just on the other side of it. A shiver courses down my spine. Whoever the person is, they're a shifter. I don't know how I know this, I just do. I've always been able to tell shifters apart from regular humans.

I should probably turn and run. Leave everything I own in there and go. Get as far away from here and not look back.

However, my feet refuse to do such. Instead, I find myself creeping toward the door. I barely get my hand on the doorknob before the door is thrown open, and an enormous beast of a man is standing there just inside the tiny house. Eyes glowing gold, lips drawn back, teeth flashing.

"Mate," he snarls, animalistically. One of his hands clamps on my wrist and yanks me through the threshold, slams the door closed, only to shove me against it and get in my space. With him this close, I not only feel his head but see the stripes licking at his skin the way it did my dad and uncles when their animal was close to the surface.

"Mate," he says again, dipping his head down as he sniffs. He surprises me further

when he lets go of my wrist and cages me with his full body against mine as he nuzzles my hair and murmurs again. “Mate.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” I blurt out, not understanding him. I mean, I knew what a mate was for shifters. My mom had been my dad’s fated mate. He never found another after her. He says the love he had for her was too strong for him ever to replace it.

“Mate.”

The gruff, harsh, gravelly voice sends tendrils of sensations along my spine. Something in the back of my mind screams at me to run. However, that little voice isn’t as loud as the other one, telling me I need to lean into this man and hold on tight, which I don’t get. I’ve always run. This beast of a man, this tiger shifter, I should be fighting to escape from him.

“Found you, Mate,” he says, nuzzling the side of my neck.

“Again, why do you keep saying that? And you need to step back. Haven’t you heard of personal space,” I mutter. My survival instincts finally kick in, overriding the other sensations that want to cloud my judgment.

I press my hands firmly against his chest to shove him away. What I didn’t expect was the heat radiating from him to flow through my palms like a warm fire does when you’re cold inside.

Thankfully, he does as I want him to and steps back, though only a step. Still, it’s enough for me to get a good look at him.

The stripes on his face recede, and his dark eyes are taking me in as much as I’m taking him. His head is shaved and smooth, and I wonder if he has to wear a cap of

some kind to keep the cold at bay. Shifting my gaze further, I take in the neatly trimmed but longest beard. I can feel a tingle at the thought of feeling how soft his beard is—and maybe having it touching another part of my body. A place where no one has ever touched me before.

At his ear, he has a bar going through the upper lobe and another circle thing. I'm not sure what it's called at the bottom.

Thanks to always being on the run, I didn't get to go to school or even keep up with a lot of modern things. I did at least learn from my uncles and dad. They taught me to read and to write. Use my head. I wasn't stupid by any means, but I didn't have time to keep up to date on all the newest stuff in the world or why people pierced their bodies or got tattoos.

This is the first time I'm actually staying in a house in a town rather than finding a no-name motel where no one asks questions. It's different for me. Probably even stupid because I risked someone finding me. And in the end, I was found.

Just not by the ones looking for me, but a whole different type of threat. One I don't understand just yet.

Looking farther down, I take in the leather jacket he's wearing overtop of a black tee, the very tee I have my hands pressed against. His legs are clad in jeans, and his feet are covered in motorcycle boots. I lift my gaze back up, stopping on his chest and seeing more than just his jacket. It has patches on it, just like the ones I saw earlier in the day on the men riding motorcycles.

My dad and uncles always said they had friends, allies who were a part of clubs, so I knew what this man was associated with. At one time, my dad called upon one of his friends to help us lay low for a few days. I remember it as clear as day. It had been my ninth birthday. Dad and my uncles took me to their friend's place. They said we

were staying with them so they could celebrate my birthday. But looking back, I knew it was because my uncle Trace was hurt. He needed time to heal. They all still made my birthday special.

Shaking the thoughts away, I clear my throat and finally meet his gaze. “Would you like to explain what you’re doing in my home?” I demand, dropping my hands from his chest to plant them on my hips. “Maybe explain how you got in here? Oh, and a name would be good so I can chew you out by name.”

The beast of a man looks at me closely. His lip twitches, and he reaches up to touch the right side of his jacket. “Name’s Tucker.”

My eyes follow to see just that. His name is sewn into the jacket, and underneath it, another patch that reads Enforcer. I don’t know what that means, but I’m not stupid to the definition.

“Okay, Tucker , you going to answer the rest of my questions?” I demand, but I’m sure it doesn’t come out as such.

Tucker’s lip stops with the twitch, and he outright grins.

The nerve.

“Got in using the key to the house.” Tucker dips down, and the grin turns devious. “I own the place, little Fae.”

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Chapter Four

Tucker

Fae, fucking Fae. This woman, my mate, is a damn fairy. You can smell it on her. It's not as strong of a scent, from a distance you wouldn't be able to distinguish the scent from that of other humans.

Close up, however, you can smell it on her, and it's a heady scent that goes straight to my cock. It took all my willpower to keep from attacking her. Not that I'd hurt her, but I'd have taken her right there against the goddamn door.

I watched her as she took me in. I know she saw my stripes. My tiger had been close to the surface. He wanted out. He wanted me to claim her, but it was too damn soon. I could scent the fear on her just as much as I could have her being a Fae.

"You have a key?" she whispers.

Just the sound of her voice, the sing-song tone of it, even when she planted those hands on her hips and made her demands. It was like her voice was a song as she spoke. Beautiful, serene. It drew me in just as much as her scent did.

"Yeah, it's my house. I do the repairs on it," I tell her, itching to pull her back to me.

"But you can't just come in here." She balks.

I take a sidestep and glance around the little house. It's not big by any means. I

bought it as an investment, to give myself something to do in my spare time. I fixed it up alongside Abel, Jett, and Quincy. We're in the process of working on another place, but it wasn't meant to be an investment, rather my place.

Before she'd gotten here, I had a moment to take the place in and the few items that she had. The house came furnished, and she's only unpacked a few things—a blanket and sheet for her bed. A night-light was placed next to the side of the bed. It looked old like something a little girl would have. It also had the scent of a shifter on it. Curious, I flipped it on, saw tigers circling around on the ceiling, and found it interesting.

A thousand questions rolled around in my head, all of them I want answers to. Like how a little Fae such as she is, has a night light that smells of shifters. Then there's the fact she's here alone.

The Fae are known to stay hidden, sticking to themselves. Staying where they can't be found. It's a rarity to have found a Fae alone as she is. They protect each other. Then again, she's not full Fae. She's only half, which I find interesting. I'd never heard of a halfling Fae. It's truly uncommon, as they're rumored to only reproduce with their own kind.

If this knowledge were to get out . . . to become known to others . . .

Fuck.

Is this the reason behind what Karsyn told me? Is it because of her parentage that she's in danger?

"I want you to leave," she says, pointing to the door. Her words bring me out of my thoughts.

She wants me to leave. I'll be leaving, but she'll be going with me. With the knowledge of what she is, there is no way I am leaving my mate alone.

"I'm not leaving," I tell her, cocking my head to the side. "What's your name?" I ask.

"What?" She blinks, head jerking.

"Name? You know mine, it's only fair I know yours."

The beauty that is my mate, she's a spritely thing. Her hair a mass of curls, all wavy and vibrant red. Her body is that of a woman demanding a man's or beast's touch. I'm willing to bet her tits would fit perfectly in my hands. If she turned around, I'm willing to bet her ass would be just as perfect in my hands. She's small, but I'd still be able to lift her and have her legs curl about my waist. Those legs might not lock together, still, she'd be able to do it while I palmed her ass in my hands at the same time thrusting inside her pussy.

Fuck me. The thought has my cock stiffening all the more. Which is exactly what I don't need it to be doing right now.

"I have a right to know your name, considering you were in my home when I got here." She huffs, cheeks turning a cute little blush color as she crosses her arms in front of her.

My eyes go straight to her chest as her movement pushes up her tits, putting them further on display. The top she's wearing isn't overly tight, but it is low cut and shows off the cleavage she has.

"Eyes up here, bucko," she snaps and cocks her hips.

I give her my eyes once again, a grin tugging at my lips. "You put it on out there, I'm

gonna look, my little Fae.”

“Little Fae?” Her cheeks brighten further. “I’m not your little anything.”

“Oh, but you are. You’re my mate,” I tell her, not beating around the bush.

“I’m not your mate,” she snaps rather than demanding to know why I keep saying that or what it means.

Which confirms she knows about shifters.

“You are my mate,” I state sternly, reaching for her.

Unfortunately, she jumps back before I can do so and steps farther away. Far enough so, I’m not able to touch her or feel her closeness. The scent of her still lingers in my nostrils, toying with my senses.

“Stop saying that. I’m not your mate, damnit,” she declares, stomping her foot. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not leaving,” I growl, my tiger demanding I force her to submit. The defiance I see in her riles the beast in more ways than one. “Whether you believe me or not, I’m your damn mate. I know you know what shifters are and what it means to be a mate.”

“How would you know I know that?”

The way she drops her arms and plants them on those hips of hers . . . fuck . . . she’s a beauty. I want nothing more than to sink my fingers in her hair, hold her still, and claim those lips. To hear her moans as I kiss her deep and thoroughly. To hear her plead for more than just my mouth touching hers, plundering her mouth as I want.

Fuck. I need to quit thinking like this before I end up losing control. The last thing I need to do right now is scare the hell out of my mate.

“Because you saw my stripes and didn’t freak. You saw the tiger inside me and looked at me like I was any other person. I’m willing to bet the shifter who gave you that night light of yours was a tiger shifter.” My question is, who was the shifter? There’s no scent of a shifter on her, just on that night-light.

“So what?” she snipes, lip curling, but I notice the way her eyes dilate and her nostrils flare. The fear licks at my skin as it reaches out to me.

Interesting.

Taking a step toward her, she moves back. We do this until I back her against the counter dividing the small living space with the kitchen. “Tell me your name, little Fae.”

My mate stares up at me with those wide eyes of hers, licks her bottom lip, and gives me the answer I was waiting for. “Lake. My name is Lake Wildthorn.”

What I didn’t expect was her last name. I hadn’t heard the Wildthorn name in years. Not since the death of my family and the alliance between the Wildthorns dissolved. All that had been left was me, and there was no female to select.

Fate is one cruel bitch when she wants to be, and this goes without saying, she’s got one twisted mind with the games she’s playing. However, knowing what that game is, is a whole other ordeal. My mate has the Wildthorn last name. A tiger shifter name. But she’s not a tiger. She’s a Fae, half Fae. Everything grows more interesting by the minute.

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Chapter Five

Lake

“What’s your father’s name?” Tucker asks as he lets me go, taking a step back.

I open my mouth to protest his movement rather than to answer him. The sudden loss of his heat leaves me chilled. It takes me a moment to think about his question, and there’s no way I’m answering it. I don’t know this man, this shifter. I can’t trust him with the answer he’s looking for. It’s bad enough I told him my last name.

“That’s none of your business,” I finally manage to say. Pushing away from the counter he backed me into, I ignored the need for him to be close and focused on the fact he was a stranger to me.

But he called me his mate, which scares me even more because I do know what it means. I know it means I’m fated for him as only no other can be. Still, I don’t understand.

“Lake, what was your father’s name? I won’t ask you again.” He growls, teeth bared, eyes narrowed to gold little slits, hands planting themselves on his hips.

I don’t know how he does it, but the very stance makes him seem bigger and far more powerful than he already is.

“Or what? You’re going to torture me until I give you answers? Sorry, bucko, that isn’t going to happen. What I can do is give you a can of Spam and send you on your

way.” Why did I say that?

“Spam?” He looks surprised and maybe even a little confused by my remark. “Why the fuck would I want you to give me that shit?”

“Supposedly, it has the same texture as human flesh.” I shrug. “You know it could curb the appetite for wanting to find the next victim you decide to hunt down when you shift.”

Tucker jerks back like I’d caught him by surprise. Though only for a second. The next, he’s throwing his head back and laughing.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” I mutter out, huffing and taking on the same stance as him, hands on hips, glaring at him.

It takes him another moment or two to stop laughing and brings his gaze to mine, the gold in his eyes gone, replaced with a beautiful hazel color. I didn’t even think hazel could be pretty, but his eyes proved me wrong.

Instead of looking at his eyes, I should have been paying attention, putting even more distance between the two of us. I should’ve just turned and run because, in the next second, I find Tucker back in my space, edging me back against the counter once again. His arms cage me in, and he leans in, getting nose-to-nose with me.

“If I want to take a bite out of someone, it would be when I have my mouth between those pretty legs of yours. And when I do that, little Fae, that’s when I’ll torture you. But it wouldn’t be to harm you in any way. I’d torture you with so much pleasure you would be begging me to take it further.” Tucker inhales, and as he does so, he sighs. Freaking sighs. He runs his nose along my cheek until he whispers in my ear, “Trust me, little Fae, when I’m done with you, you’ll never be the same again.”

“Why do you say that?” I more or less breathe. My voice seeming gone, trailing on the air in a barely there whisper.

“Because you’ll never want me to stop. You’ll be begging me to take you at every turn. To keep you next to me. Which I’ll tell you now, little Fae, you don’t have to plead for.”

Tucker jerks away, and I’m left there leaning against the counter once again, reeling by his effect on me.

“Now, mate, tell me who the fuck your father is? Callum, Rohan, Jair, Walker, or Trace?”

It’s my turn to be shocked as he names my dad and each of my uncles. “How do you know their names?”

“Because they’re tiger shifter royalty, little Fae, everyone in the shifter world knew of the Wildthorn family. And the family was allies to mine. That is before they were all killed by blood witches.”

I stare up at him in total disbelief. I knew the story of blood witches killing the female my uncle Jair was to marry long ago. She and her family were decimated by evil. I didn’t know there was anyone who survived. They didn’t tell me that part.

There’s a lot my dad and uncle didn’t tell me.

The one thing I wish they had was why I was in such danger and why I was constantly running for my life.

“So which one, little Fae?” Tucker’s gruff tone draws me out of my thoughts before I can allow them to go any further.

“My dad’s name is Callum,” I answer. He already knows who they all are, I might as well let the cat out of the bag. “Before you ask, I know he’s a shifter, and I’m not. My mom was his mate, she was already pregnant with me before they met. And she died when I was born.”

“That explains that. But now I want to know why they’re not protecting you. If your mom was Callum’s mate, then he’s got to know you’re a Fae,” he says, surprising me.

“Excuse me?” Is that why he keeps calling me little Fae?

“Your dad had to have known you were a fairy, Lake. You can’t deny it, you’re half Fae. The scent is all over you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I admit, releasing a ragged breath. “I’m not a fairy.”

Tucker keeps his gaze laser-focused on me, head cocked slightly. “You don’t know, do you.” I shake my head to answer him, and he mutters a curse. “They kept that from you. Didn’t tell you, why?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Fairies aren’t real . . .”

Tucker laughs darkly and shakes his head. “You believe in shifters. Seen it with your own eyes. You know about us. I’m sure they told you about blood witches, but you don’t think fairies are real.”

“Well . . .”

Maybe they are, but I’m not one. I’m normal. I’m just a human. My mom was human.

“Trust me, little Fae, you are what you deny. A Fae. There’s no shielding your scent from me.” Tucker’s nostrils flare, and he’s looking more than just a little pissed. “You not knowing the truth of what you are is dangerous. They had to know that.”

“I’m not a flipping fairy,” I shout, stomp my foot, and feel like a child for doing so. But I’m not going to put up with him talking about me being something I’m not or about my family. They protected me all my life. They raised me with love and shielded me from all the bad they could.

Tucker cocks a brow, not saying a word.

“There’s no way I’m a fairy,” I state once more. “My mom was human.”

“And what of your biological father?” he asks.

That has me freezing up. Anytime I ever asked, Dad would change the subject. He never told me about him. I just thought he didn’t know and didn’t want to tell me. What if he did, though, and he was hiding it from me?

“You don’t know anything about him, do you?”

Slowly, I shake my head, not answering him verbally.

“Well, Lake, it’s best you start believing. The truth is there in your scent, little Fae, you are just that, a Fae. And knowing this, it explains why you’re in danger.”

“How do you know that?” I blurt out, only to slap my hand over my mouth.

“I know,” he states, stepping into my space. “Because I was told my mate was on her way here and that she has danger right on her ass.”

Oh my God.

He can't know. I don't even know who is after me. I hope he doesn't ask me who it is because then I have to tell him, and that's not what I feel like doing. How do you explain you're running from an unknown?

A cold shiver courses down my spine, and I know what that means. He's right, that danger is right on my ass.

Thankfully, Tucker doesn't ask any more questions, nor does he say anything right off. Instead, he stares at me, sensing something. When he finally speaks again, he grabs my wrist at the same time. "We're leaving," he states, starting toward the door.

"What?" I balk at the very idea of him taking me anywhere. "I'm not going with you." I attempt to pry his grip from my wrist, but he's too strong.

Tucker narrows his gaze and tugs me to his front. "Mate, you aren't fighting me on this. I saw with my own eyes the chill go down your spine. I felt the shift in the air. You can't lie to me. You're in danger. It's after you, and I'm getting you to the one place you will be safe. The one place my brothers and I can keep you safe no matter what comes at us. Now, you can come willingly, or you can fight me. I will throw you over my shoulder, still taking you out of here. You have three seconds to make your decision."

I feel my throat tightening, and I glance to the side. It's a view of the bedroom and where my night-light sits. I swallow and lick my bottom lip as I bring my gaze back to his. "Can I bring my night-light, please?"

Chapter Six

Tucker

“Where are we?” Lake asks as I help her off the back of my bike and follow suit.

I glance over to where Justice, my VP, was parking his truck. I could have called one of my other brothers to come and help out, but he and Corbin were the ones I needed to talk to first thing. Corbin, I have a feeling, knows more than he’s letting on because of Karsyn.

The moment Justice saw Lake and got her scent, he knew what I knew. He didn’t seem too happy, though he didn’t say anything. Just let me put the shit I needed in his truck.

“Clubhouse,” I answer, take her hand, and guide her toward the entrance. “I’ll get your stuff inside in a bit. I gotta talk to my brothers. Don’t get scared around them. We’re not all tigers here.”

“The guy who you had come to the house, he’s not a tiger,” she states, looking in the direction of Justice making his approach.

“He’s not,” I confirm.

“Coyote,” Justice mutters when he’s close enough for Lake to hear him. His eyes were focused on her. “This club doesn’t discriminate against what you are.” He pauses for a moment and takes Lake in before continuing. “Or rather, we don’t

discriminate who our brothers are.”

“VP,” I growl, not wanting to disrespect Justice. But I won’t let him make Lake feel beneath him in any way.

Hell, the man caught her scent. He knows what she is, so he knows she’s anything but beneath him. Or anyone else.

There’s a legend about those of the Fae. They say that the lineage is older than time itself. I don’t know how true it is, but then again, I hadn’t ever met one in person before. Let alone think I’d ever find my mate and that she’d be half Fae.

Justice’s nostrils flare, and he jerks his chin toward the clubhouse. “Let’s just get inside, then we’ll talk about your mate.”

“Can I please have my things?” Lake asks, her eyes glued to Justice’s truck.

I look at her, then to the truck, and think about how she asked to bring her night-light with her. The scent on it had to belong to Callum and his brothers. It’s the only thing of hers that really had the scent on it. With how attached she is to it the damn thing, I’m guessing one of them, probably her dad, gave it to her.

“VP, can you grab the night-light?” I ask, meeting his gaze.

“You talking about that lamp?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

Justice’s gaze sharpens for a moment before nodding. “I’ll get it and meet y’all inside. Corbin’s already inside with Karsyn.”

“Great.” This is going to be interesting, and I’m honestly not looking forward to it. I’m not ready for questions I don’t even have answers to. For that matter, to share the vision of Lake. To let even more know just what she is.

At the house, before I called Justice to bring his truck for me, I felt the change in the air. It was different. Since Karsyn placed a protection spell on all of Redwich, I hadn’t felt anything like it. Something dark had entered the town lines. There was no identifying it as you could if it were a blood witch or vampire. Those I knew instantly.

“Come on, little Fae, let’s get you inside.” I shift her closer to me. “My VP will bring the light inside. We’ll put it in my room after you meet my Prez.”

“I’m not staying in your room,” Lake protests, jerking from my side. “I don’t even know you and you think I’m going to sleep with you? What do I have whore stamped to my head?”

“Lake, you’re my fuckin’ mate, you ain’t sleeping in any other room. And I didn’t call you a whore, nor did I think it.” For a woman who was raised by shifters, she doesn’t know much about us. Then again, they hadn’t told her about what she was. They’d hidden as much as they could about her from her. It’s all I can do to keep my shit together, to keep my tiger from coming forward. Since seeing her the first time, I’ve been fighting to keep him at bay. He doesn’t like her upset. Nor does he like the thought of anyone near her without our mark or scent on her.

Taking a deep breath, I reach out and take her hand. “You got a lot to learn, woman. The only way you’re gonna learn it is if you trust me. I’m not going to treat you like a whore. We don’t do that to our mates. Fated or chosen. We got a woman, they’re treated like gold here at the clubhouse. As for sleeping in my room, that’s exactly where you’re sleeping.”

Lake opens her mouth to protest, but I stop her with a shake of my head.

“You might have been raised by shifters, but you don’t seem to know a damn thing about us. We respect our mates. Protect them. You might not like it, but oh fuckin’ well. You’re gonna be where I know you can be safe. I can’t do that if I don’t have you near. For my tiger’s sake and my sanity, you’re gonna do this.”

Lake gets an expression on her face I can’t decipher, and not sure I want to. ‘Cause either way, it affects me in ways I’ve got to fight to get inside her at the first chance possible.

“Thought y’all were heading inside,” Justice grunts, making it back to us before we ever get close to the door.

“Just having a chat before we get inside,” I tell him and see the lamp in his hands. The way he’s holding it, respecting the fact it’s special to Lake, proves he doesn’t have anything against her.

“Right,” he says. He looks at Lake and stretches his hand out in her direction. “Here.”

“Thank you,” Lake whispers taking the night-light and pulling it to her chest. “I appreciate you bringing it in the truck so nothing happened to it.”

Justice looks taken back by her gratitude, like he wasn’t expecting it. I definitely didn’t. Not with her voice filled with such emotion regarding the damn lamp. It also makes me wonder if there’s something else to the damn thing than just it being a night-light. More than just her need to keep what little she had left of those who were her family.

“Come on, little Fae. Time to get inside,” I tell her, guiding her to the door. My VP comes up behind us, surprising me further.

“You’re welcome,” he says to Lake’s back.

I pull the door open and ask Justice over my shoulder, “Abel and the others leave yet?”

I didn’t pay attention to see if his and Dane’s bikes were parked out front. Salem and Jaxson were going to be in the cargo van while Dane and Abel took point front and back.

“Karsyn told Dane to wait. Asked Corbin to call Orpheus and tell him to delay. He agreed because he felt what we all felt.”

“The shift in the air?” I ask, cocking a brow at him over my shoulder.

“Yeah, Karsyn said whatever it was, it was powerful enough to not only break through the spell on the town lines, but take it down completely,” he explains.

Lake’s body grows tense at the intel, and her feet come to a halt just inside the clubhouse.

“If that’s true, then they’re closer than I thought,” she whispers before yanking herself from my side once again and spins to go back the way we came. “I have to get out of here. Before it’s too late.”

“Lake, you’re not going anywhere,” I tell her, snagging her around the waist. “Even if you were, it is too late.”

“But I can’t let them get me. I promised them, I promised I’d keep going,” she cries. Tears shimmer in her eyes, but not one rolls down her cheeks.

“You’re where the Moon Goddess has guided you over the years you’ve been alone,”

Karsyn states softly, yet loud enough for all those in the room to hear.

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Chapter Seven

Lake

Moon Goddess?

Seriously?

She wanted me here?

Why?

My dad taught me about the Moon Goddess and told me stories about shifters, where they were her children. Her creation. He told me a story about how the Moon Goddess herself birthed a wolf shifter.

I didn't know if that was actually true. I didn't think it was possible, if it weren't for my dad being adamant when he claimed the Moon Goddess watches her children. I honestly don't know how I feel about that. My thought is, if she did, then why did she allow my daddy and uncles to be taken from me, leaving me alone to take care of myself?

"I'm Karsyn," the woman who'd spoken introduces herself but doesn't move from where she's in the arms of the shifter at her side. The patch on his cut shows he's the President of the club.

Wonderful.

I clear my throat and lower my eyes to the floor. “I’m Lake.”

“I know who you are,” Karsyn remarks.

“Come on, little Fae,” Tucker whispers and urges me forward. He peels the light from my hand and gives it to another guy. “Quincy, do me a solid and put this in my room for me.”

“Sure thing, brother,” Quincy grunts, taking my night-light from Tucker.

I want to protest. To clutch the lamp to my chest. What would it make me look like though? A sissy? Someone who can’t take care of themselves?

Tucker ushers me over to the man and woman before speaking again. “Prez, Karsyn, think we can sit down and have this conversation?”

“Yeah,” Tucker’s President says, looks at me, and surprises me. “Name’s Corbin. Welcome to the Spiked Raiders clubhouse.”

“Ugh, thanks, I guess,” I mutter, realizing something as I do. He doesn’t reach out to shake my hand or anything. He just keeps his arms around Karsyn.

“Sit, Lake,” Tucker murmurs as he pulls a chair out for me.

I do as he says, watching the other two closely, seeing the protective way Corbin is with Karsyn. How he keeps one hand securely on her rounded stomach.

“Would you like something to drink?” Karsyn asks.

“Water?” I don’t drink anything else. If I do, it makes me jittery. Even decaf stuff. It’s best to stick with water. I sometimes will splurge and get the flavors just to have

something different, but I had to watch which ones I get since some of them had the same effect as drinking a soda. I found it best to simply just add actual fruits to my water.

“Hips, grab two bottles of water and two beers,” Corbin shouts, not taking his eyes off me.

“Coming,” a woman, I’m guessing is ‘Hips’ he called to.

Why would anyone name a woman such a thing? Then again, I’m named after a body of water. At least mine’s not Ocean or Sea. River wouldn’t be so bad, but still.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about,” Corbin announces, not beating around the bush.

Hips drops the drinks off, shooting a glare in my direction, but doesn’t say anything.

“What’s with her giving me the stink eye?” I blurt out.

Karsyn giggles. Corbin smirks. Tucker chuckles.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” I mutter, leaning back in my seat.

“She’s glaring because she and the others have lost yet another brethren of the club,” Karsyn explains, but I don’t know what she means.

Tucker leans in, tucks my hair behind my ear, and whispers, “She’s a clubwhore, and they don’t like it when one of us finds our mate or decides it’s time to choose one and it’s not them.”

I find it hard to keep my body in check just from him speaking into my ear. Ever so slowly, I twist in my chair to face him and narrow my eyes to tiny little slits. “I keep

telling you I'm not your mate. That woman has no reason to look at me because of something as petty as her or anyone else not getting their way. Take this as a warning, keep calling me your mate, and I'm going to hurt you. If she looks at me like that again, I'll rip her hair out."

Okay, so maybe she is overexaggerating when it comes to him. I know he's not lying about me being his mate. I saw the tiger in his eyes. His tiger is always close. It is almost as if the two live together in one body and share life as one.

"I like her." Another man laughs, and two others chuckle as they all come to join the table.

Tucker cocks a brow, shakes his head, and grins.

"Let's get back on track here," Corbin states, shifting a bit in his seat, not in a nervous way or even a worried one. He takes on the cool and calm approach of his movement, taking Karsyn with him.

With the way he focuses solely on me, I get the inkling feeling that he wants to get back on track. He wants to know who is after me.

"I don't know who's after me," I blurt, getting right to it before he can ask.

"How is that possible?" Justice demands, his voice harsh and vibrating with . . . I don't even know what.

It's all so . . . so . . . confusing.

"I've always left when I felt like it was closing in on me. The one time I didn't . . ." I trail off, shaking my head. I don't even want to think about it.

That had been when I was thirteen, and I found myself alone. My family gone. No bodies . No blood . Nothing . It was like their very existence was wiped from the earth altogether.

“So, you’re telling me that anytime you’ve felt a bad vibe, you’ve up and left?” Corbin asks, not hiding his suspension.

“Prez,” Tucker speaks up. “You’d be able to smell the lie on her if she were.”

“All I smell is sweetness. Like sugar,” another of Tucker’s brothers states.

“That’s because she’s Fae,” Karsyn announces.

“I’m not,” I protest. Everyone keeps calling me something I’m not, and I’m getting tired of it.

Getting to my feet, I look at Tucker. “I’m tired and need to be alone right now. Which way is your room?” Tucker starts to stand, but I sidestep the chair I’d been sitting in, shaking my head. “I want to be alone. Just tell me where to go.”

Tucker stares closely. The way he does it, I don’t know whether to like it because it affects me so or hate it due to the reasons for it. He’s reading me like he knows me. He doesn’t. None of these people do.

At this point, I don’t even think I know myself.

Finally, Tucker stretches an arm out, pointing to a hall. “Fourth door on the right.”

Chapter Eight

Tucker

“Your mate is a fairy,” Justice mutters the moment Lake steps into my room.

No one spoke as she left the table. No one said a word until she was securely behind doors.

“Half fairy,” I tell him. Her mother was human. I glance around the table until I meet Abel’s gaze. “Her mother’s mate was Callum Wildthorn.”

“You’re joking.” Abel looks as shocked as I felt when she told me her last name.

“Nope.” Slowly, I return my gaze to Justice, then to Corbin’s. “Lake doesn’t know much about shifters. She barely wants to recognize what mates are. She knows she’s in danger and doesn’t know how it is. I think Callum and his brothers kept it all from her. It was their way of protecting her.”

“Someone want to explain to the rest of the class why you two got that look about this Callum Wildthorn shifter?” Corbin asks, letting Karsyn go. He leans forward and braces his elbows on the table, fingers laced together.

Abel and I share a look. Though he’s a crossbreed tiger, he knows of the Wildthorns. Anyone with tiger’s blood in them knows the name. Like I’d told Lake, the Wildthorns were pretty much royalty for those of our kind. But unlike Abel, I knew them because of those within my streak.

“It’s time.” Abel shrugs, knowing that the secret he’s kept from everyone is going to be out. The reason behind him being a crossbreed.

“Right.” I nod. “You best tell this part.”

“Everyone at the table knows I’m a crossbreed. I’m a leopard and I’m a tiger. You all know my mother. She’s a leopard. My dad was a tiger.” He stops to glance around the table. “He was a Wildthorn tiger. Ran from his streak when he refused to reject my mother. Callum Wildthorn is a cousin. I didn’t know them. My dad cut off all contact with them. But when I was fifteen, he’d been killed by a rival of the Wildthorn family.”

“No one knows this about Abel because if the wrong person finds out, it could cause trouble,” I explain.

“You should’ve told us,” Justice mutters.

“I get why he didn’t,” Karsyn speaks up, her soft voice breaking through the tension in the room. She seems to have this effect whenever she talks. “Abel was protecting those who took him in as family.”

“We’re getting off track again,” Corbin remarks, sounding annoyed. “I don’t give a shit who is who. Don’t do it again, that’s all I’m gonna say about the matter. What I wanna know right now is about the threat we could be facing. If she doesn’t know who, then how the fuck do we find out?”

“Corbin,” Karsyn utters softly.

My Prez looks over his shoulder as the rest of us all look at her. “Syn, we gotta know.”

“I know,” she agrees.

“What are we missing?” Dane demands.

“The Moon Goddess came to me about Tucker needing to find his mate before it’s too late.”

“We know that part,” Dane states, interrupting Karsyn. If it were any other of us, we’d be getting our heads ripped off by Corbin. When it comes to Dane, Karsyn’s just as protective of him as he is of her. Granted, neither of them knew each other until he and his dad found her at a little cabin. She wanted to be able to have the big brother experience, and Corbin allows it to an extent.

From the looks of Prez’s face, Dane’s getting close to that extent with the way he’s interrupting his sister.

“I was getting to the rest of it, Dane,” Karsyn states, speaking up for herself and not letting her brother get away with his interruption.

Dane’s lucky as hell from the glare his sister gives him that she doesn’t use her powers against him. Then again, she’s an earth witch and refuses to do anything that isn’t about healing or helping us protect our own.

Hell, the woman had gotten involved in club business and ended up helping us with the very damn barrier that is gone now.

“Well, come on and get to it.” Dane smirks. It seems he’s enjoying pushing her.

“Jerk,” Karsyn mutters and straightens in her seat, hand on her hand sitting protectively over her rounded stomach. “The part of the message she told me to keep to myself until the time was right is, and I quote, ‘The danger is coming. It will come

for her and will not stop without a fight. To save her, her tiger must earn her trust and bring forth the gifts within her. The tiger must prove she will never be alone again. With him, she'll have him. It's the only way. Until then, she'll always be alone. She'll end in the hands of the Drakon King, and all will be lost.' "

That's a hell of a thing to listen to.

"Did you just say the Drakon King?" Abel asks, straightening in his chair, nostrils flaring, eyes flashing gold, and stripes appearing. The tiger in him is making an appearance as it's never done in the years I've known him.

Abel can shift into either form, leopard or tiger. The only downfall for him is he can't half-shift, not without killing one part of him, and if he does that, he'll become a soulless shifter. Or that's what's said about those who are crossbreeds.

"Yes," Karsyn says, nodding and sinking into her seat. Her face going slightly pale, paler than she already is. "The Drakon King is who's after Lake. Not just because she's half Fae, but because her mother was a human that was able to breed with anything, including shifter, Fae, vampire, dragon, the list goes on."

"He thinks because the mother could, she can as well?" Justice asks before I can.

"Exactly. Without her mate," Karsyn pauses, shakes her head, sadness overshadowing her features, "her true mate, mating her, securing it for her, then anyone can take her and make her their mate, stealing her away from you."

"You're telling me Lake is a nymph?"

The question is out of my mouth before I even understand everything she's just said.

"Lake isn't a nymph, but her mother was the daughter of a nymph and human,"

Karsyn explains.

“Makes sense,” Dane mutters. “It would explain the scent that was on her. It was intoxicating.”

I shoot him a glare and growl.

“Brother, she’s yours, but I’m speaking the truth. The scent isn’t just sugary sweet. The longer she sat here, the more intense it became.”

“He’s right,” Justice remarks.

“It’s the combination of her having the blood of both Fae and nymph running through her veins,” Xavier speaks up for the first time.

“I didn’t catch the scent, and I was sitting right across from her,” Corbin states, brows drawn together.

“Because you’re mated,” Karsyn states, reaching out to place a hand on his arm.

Corbin looks back at her, and she gives him a small smile. “Go ahead and finish whatever it is in that head you’re singing that ‘lalala’ bullshit to shield from me.”

Karsyn’s smile grows wider before she turns to me, the smile disappearing marginally. “One thing to know, and it’s to stay this way until the time is right, Callum Wildthorn and his brothers are still alive. They were taken by the Drakon King. To get them back, you need Lake as much as she needs you.”

I look to Abel as I drop in my chair. This news is reeling. And she can’t now yet . . . why?

“If she knows ahead of time, she’ll give herself willingly. We can’t let that happen,” Karsyn remarks without me having to ask her to explain.

“I can’t hide this from her,” I state to the room. “Lake has a right to know this. All of it.”

“You just have to hold off until she’s mated to you,” Karsyn explains.

“I can’t do that.” The urge to see her, set eyes on her once more, builds inside me more than it always was. I stand and look to Corbin. “You get me when I say this. She’s my mate. If I’m ever to gain her trust, to have her accept me, I won’t lie to her.”

Corbin stares at me for a moment before nodding. “She’s your mate. You do what you gotta do. We’ve got your back.”

Nodding, I leave them all at the table, ignoring the conversation they continue having, and head to my room.

At the door, I take a breath and prepare myself for setting eyes on her again. It might have only been twenty minutes, thirty tops, since I saw her last, but it feels longer.

My tiger doesn’t like what we’ve found out. The very fact she could easily be stolen away from us, enrages the beast.

Turning the knob, I shove the door open, step inside, and come to a halt at the sight I’m seeing.

Unbelievable.

Chapter Nine

Lake

I jerk upright as Tucker steps into the room, his eyes on the ceiling. The very ceiling I was just looking at, watching the tigers dance around and around. No one has ever seen the night-light on besides my dad and uncles. They'd sit and tell me the stories about the tiger princess and how her prince would come for her. Save her, and she'd be happily ever after.

"I thought you would be a while longer," I murmur, stretching across the bed to switch the night-light off.

"You thought wrong," Tucker grunts, moving far quicker than I expected. He grabs my wrists, stopping me from turning the light off. "Leave it on."

I don't say anything, I just watch him watching the ceiling.

"This the reason you're so protective over this light? The tigers circling around?"

"Yes." There's no reason to hide the truth of it. "I've had it all my life. I remember my dad turning it on and telling me stories before bedtime. Sometimes, I'd fall asleep before he was finished. Other times, I'd stay awake to watch the tigers dancing."

Tucker doesn't say anything as he lets my wrist go. He does, however, sit on the side of the bed, twists and falls back on his back. His arms stretch upward, and he puts them behind his head, not once taking his eyes off the ceiling.

“I can see why you’re drawn to it,” he finally states.

Being on the same bed with him is almost more than I can handle. I mean, just the very air changes. Like it becomes charged, and I don’t understand it in the least.

“We need to talk.” Tucker turns and faces me.

“About what? You letting me go? Realizing we’re not mates?” Okay, so maybe I shouldn’t have asked those questions. But it’s been a lot to take in today. Before he came in here, I’d been staring up at the tigers, coming to terms with the fact that I’m his mate. I want to fight it because I know he’d be yet another person who can be taken away from me.

“We’re not going there again,” he growls, eyes intensely focused on me. They were also a vibrant gold. The stripes slowly show themselves.

Those stripes alone caught my attention in ways I didn’t think possible. My hands itch to run them through his fur, petting those stripes. I wanted to memorize each and every detail of them all. I also wanted to bury my face in his fur and feel safe and know I don’t have to worry about the panic or having to look over my shoulder.

“You said we need to talk.” I barely contain my need to lick my lip or touch him.

Tucker’s eyes don’t change, nor do the stripes go away, but he nods as he answers. “Yeah.” He lets out a breath. “You’ve had a lot thrown at you all at once.”

“You could say that,” I agree.

“Right, well, I’ve got more for you, but I’m gonna start off by saying.” He pauses as he lifts a hand to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. He follows this movement by stroking my cheek. I’ve never felt such intense feelings from a simple stroke of a

thumb against my cheek.

“What?” The word comes out on no more than a breath as I stare into the eyes of this man, seeing the tiger within him. It’s eerie how much he and his tiger seem to share Tucker’s body.

“As your mate, I want you to know you can trust me. You won’t do that if we don’t have honesty. Mates who lie and deceive are not mates at all.”

“Um, okay.” I don’t completely understand, but I do appreciate the fact he wants to be honest with me.

“What I’m saying is, what I’m about to share with you is a lot to take in. It’s a lot to absorb. And it sure as hell is going to not only freak the fuck out of you, but it’s going to have you wanting to do something I can’t let you do. You’re my mate, and I’m not letting you get away from me. Do you understand?”

“I guess so.” I somewhat understood. But not fully, what could he know that I don’t?

Tucker holds my gaze for a moment longer before his eyes lighten, and he lets out a puff of air. “I told you already I knew the Wildthorns.”

“I got that part.”

“Let me finish before you say anything else,” Tucker orders, his voice soft and gentle yet still commanding. I nod, earning another stroke over my cheek. “Remember, it’s a lot, and you’re going to probably not want to believe it, but it’s all true.” The story he goes on to tell me rocks my world entirely. He was right about wanting to get up and run. It was a total nightmare. The worst of sorts at that.

“Let me get this straight,” I mutter and sit up, crossing my legs. Tucker moves to sit

with his back to the headboard. “You’re telling me one your ‘brothers’,” I totally use the air quotes saying this, “is my cousin. His dad had been my uncle. That my mother was a nymph, my biological father was a Fae, and some dragon king is who has been after me all these years?”

“It’s Drakon King with a K.” Tucker grunts, correcting me and watching me closely. “And I wasn’t quite done. Your dad and uncles, they’re not dead as you seem to think they are. They were taken captive by him. They’re his bait to get to you. The only thing is, is you’ve been staying one step ahead of them, keeping yourself out of the Drakon King’s hands. What you need to know now is, if he gets his hands on you, there’s no saving you.”

“There’s no saving you.”

“There’s no saving you.”

Those simple four words continue to repeat themselves on a loop in my head.

My dad was alive. He’s out there somewhere, being held as a way to draw me in. To trick me.

What’s that story my dad would tell me? Not the one with the tiger prince saving the princess, but the one about the trickster who came after the princess. To stay safe, she needed to find the prince. To ask him to save her.

Could he have been talking to me about Tucker all this time? It’s silly. But I have this inkling feeling that my dad was preparing me through the stories. But why couldn’t he just outright tell me? Also, why didn’t he tell me about my mother? That she was a nymph well half nymph according to Tucker.

God, it all sounds so strange.

I shouldn't be surprised by it all, but I find myself believing everything Tucker says, including him being my mate.

"So, what now?" I finally ask, my mind still reeling with everything. I wish nothing more than to run out of here and find this person, creature, shifter, whatever he is, and demand he return my dad and uncles.

I still have a cousin, which I'm not sure I believe yet. It's just one thing too many for me to cope with right now.

"Right now, we're gonna get you something to eat, get you straight so you can get some sleep," Tucker states, getting off the bed. "Tomorrow's soon enough to discuss what comes next."

"That sounds good." I could use some rest. I don't remember the last time I actually rested.

"Good, and while we eat, you can tell me one of the stories your dad told you while you were a kid and looking at the light shining on the ceiling."

He's got to be joking. Right?

There's no way I'm retelling the stories of the tiger prince and the princess. Nope. No way.

Tucker's lips curl into a smirk, and he shakes his head. "Come on, little Fae." He stretches a hand out in my direction.

I look down at his hand, then back up to his eyes. Before I can think better of it, I take his offered hand and let him pull me from the bed. At the same time, I give him something I've never given anyone.

Some of my trust.

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Chapter Ten

Tucker

“She’s going to be the death of me,” I mutter to myself, pacing outside the bathroom attached to my room.

In the past two days, I’ve not been able to get any further with her. It’s almost as if Lake is intentionally keeping me at bay, and I don’t know how to get past the barrier.

Sure, Lake talks to me, but only when I ask her questions.

The tiger within my skin is clawing to get out. The urge to give in and shift grows by the minute. I need to run. He needs to run. We need to run. To clear the mind and come up with what needs to happen next.

The club has been on guard looking for whoever the Drakon King sent. For all we know, it could be the King himself. None of us know what the bastard looks like.

To make matters worse, the longer Lake is around the clubhouse, the more I notice my brothers’ change in attitude. They’re becoming aggressive at times when they’re usually lax.

The only ones not affected are Corbin, Big Daddy, and Daniel. It seems to be because they’d been mated. Corbin has his. But Big Daddy and Daniel both lost their fated mates. Daniel lost two mates. One chosen. The other, his fated. After Big Daddy lost his mate, he never picked another. I can’t blame him, but I hate the fact he’s lost what

is supposed to be special to shifters. If he could have it back, I'd give it to him myself.

I've got a pretty good idea why my brothers are struggling with this by the day. They're fighting the pull of Lake. To keep from taking what isn't theirs. They know Lake is my mate, though unmated. If I could, I'd go in the bathroom right now and take her in the shower, but I can't. I won't do that to her. Lake needs to know she's safe with me before I take it farther.

The past two nights, I slept on the floor rather than in my bed next to her. Each night, I'd stare up at the ceiling, watching that damn night-light showing her something special. Something that was created for her by Callum. It's within the grains of the wood, the scent of the man who raised her. Protected her.

It might piss me off that he left her, still, it wasn't by his choice.

My brothers and I have spoken about this. How they were taken by the Drakon King and how we get them back. It won't be easy. That doesn't mean it can't be done. Precession is key in doing so.

The sound of the shower turning off draws my attention out of my head and to the door. I need to get out of here before she comes out. Lake becomes a temptation with each minute I spend with her. If I don't get away from her soon, I'll do something I'll regret.

Pivoting on my heel, I stalk away from the bathroom door across the room. I barely get the knob twisted when the bathroom door opens, and I'm assailed with the sweetest, intoxicating smell. It's stronger, far more potent than it usually is. Usually, I smell her Fae blood running through her veins, but this is different. It's seduction.

"Tucker," she whispers, and the way she does it, my name comes out huskily as if she

were singing my name rather than just calling it out on a breath.

“Yeah,” I call over my shoulder, not daring to look at her. If I did, I’d lose control altogether. All bets would be off, and she’d be mine.

“Why are you leaving?” she asks. It’s hard to focus on her question rather than the scent of her. “Did I do something wrong?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I state and clear my throat. “I just need to go run.”

“You’re going to shift?” There’s no missing the curiosity in her voice.

“Yeah.” I turn the knob more, needing to get out of the room.

“Can I come?” And there’s the question I was hoping she wouldn’t ask.

Fuck.

There’s no way I can lie to her or deny her this. She wants to come with me. More than that, she wants to see the tiger beneath the skin.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” I tell her, looking at her over my shoulder.

“Why not?” Hurt visible in her gaze, the curiosity gone from her voice. I watch her as she shakes her head and her shoulders slump. “I shouldn’t have asked that. I’m sorry.”

Damn. Damn. Damn.

“It’s not that I don’t want you to come with me. If you do, there’s no stopping what could happen,” I explain through gritted teeth.

Lake stares at me, cocks her head, and steps closer. “There’s no stopping what? I’m your mate, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you’re my mate, Lake, but I’m doing everything in my power not to force it on you. To give you time to accept the truth. You had a lot thrown at you at one time.”

Lake steps even closer, and my cock stiffens to the point it’s pressing into the zipper hard enough to leave imprints.

“Lake, I’m warning you, back away unless you want me to fuck you.” I growl, the need for her growing heavier inside me.

“I want to come with you, Tucker. I need to see you.” She’s not talking about seeing me naked. She’s talking about seeing the tiger I’ll shift into.

The very beast inside me stretches, wanting the same damn thing. But he wants more.

Fuck me. If I end up hurting her, I’ll never forgive myself.

I open my mouth to protest, to deny her, when she steps even closer and whispers the one word that becomes my undoing.

“Please.”

Closing my eyes, I drop my head forward and inhale the sweet, seductive scent of her. Smelling only that of her nymph blood and none of the Fae. I’m figuring it’s the way her body calls for her mate. But I can’t go by the scent alone. I won’t do that to her.

“You come with me, I tell you to leave, you do it, understand?”

I ask, not lifting my head nor opening my eyes.

“I understand.”

I hear the agreement, though I know it’s a lie. There’s no way she’ll leave if I tell her to.

“Fine.” I nod, open my eyes, and stretch an arm in her direction, indicating for her without words to take my hand. She does something even better . . . slides up next to me and curls herself into my side.

Chapter Eleven

Lake

It took me a couple days to come to terms with everything and to process what Tucker shared with me. I made sure to keep my distance from him the best I could while also getting to know him in the way I needed to. I didn't talk much unless he asked questions, but I have my reasons.

I'm not used to talking and asking questions. I've been on my own for so long, isolating myself from the entire world. I was only speaking to those I needed to in order to survive. I didn't know who I could trust. Who the enemy was or who I could lean on when I needed it.

While in the shower, I made the decision it was time to open up to Tucker.

I don't know what it is about him that pulls at a part of me. I honestly couldn't describe it if I wanted to. But I knew I wanted him, needed him.

That need was stronger now than I've ever felt in my life. Between my thighs, I ache for him. The very thought of another man repulses me. I couldn't even touch myself to relieve the ache. It only made it worse tenfold.

Yesterday, I had a talk with Karsyn and asked her some things while we were alone. Shed explained to me what she told Tucker. My mother was indeed half human, half nymph. I'd been more than a little surprised by how she'd been able to tell me this and other things. Karsyn explained she had a connection to the earth and, in turn, to

everything that thrives from it. She also had a connection to the Moon Goddess and the Earth Goddess.

I found it hard to comprehend until she'd gotten this distant look in her eyes and smiled as she spoke. "The Earth Goddess speaks truth of your grandmother being a nymph, mother only half. You have the blood of the nymphs running through your veins alongside that of the Fae. You are special in more ways than you know. You will soon find out, but first, you must come to terms with the knowledge that you are the mate of a tiger. Just as your mother was fated to that of your father. Be with him. Trust in him to be what you need him to be. Know that he will never leave you alone so long as you take his hand and hold what fate has blessed to you."

It totally freaked me out, but I'd taken the time to think about it. Dad taught me to always think things through, no matter what. Take the time to think before you act. If you don't, you end up dead. You have to be swift and calculating, and make sure whatever you decide, you make the right one.

This is my reasoning for moving into Tucker's side, rather than moving back and letting him go. Plus, I seriously want to see him shift into the tiger within him. He thinks I haven't seen the looks he's been giving me. Or the wide berth his brothers have given me when I step into a room. I'm affecting them. The longer I'm around them and not connected to Tucker, the worse it could get for them.

I learned this after doing a bit of reading. Karsyn, thankfully, had given me a couple books she's collected over the months since she found herself mated to Corbin.

Tucker doesn't speak, but I feel the tension in his body as we make our way out of his room and down the hall. Rather than going toward the main room, he turns us in the other direction toward the back door.

"Corbin called his brother Cyrus earlier today and asked him to bring Harmony by

the clubhouse. She and Karsyn spelled the woods surrounding the clubhouse. The two of them together placed a protective barrier to keep evil out. We're hoping because of the gifts both women have that it will hold," Tucker explains once we step out into the cool night. The warmth radiating off Tucker keeps the chill at bay, but I'm sure once he shifts, I'll grow cold.

"So, that's what I felt earlier today," I murmur. I felt something powerful wash over me earlier in the day, but I'd put it down to my nerves getting the best of me.

"Yeah," he agrees. "Come on, we're gonna go out a little bit of ways, but not far enough that if something happens, someone can't get to you in time."

I don't bother giving him words as a response. I understand him and that he didn't want to bring me out here. Regardless, I need to be with him. Not to mention what might happen with him out of the clubhouse, away from me. I'm sure his brothers wouldn't do anything, but from what I've read thus far in the book Karsyn gave me, once a nymph comes into contact with her mate or is surrounded by multiple unmated males, doesn't matter what species, a nymph's scent changes, supposedly becomes appealing . . . sexually enticing.

I didn't know this was even possible. I haven't asked for confirmation yet, but Tucker's tension somewhat answers it for me.

The two of us walk a bit of a way past the tree line before he stops and lets go as he steps away.

Tucker strips his shirt off and turns to me. Without a word, he shoves it over my head. I'm instantly overwhelmed by a woodsy leather scent. I hadn't even been paying attention enough to see he'd taken his cut off at the clubhouse while I'd been in the shower.

I lift my gaze to Tucker's and see the vibrant gold in his eyes. They're that of a tiger's and I take a step back. Not out of fear but rather envious. I love the color. Unfortunately, he doesn't see my stepping back as what I feel.

"There's no going back now, Lake. You came out here with me. Made your choice," he snarls, eyes narrowing.

"I wasn't backing away out of fear." I straighten, glaring in defiance. "And if I decided to change my mind, I can do just that."

Tucker's nostrils flare, and he looks downright murderous. Instead of speaking and getting in my space, he shifts. It's smooth and nearly instant. In the blink of an eye, he goes from man to beast.

Beautiful. Mystical. He's the most magnificent creature I've ever seen. Far more intriguing than that of my dad and uncles.

Tucker's fur is a deep reddish-orange, his underbelly a cream color rather than white, and black stripes spread beautifully all around him. But it's his face that speaks mostly to me. His eyes are the same as they were before he shifted. Though, in this form, they seem far more striking.

"You're beautiful," I whisper.

A growl rumbles from him, and he steps forward.

I fall to my knees and keep my eyes on him, watching him watch me. To most, I'd be prey. And maybe to him, I am, but not in the same way. A shiver courses down my spine at the thought, and Tucker snarls.

"Oh, quit snarling," I mutter. "I'm not scared of you, and you know it."

Tucker steps forward again. He's a lot larger than the tigers you see in the wild or the zoo. His massive body overshadows me, and the closer he gets, the more I have to tilt my head back in order to keep eye contact.

Between my thighs aches for him, but I don't know how to say the words. The only thing I can think of to show this is to reach up and brush my fingers through his fur. Tucker stops a mere inch from me, his head over mine, and I drop my gaze. Not in submission but to see his undercoat. Right in the center, just under his neck, there's a strange design in the stripes. I suck in a breath at the sight of it because I know exactly where I've seen it before.

He's the tiger that dances around on the ceiling every night. I look up and think of the stories my dad told me about when I was just a little girl. My dad used to call me his special little girl and say that I'd one day find my prince. Seeing this design on Tucker, I know now more than ever that he is who I was meant for.

I open my mouth to say something else, but in another blink of an eye, Tucker shifts again, this time into a much longer being. Standing on two feet, his body covered in fur, his face a mixture of human and beast.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" I ask him, not fearing him in the least. If anything, I find him fascinating. I'd never seen my dad or uncles half-shift, and it's remarkable. Maybe a bit of a turn-on as well.

Tucker glares, lips drawn back, teeth out, and nostrils flaring.

"It's not going to work, Tucker," I whisper as I reach out with both hands and press them to his lower stomach. I dare not look down farther. In this form, he doesn't have anything covering him as he does when he fully shifts and has his fur to cover his . . .

Nope, not going to think about it. Not thinking about it still doesn't help the ache that

grows inside me. Between my thighs, it begins to throb.

Tucker comes over to me and takes me to my back, his man and beast form coming over me. I open my mouth to say something but find myself unable to do so as he shifts back to man and claims my mouth in the most intoxicating kiss I've ever had in my life.

Chapter Twelve

Lake

Soaking up Tucker's heat, wet grass soaking through the shirt he'd pulled over me . . . through the tank I'd put on earlier, none of it matters. All I can think about is getting him closer and feeling his body over mine.

The only thing I'm capable of doing is focus on the kiss he's giving me. Completely dominating. My lips part, and he doesn't hesitate in spearing his tongue inside.

Oh my. I didn't think kissing could be so good. Beautiful, in fact. The way he kisses me causes my body to heat all the more.

I don't know what I should be doing. Still, I wrap my arms around his bare shoulders, enjoying the feel of him pressing into me.

The moment couldn't be more perfect than it is right now. Nature is all around us. I'm caged beneath his massive body. Him over me, shielding the rest of the world away. Mouth to mouth, body touching body. Every bit of it feeling absolute.

Still, my body aches for more, to feel him completely. A part of me screams out to be completed. I don't understand it, but I know that what we're doing, it's not enough. I need him fully. Only I don't know how to go about telling him, let alone asking.

I want to plead, beg, something, to get him just to rip my clothes off and ease the ache worsening between my thighs.

As if reading my mind, Tucker jerks back from me, drawing a whimper from my lips. I didn't want to lose that part of him.

"Easy, my little Fae," he rasps gruffly.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," I admit on nothing more than a breath.

"Just feel what I do to you, Lake."

I give him the smallest nod and know he can hear just how hard my heart is thumping in my chest. Hear the blood rushing through my veins. Sense the nerves and excitement coursing through me like no other.

Tucker stretches one of his arms out, bracing himself up on his other arm. Claws flex from his fingertips, he brings the edges up and shreds the shirt he'd given me along with my tank top. Next to follow is my bra when he slices right through the middle.

"You know that's the only bra I own," I tell him, my chest rising and falling quickly.

"I'll get you more," he announces savagely, nostrils flaring, eyes dropping to my chest. "Damn, your tits are beautiful, little Fae."

Tucker lowers himself downward just enough to lick the hardened tips. I thought that would be it, but he moves back to the first one, wraps his lips around the tip, and sucks it deep.

A surprised gasp leaves me as I find myself overwhelmed with unknown sensations. That's not to say I've never touched myself, but doing so is nothing compared to Tucker's mouth on me. His tongue swirling around my nipple. His fingers pinching and pulling on my other one. I hadn't even thought to see if he'd retracted his claws.

I didn't care. He could rip me apart, and I wouldn't care, so long as he kept doing what he was doing.

Tucker switches his movements, taking my other nipple in his mouth. His other hand, however, doesn't move to toy the breast he left but glides downward, into my jeans, then my panties. He finds what he's looking for and awards me with a groan that sends tingles through every cell in my body.

Things seem to escalate. I don't know how, it just does. One moment, I have his mouth at my breast, his hand in my pants. The next, he's jerking back and my jeans are shredded from me, just as he had my shirt. He twists me up and around until I'm on all fours.

"Tucker," I murmur, calling his name over my shoulder.

"I've got you, Lake, my little Fae. Just relax." He growls animalistically. It's then I know it's not just him. It's man and beast, both joined together to take me. To claim their mate.

Tucker strokes my back with the backs of his fingers, and I'm not sure if I could relax. With not knowing what's coming. Not with being bare to him like this.

"Trust me, baby." My body jerks, feeling the first finger enter me. "Fuck, your pussy is tight around my fingers, just sucks them right in. You want me to fuck you, Lake?"

"I need you, Tucker," I pant, feeling sweat starting to bead along my skin.

"And you'll have me," he states right before a second finger joins the first. Tucker surprises me further when I feel his tongue lower as he flicks it across my clit.

"Oh God." There's no stopping my body from jerking or moving back for more. I

need him, and he's driving me crazy with his touches. If he doesn't take me soon, I might combust into flames.

"Not God, little Fae, I'm your mate. The only one who gets to see you like this. The only one who gets to pleasure you. To slide inside you," he murmurs, pulling away.

I don't have to ask what he's about to do. I feel it and encourage it by pushing back into him.

"Not so fast, baby. I don't want to hurt you."

Those very words seal it for me. He doesn't want to hurt me. I know he won't.

"Tucker, please, I need you inside me. I ache for you. It hurts. Only you can ease it. Please, put your co . . ." I end with a scream, not finishing my statement.

"Fuck, Lake," he snarls, coming over me. His cock inside me, moving gently after thrusting deep inside, seating himself fully within my pussy.

Having him inside me is a completely different sensation, and it's glorious.

"Take me, Tucker," I plead, arching into him.

Tucker curses lowly and obliges, giving me just what I need. It's beautiful. Miraculous. Everything seems to brighten in a way I didn't think it could. My world brightens and sparkles. It's a corny analogy, but it's the truth. Almost like the very essence in the strands of the universe can be seen, and I can touch them. I could mend them or pull them apart.

The grass under me thickens and grows. I can feel it all. So much sensation mixing with Tucker's movements and growing in time with each thrust.

His groans of pleasure mix with mine, and soon he has me crying out as it becomes too much. The very sparkles become sparks of light, and my body pulsates with such passion I've never thought possible as my orgasms overtake my very being.

Tucker joins me, his cock swells. What feels like spikes sinking into my walls, locking him in place, keeping him from sliding out. From the way his body jerks and he snarls and curses, I don't think he expected to do what he did. But it's only for a split second before his body comes completely over mine, his mouth coming over my shoulder where it meets my neck, and he bites me.

Bites me hard enough with such intensity that I'm through back into the throes of another orgasm.

Long moments pass before he lets me go and is able to withdraw from my depths. He rolls off me only to pull me over him so that I could collapse on him. The moment my head comes in contact with his chest, exhaustion sinks in, and I fall fast asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Tucker

Son of a bitch.

How the fuck have I never known that shit was going to happen?

Never in all my years of fucking the doxies and other random women has my cock ever had spikes come out, locking me inside them. Only with Lake. It's not a secret that when wolves take their fated mate, they lock inside with the knot in the middle of their cocks. I didn't even think about having a damn barb in my cock.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I don't think I hurt Lake with it. If anything, it enhanced her release more. Intensified it tenfold.

Hell, her orgasm triggered mine the first time and caused the barb to come out in the first place. Then I sunk my teeth into her neck and tasted her blood. I felt the sensations inside her like they were my own. Just before she passed out on my chest, I heard her thoughts. How she felt.

I can only put it down to us being mates—all of it.

Why didn't I know any of this could happen, though? My parents were mates.

But they weren't fated.

Shit.

They were mates by choice, by alliance.

I shake the thoughts away and focus on the woman back in my bed at the clubhouse. After she passed out, I carried her back to the clubhouse. She slept through me cleaning between her legs as well as the grass and dirt from her knees and hands.

I probably should've stayed with her in case she woke, but she's out. I can not only sense it, but I also feel her like a second skin.

Right now, I need to shift and run as I intended early. After she saw me shift, the look in her eyes when she saw my markings, the longing I felt coming from her. I decided to shift once again, showing her the beasts she's mated to. Not just shifter, but man and beast together.

Lake hadn't been intimidated in the least. Instead, she'd been turned on. The scent of her arousal had been my undoing. I took her innocence like the beast I am, and she loved it.

More than that, I felt the shift inside her. Like she was blooming within herself.

Shifting, I drop to all fours and take off at a sprint. Regardless of how fast and far I run, there's no escaping the visions filtering through my mind.

I catch the scent of a deer nearby and decide why the fuck not. A kill might help relieve the tension inside me. Searching my prey out, the buck jerks his head up, eyes searching for the threat.

I crouch low, ready to pounce when I hear it—the flapping of wings and a deafening screech. I fall back out of reach of the flames just in time to keep from being scorched by them as they engulf the deer. The buck is dead before it hits the ground. I look up at the sky to see . . . holy fuck . . . that is one seriously ugly monster.

I wouldn't even call it a dragon.

The giant fire-breathing beast looks like a mutated version of what I've seen in books. Even the TV ones are better looking. This thing has a short snout, piglike nose and six flame-colored eyes. The wings were transparent and reminded me of a fly.

Totally freaky. It swoops down only to collide with the barrier Karsyn and Harmony put in place earlier in the day.

At least that proves the monster can't get in, but his fire can.

The ugly beast screeches once again and throws itself at the barrier with no luck. Another screech, and the thing shoots up into the sky and disappears.

I looked to where the deer had been, and see it's completely charred. I hate leaving an animal like that, but no way in fuck am I eating that shit. Besides, reporting to Corbin is far more important.

That and seeing to ensuring Lake is safe again.

Turning away, I head for the clubhouse, not stopping until I'm at the back door. Only then do I shift and head to my room. I quietly step inside, move to my dresser, pull on a pair of jeans, a tee, my boots, and grab my cut. I take a look over to the bed and see Lake's curled up in the middle, clutching one of my pillows to her chest.

As much as I want to crawl into it with her, I can't just yet. I've gotta report to

Corbin. This shit is about to get serious, and not in a good way.

“Let me make sure I got this right.” Corbin leans forward, eyes locked on me. Justice is on one side of him, and Dane is on the other. “You’re saying the beast you saw couldn’t get through the barrier, but its fire could?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. I’d just finished telling him about the ugly ass beast in the woods. I don’t think I’d even been able to call it a dragon. It might breathe fire and have wings, but it didn’t look like a dragon.

Abel shifts in the seat next to me, Xavier on the other side of him. Jett sits to my other side and clears his throat.

“I get it sounds fucked, but the damn thing was mutated,” I remark, somewhat wishing they’d been there to see it.

“This is going to be a problem,” Justice mutters.

“Yeah,” Corbin agrees. “The good thing is the barrier Karsyn and Harmony put in place is holding. If we could figure a way to keep fire out, then we’d be solid.”

“No way to do that unless we put a dome over us.” Dane grunts slouching in his seat, his nostrils flaring. “Something else needs to happen. No way we can stay here. We’ll be sitting ducks.”

“Maybe that’s what they want us to think? To get in our heads,” Abel suggests.

“I agree,” Xavier mutters.

“Either way, they know where Lake is.” The very thought of them trying to get to my mate has a red haze slowly coming over me. I won’t let them take her. They’ll have

to kill me first.

“Speaking of Lake.” Jett clears his throat, one brow cocked.

“Don’t even go there,” I stop him from finishing whatever he was going to say.

“He’s right,” Justice states. “The scent of her isn’t as potent enough to make us crazed with the need to fuck anymore.”

Great. I didn’t need him or anyone else to mention this. The last thing I want to hear is them thinking of fucking what’s mine.

“I think we should leave this for the time being, reconvene tomorrow. I think a conversation with Orpheus needs to be had. Cyrus already knows of the threat, but with as old as Orpheus is, I’m sure he will know something useful about the Drakon King and this ‘ugly beast’ Tucker saw,” Corbin states.

Talking to Orpheus would be a good idea. Having him here around Lake won’t be so bad now that she’s mated to me. He, like the rest of my brothers, won’t be consumed with thoughts of my woman and sex.

The very thought makes me want to murder someone. Instead, I get to my feet and decide it’s time to get back to my mate. To see if I can’t do something to erase the thoughts from my mind, and the best way to do that is to slide myself between her legs and feel her pussy wrapped around me all over again.

Chapter Fourteen

Lake

Walking along the stone floors, I'm surprised the stones aren't chilled, they're surprisingly warm. I always imagined floors like this would be cold. Maybe ice cold to the touch.

Even the walls are warm, with torch scones along the walls every so many feet. I follow the torches, hearing the sound of voices as I thank whoever thought to warm the place against the chill in the air. If not for the warmth of the place, I'd be cold and looking for something to change into rather than the black silk nightgown. It's soft and feels amazing against my skin.

The sounds of voices grow louder as I move in closer. It's not until I'm in the doorway that I hear what they're saying.

"Her powers are awakening," a strange voice announces. "She's found her mate, my king."

"Incompetence."

I glance to the side to see the man who spoke. The size of him alone is enough to draw fear from me. Standing nearly as tall, if not the same as Tucker, his chest wide, hair long down his back. He's not wearing a shirt, so there's no missing the scars lining the muscles on display. The one speaking to him called him King, but what is he king of?

“Kill the mate and bring her to me,” the King orders, nostrils flaring, smoke blowing from them.

Whoa. This has to be the Drakon King.

“It won’t be so simple, my King,” the other man states, bowing his head. Taking a good look at him, I see that he’s just a bit shorter than the King but has the same mass size and just as many scars. Where the King’s hair is jet black, this man’s is red, like blood red.

“Explain.”

The King straightens farther, eyes narrowing and heat radiating off him that even I could feel it. It’s the power coming off him, commanding the room.

“Her mate is a tiger.” Lifting his head to the King, the other man says, “I sent Xoghudy out to search for her. He found her scent, but it was already mixed with that of the tiger.”

“Then the tiger must be killed, Barrydi,” the King declares. “I will not have my plans faltered. The woman is to be mine. Just as her mother was supposed to be until that bastard, Nyx Iceclove, captured her, stealing her away into the night.”

“Yes, my King, but if not for Nyx taking the woman’s mother, this woman would not exist. She’s far more worthy than that of her mother. Once her powers fully awaken and she’s at your side, she’ll make a good queen.”

“You’re right, Barrydi, she will be, and I’ve got the perfect bait to lure her in. I just need the mate out of the way.”

I swallow, my nerves getting the best of me. My heart is thumping so loudly, I’m

surprised no one else can hear it.

“Take Metu. Take care of the tiger and anyone else who dares get in the way.” the King commands.

“I’ll see to it, my King.” Turning on his heel, Barrydi stalks away from the King.

I take a step back myself as the King’s gaze turns in my direction. “See you soon, my beautiful Lake. Let me introduce myself. I’m Zurri, Bringer of Death, and as I’m sure you see, the Drakon King. You’re meant to be my queen and stand at my side. Soon enough, you will be. Don’t think you can change the outcome, you cannot.”

I jerk upright, breathing raggedly, hand clutching at my chest. I glance around realizing it was just a dream.

Just a dream.

But it felt so, so real.

“Lake?” Tucker asks, coming up off the bed next to me, his arm curling around me, pulling me into him. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“It was just a dream,” I tell him, shaking my head. Though, that’s not the only thing shaking. My whole body felt like it was shaking. “Was a nightmare. A really, really bad nightmare.” I release a shuddered breath. “It felt so real though.”

“Tell me what happened,” Tucker demands and kisses the top of my head.

I tell him everything I remember about the dream, how the Drakon King turned right to me at the end, and what he said. How he’d even given me his name.

“I don’t get what they meant by my power being awakened.”

“Because your power was awakened last night when I claimed you as mine,” Tucker answers, twisting me until I’m in his lap, my legs on either side of his thighs. My naked body presses into his.

Another kind of feeling begins to consume me, starting between my legs.

Even more, something feels different. It’s like the two of us are connected in a way we weren’t before. As if I can feel him inside me.

“You’re feeling the mating bond,” Tucker states.

“How did you know . . .”

“We’re mates, little Fae. Last night, we completed the mating. Now I can read you. You can read me. When we’re not close, we can still communicate. It’s a mind-link.

Wowzah. Remind me never to think dirty around him.

Tucker smirks and glides his hands down my spine to curl under my bottom. “Think all the dirty thoughts you want, little Fae.”

Groaning, I plant my face on his chest.

“Back to the subject at hand,” Tucker states, squeezing my rear. “Remember what Karsyn told us about your powers? They will awaken only when you’ve been with your mate. You accepted me last night, not just into your body, but into your soul.”

“How do you know that?” I blurt, jerking my head off his chest and staring at him with wide eyes.

“I felt what you did. Saw what you saw. Gotta say, Lake, in time, your powers are going to be stronger than you realize. If what I saw is any indication, the lines will be easy to blur. A cross between good and evil.”

“You think I could become evil? That the Drakon King is right in my dream?”

“I’m willing to bet it wasn’t an actual dream,” Tucker announces, brows drawing together.

“What do you mean?”

It couldn’t be possible that I wasn’t dreaming. It was a dream. I woke up from it.

“I mean, it could’ve been your subconscious took you there. Wanted you to see what the threat was that’s against you,” Tucker explains. “That would be why the Drakon King was able to sense you but not see you.”

I nod, not really agreeing but trying to come to terms with him most likely being right, which makes it all the scarier. If I’m to have all this power and walk the lines between good and evil, I could easily fall into the evil category.

“This is all a lot to take in right now,” I finally croak out.

“It is,” Tucker agrees. “For the record, little Fae. Those who live within the supernatural world all live on the same lines. They choose between good and evil. Which life they decide to have. What they want in life. This club, my brothers, me, we all walk that same line you’re now on. The difference for us is we live by our own rules. We decide our own fates. If you wrong us, we’ll make you pay. You fuck with what’s ours, we will come at you. But when it comes to those who belong to us, we’ve cared for them all the ways imaginable.” He dips his head down to nuzzle my cheek, and whispers, “All the good ways that you could imagine.”

My breathing picks up as he shifts us. Grinding me against his hardened cock. I part my lips with a gasp when he twists us until I'm beneath him, his body between my legs, cock pressing at my entrance.

"I'll show you just how good I can be, little Fae," he growls and slides in an inch at a time. "Fuckin' love that you're already drenched for me. Your pussy just sucks me right in. Go ahead and let that pussy squeeze my cock."

Oh my.

I arch up, back bowing, my body welcoming him inside. The deeper he thrusts, the more intense it becomes, and I want more. Crave it. Need it. It's as if I don't get it, I'll starve until he gives me what I have to have.

As if hearing me, which he probably did, he gives me what I need, slams inside, and starts hammering inside me. It feels wonderful, amazing, in fact. The orgasm rushes through my body, drawing a scream from my lips. It's fantastic. It's beautiful. It's torture. Everything all in one, and I don't ever want it to stop.

"Tucker," I pant, wanting to feel him over. His mouth on me. Feel his teeth at my throat again.

"Fuck," Tucker snarls, comes over me and gives me just what I need. What I crave.

The instant his teeth lock on my neck, I feel his cock do that thing again and it hurls me right into another release. I sink my nails into his shoulders, holding onto him like he's the only one keeping me grounded on this earth. If I didn't, I might float away and never find my way back.

Tucker growls against my skin, and I whimper in pleasure that ripples from the very sound.

If only everything else could be as simple as it is with him in a moment like this.

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Chapter Fifteen

Tucker

Holding my mate's hand in mine, I guide her through the clubhouse and into the main room.

I need to share what she saw in her dream with the others. They need to know what we now know.

How Lake was able to subconsciously dream, walked right into a dangerous situation unnerves me. I don't like the fact that she was able to do that. Her powers are growing within her. The scent of them becomes more potent by the day.

What gets me the most has to be the names she mentioned hearing. Not just the dragons, but Nyx Iceclove.

Nyx is legendary for being the dark Fae, one of the unseelie princes who no one dares cross. The very fact Lake's mother got away from him shouldn't have happened. If rumors and legends are to be believed, he and the rest of the unseelie race have been at war for over a millennium. A part of me wants to dive deeper into the history and find out what it is about Lake and her mother that the Drakon King wants and why Zurri thinks that he'll have my mate at his side.

The only thing I can for sure say is he wants her powers. Lake is special because of the abilities she's coming into. More than that, she's not just part nymph. She's also Fae. The smell of the Fae has gotten stronger since our mating is complete. I can still

catch the intoxicating scent of her nymph blood, but it's nothing compared to the Fae, which I caught the first time I saw her.

There's a lot we've got to figure out, and I'm not going to let any of this happen without me. Let them come for me. They'll find themselves against a beast they don't know how to handle. They'll find out why those blood witches didn't kill me. Why I have a design within the stripes on my fur when I'm in my tiger form.

Lake saw it just as she saw it in her night-light. The sight of the mark on the tiger in her night-light caught me off guard, not because it was there, but because Callum put it there. That he shared with his daughter a secret only those of the Wildthorns and my family knew. It's a secret I'm going to eventually have to tell Lake about.

Telling her should be interesting, when she finds out that not only her dad and the rest of the Wildthorns were like royalty to the tiger shifters, but my family was royalty. I'm the last tiger prince and as such, the last true Alpha that can call on all tigers to our race.

"Yo, Tucker," Abel calls out, drawing me out of my head.

"Abel," I greet him, giving him a chin lift, seeing his gaze shift to Lake. There's no denying the look in Abel's eyes. He wants to be able to connect with the only family he has left. Even if that connection is through my woman, who isn't his true family, but the daughter of his uncle's mate.

Abel brings his gaze back to mine, and he clears his throat. "Orpheus will be here in about an hour."

Furrowing my brow, this news catches me off guard. It's still daylight out, and I've never known him or any other vampire who could travel during the light of day.

“Trust me, I thought the same thing,” Abel grunts, having read my expression. “Corbin said Karsyn is doing a spell to darken the sky for him to be protected from the sun.”

“Orpheus is a vampire?” Lake squeaks out and curls closer, nails digging into my chest.

“Yeah, little Fae, but Orpheus is no danger to you. He’s an ally to the club,” I tell her, sensing that there is unease still inside her. I could hear her doubt, but it’s not as loud as I’ve heard her other thoughts.

“How is a vampire an ally to shifters?” she asks.

I give Abel a quick side eye and maneuver Lake in front of me, grip her chin between two fingers, and tilt her head back so she has no other choice but to look at me. And I can keep her looking at me when she hears what she’s not going to like.

“There are some things you can’t know when it comes to the club, Lake. It’s club business. You only know what I let you know.”

Lake jerks against my hold on her, eyes narrowing. Yep, I knew she wasn’t going to like that.

“It’s for your protection,” I tell her, tightening my arm around her and lowering my head toward hers, holding her gaze. “You don’t have to like it, but you’ve got to accept it. All you need to know is that the vamps in this town they’re allies to the club. Orpheus is the Vampire King.”

“King?” she gasps.

“Yeah.” I nod.

I didn't have a problem with Orpheus. Couldn't care less he is the king of vampires. As long as they don't cross me, I'm good.

The vampires, as a whole, usually stick to themselves, making them no problem for me. They seem to know better than to step out of line when it comes to their king. Orpheus set laws for them all to abide, if they didn't, I heard how Orpheus handles traitors, and it isn't pretty.

Our alliance with Orpheus is in the work we do for them. What my brothers had to postpone in handling for him. The shipment of blood bags was still sitting in freezers, waiting to be taken to their buyers.

Orpheus and his vamps create, and we broker the deals. The blood bags contain something that allows vampires or even shifters who want to drink it to get high.

Guess it's what some would put down as meth or cocaine to humans.

However, working with Orpheus isn't the only one we deal with. We also run shit for humans. A group known for being a militia. They create weaponry that we handle the deliveries of. The group knows what we are and knows to keep their mouths shut. They don't, they'll find themselves without a throat. For years, we've worked together, and it's worked out. We make money. They make money. Same with Orpheus.

"Vampires kill people. They're evil," Lake whispers and licks her bottom lip nervously.

I narrow my gaze and try to remember there's so much she doesn't know about the very world she knew existed. Callum definitely didn't tell her much about it. If I knew exactly where he was, I'd find him and kick his ass. Then again, Lake was his daughter, he was shielding her youth the best he could. The one thing he made sure to

tell her about was bedtime stories that weren't stories at all. Not for her, at least.

I am her tiger prince. She just doesn't know it yet.

"Evil is evil, Lake. Not all of one group is evil or good. Think about it, if all humans were good, you wouldn't have war. You wouldn't have people killing. It's the same within our world. Some show humanity where others don't."

Lake remains quiet, but I can see the way her mind is spinning over what I've just said. What I don't do is remind her of the conversation earlier about the tight line she walks with each hour that passes, and her powers grow.

"You get what I'm saying?" I ask.

"Yes," she murmurs. "I don't mean to sound like a bitch about all of this, but it's just?—"

"I know what you mean," I interrupt her. "Now, let's get you fed before Orpheus gets here and the next drama begins."

Chapter Sixteen

Lake

You know that saying lions, tigers, bears, oh my? Well, I'm changing it. For me it's vampires, dragons, shifters, oh my. Let's not forget there's also the Fae.

With so many different supernatural beings, I feel as if my head is spinning. I hold firm to Tucker's side, even when we step into the main room of the clubhouse. I need him in order to feel grounded otherwise I fear I'll fly away. But to do that, I'd have had to sprout wings, wouldn't I?

I mean what exactly do Fae people look like? All I keep thinking about is them looking like Tinkerbell and her friends. Or like the statues I've seen in stores. Anytime I see them, I've always stopped to admire the beauty someone created. My favorite one I ever saw and allowed myself to buy on impulse is that of a dark-haired fairy, wings the color of a white tiger's face with the cyan-colored eyes. The fairy sits atop a snow-covered rock with a tiger standing protectively around her. Protecting her from dangers to come.

Three weeks after I bought it, it was broken in my haste to run. I learned after that to not purchase anything that isn't necessary. I've been lucky not to break my night-light.

Tucker ushers me to one of the tables, the very same one Corbin, Karsyn, and several others were already seated at. He sweetly pulls a chair out for me to sit in. But he doesn't take the one next to me just yet. Instead, he leaves me sitting there and makes

his way to the bar, where there are trays of food set up. He grabs two plates and starts piling food on top.

My jaw slackens at the amount of food he brings back. I lift my gaze to his when he sets one in front of me.

“There’s no way I can eat all of that.” The words rush out, and I suddenly feel like an idiot.

“What you don’t eat, baby, I will,” Tucker states, finally sitting down.

Once he plants a hand on the back of my chair, his hand stroking my shoulder, I release a breath I hadn’t known I was holding. Granted, I wasn’t really, but the tension leaves me.

Mostly.

I’m still feeling completely unsettled by the imminent arrival of the Vampire King.

And that unsettling feeling doesn’t even phase the ones I have regarding my dream where I met the Drakon King. Technically, I didn’t meet him, but he introduced himself to me.

The whole thing freaks me out.

Without waiting for me to take a bite, Tucker leans his body forward and shoves a large amount of food into his mouth. I might add he does this while still keeping his arm around my shoulders.

The conversation around the table flows. Karsyn engages with me a bit, but I’m guessing she knows I’m not really in a talking mood. I’m honestly not even in the

mood to eat. However, I get the sense if I don't eat something, Tucker will see to it that I do. I'm sure whatever way he does it wouldn't be torture. It might even be pleasurable.

Just like . . .

Tucker growls at my side, and I jerk in his direction to find him giving me that same look he gave me a bit ago.

"What?" I snap, frowning at him.

"You know what," he states, his tone going intensely rough, near ragged.

"I don't." I didn't. Really. Honest to God, I didn't know what he was getting his panties in a twist about. "What did I do?" Maybe I should help him with his attitude like we were doing in his room earlier and then what we did last night in the woods. I would love to take my time and explore his body the way he's taken the time to do mine. Feel his shaft in my hand. To wrap my lips . . .

"Lake," Tucker growls, my name a warning in that tone. "Knock it the fuck off."

"What are you talking about?" I demand and glance around the table to see that all eyes are on me. "Why's everyone looking at me?"

"They don't know what you were thinking, but they can smell it," Tucker informs me, sounding more than a little pissed or frustrated.

"Even I can fuckin' smell it, and I'm mated," Corbin snarls.

"It's quite interesting," Karsyn murmurs, leaning forward to fake whisper. "It's almost as if you have the scent of desire itself."

“Oh my God,” I whisper, eyes wide, attempting to bolt out of my seat, but Tucker foils my plans and instead pulls me into his lap.

“Easy, little Fae,” he rasps, his arm going tight around me. “You need to learn to control it. Don’t let it control you.”

“I don’t understand how my thoughts affected my scent?”

I don’t understand. I’m completely confused by all of this.

“It’s the nymph part of you,” Karsyn explains. “I don’t know much more than I’ve learned or in what I’ve heard. What I can conclude is whenever you have a certain thought,” she stops to clear her throat, cheeks brightening, “those thoughts are projected to everyone close. Everyone, including females, it seems.”

“It wasn’t like that before Tucker mated her,” Abel remarks.

“Abel’s right, it was different, but still just as intoxicatingly sweet,” Dane adds.

“Maybe it was?—”

“It was the scent of seduction,” another man states from behind me. I nearly jump out of my skin. I probably would have if Tucker didn’t have a hold on me. So rather than losing my skin, I twist in his arms to see who’s spoken just as they continued speaking. “It’s the scent that causes chaos among men. The scent of sexual pursuit.”

“Orpheus,” Corbin calls in greeting. “Want to elaborate on what you mean?”

So, this is Orpheus, the Vampire King.

“Interesting,” Orpheus murmurs, eyes locked on me. “You are a beautiful creature,

aren't you? Quite the mixture." His voice trails off as he inhales and releases a sigh. "Quite the unique beauty, for sure. A rare gem. A Fae that shares the blood of a nymph."

"You want to get to the point," Tucker growls, his emotions burning inside me in a way I didn't expect. He didn't like the vampire looking at me.

Interesting.

If I can feel him so easily. I wonder if I focus on him, would he . . .

"Damnit, Lake," Tucker snarls, tightening his arm around my waist.

"Okay, so that . . ."

"If you don't stop right now, woman, I'll fuck you right here and not give a damn who sees," he states, cutting me off before I can finish.

"And that right there is the scent of seduction," Orpheus announces, his gaze going to Tucker. "Your mate puts out a scent that can be used for several reasons. One, seduction, which is what it's known for. Two, destruction, to distract and eliminate. There's more than I want to get into at the moment. I have a book that I could lend you," he states more to me than to Tucker.

"I would like that," I find myself saying with a nod.

"Then I'll send for it." Orpheus gives a curt nod, clears his throat, then looks at Tucker, and then toward Corbin. "The threat you spoke of."

"The Drakon King," Corbin remarks.

“How do you?—”

“Let them finish, little Fae,” Tucker orders softly.

“But—”

Tucker touches a finger to my lips, stopping me from speaking further. “There’s more you don’t know. We’ll get to the dream last night.”

“What dream?” Karsyn asks, sitting forward.

I quickly relay the dream to her and see her face pale.

“Zurri would want you because it’s prophesied that he would claim his bride and she’d be both Fae and nymph,” Orpheus declares.

Someone please tell me that he did not just say that I’d been prophesied to be the bride of a dragon.

Chapter Seventeen

Tucker

“What prophecy are you talking about?” I demand, the beast inside me enraged with a fury unlike anything I’ve ever felt. The very thought of some claiming our mate as theirs is enough to want to draw blood. To sink my claws into the flesh of those who dare come between my mate and me. More than that, to clamp my jaw on the throat of that person or being. I won’t let anyone take her from me.

Orpheus moves around the table and claims one of the empty seats at the end. His eyes are still on Lake. Once he’s settled, sitting there, looking like a fucking supreme ruler rather than a guest in our clubhouse, he finally answers my question. “In my years, I’ve heard of many prophecies. What you must understand is that when it comes to a prophecy, just as anything else in life, there are two sides to it. Think of a coin, you flip it one way, it has one thing, the other another. The same goes for each prophecy. There is no guarantee to either side winning. One that is only a possibility.”

“Get to the point,” Abel growls.

“Abel, calm down,” Corbin orders, giving our brother a sharp look. He then slices his gaze to mine before glaring to Orpheus. “Skip to what we need to know, if you don’t mind, Orpheus.”

Orpheus shrugs and clasps his fingers together. “As I was saying, there are two stories to each prophecy.” He pauses, his eyes getting a faraway look in them.

“In time, there will be one. A girl born of a nymph. She will be a special gift to those who love her. Her gifts will heal what’s been broken. However, she’ll need the guidance of the other half of her soul . . .her true mate. Many can take her as their mate, but only one is her true. With only her true mate will she be safe, and she’ll learn to control what grows within her.

“This girl born will be unlike any nymph born. She’s more than just a nymph by blood. There must be a part of human and Fae. If not protected, she will be taken. She’ll be lost, and she’ll not know the true mate she was meant for. The one who carries the mark of a true alpha, a tiger prince who lost everyone . . . is the last to hold the mark of his lineage. He’ll be able to fight, but he mustn’t do it alone. For the evil thrives on the dark.” He blinks, clears his throat, and gets that look again.

“Evil wants what should be good. She, who is born of a nymph, can turn dark. She who carries the blood of a Fae will be unlike any other. She will be the queen to a king. Good or evil, it does not matter. Her mate will decide. The choice is hers, but it can be taken from her. If hatred fills her heart, only then will she become the dragon bride, queen to the Drakon King. The most feared queen to live. She will be the ending to all that is good. A scale must stay balanced. If tipped either way, the ending will come forth yet another dark age where dragons once again rule.”

No one said a word as Orpheus spoke. Now that he was done, still, no one spoke. Those words filter through my head repeatedly. It’s confusing, yet it answers questions all at the same time.

Her gift, the powers awakening inside her, they depend on my guidance. On me showing her the way. Helping her learn to control something I don’t even know myself to what extent it’ll be.

What’s fucking with my head is the part that mentions me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

It was prophesied I'd lose my entire family. Did Callum know? Is that why he gave her that damn night-light that has my tiger in it? Had her mother told him? Lake is the daughter of Nyx.

None of this about the prophecy makes sense to me. Mix that with everything else . . . yeah, it's fucking with my head. The only thing that doesn't bother me in the whole scenario is that Lake is mine. She's my mate. True only to me .

That alone is enough for me to keep my sanity.

"What do we do now?" Lake whispers.

I don't have to look at her to know what she's thinking. It's loud and very clear in my head. Even her scent screams to me that she's scared.

"We do as we're doing now," I tell her and press a kiss to her temple. Though I do my best to keep my voice level and calm, it doesn't work. My brothers hear the undertone of my voice. The threat to anyone who comes near me right now. To anyone who dares come close to Lake.

"But he's sending someone." Lake's head whips in my direction. "He's sending someone to kill you." Panic starts to rise in her voice, and her eyes widen. "They'll kill to get me."

"Let them try."

I turn my attention to Justice, who snarled those three words. "VP . . ." I start, but he slowly stands, hands on the table, and his body leaning forward.

“We now know the threat we’re facing. They want one of us dead, they’ll have to fight us all,” Justice snarls, his lip curling up, showing his canines.

“But they’re fire-breathing dragons,” Lake utters, fear rolling off her in waves, tears shimmering in her eyes. “You can’t put your lives in jeopardy.”

“Lake,” Corbin calls, getting her attention. “When it comes to protecting what’s ours, we’ll do whatever it takes. This club, it’s a brotherhood, and when one of us is threatened, all of us are. You’re Tucker’s mate, which means you’re one of us. Tucker is our brother, and he will not fight this alone.” Corbin shifts his eyes to me. “You lost your family once. You won’t lose another.”

“What about Lake’s family? Her father? Her uncles?” Karsyn asks, her hand firmly planted on her stomach in the protective way I’ve seen her do more than a few times. “The Drakon King has them.”

I think about this for a moment, and a thought occurs to me as I look toward Orpheus. “What do you know about a Fae named Nyx Iceclove?”

Orpheus straightens in his seat, eyes narrowing. “I know Nyx Iceclove. How do you know of his name?”

“I believe he’s Lake’s biological father from what Lake shared of her dream,” I explain and glance around the table. “The Fae and dragons have been at war with each other for well longer than a millennia. What if we contact the Fae and ask them to fight alongside us?” If we could get them to agree to work with us, it could work out. The Fae can open the portal needed to enter the dragon realm.

“You think they would do that?” Corbin asks.

“Not without a price,” I answer, leaning back in my seat, bringing Lake with me,

locking eyes with Corbin.

My Prez's eyes are calculating, watchful, and alert to all around him. I could see his mind at work. Maybe even running through scenarios and putting together a plan.

"If we could get Nyx to agree to help us into the dragon realm, we would get Lake and Abel's family back, and we could potentially do it without being detected. Once we get them back here to Redwich, we could even the playing field. We're more powerful here than we would be there," Corbin states and looks to Karsyn. "You would have to stay out of sight." He shifts his gaze to Lake. "And you would as well."

"Do you need to contact a Fae to open a way to the dragon realm?" Lake asks, turning in my arms, so that she's sitting on one leg, her body twisting more toward me, eyes locking with mine. "Couldn't I be the one to do it?"

"You have to know where the dragon realm is. And we don't know if you have the ability to do just that," I tell her, not wanting to hurt her feelings.

"But I think I could do it." The adamant tone she uses catches my attention, and I wait for her to continue. Lake nibbles her bottom lip for a moment and takes a breath. "Last night in the woods . . ."

"Go on," I urge.

"You know during . . ." Her cheeks tint a bright blush as she lowers her lashes. "Well, I was able to see the strands in the air. I felt it calling to me. Like I could rip the strands apart and open the world to a whole other new one." She pauses and takes a breath. "I'm not sure how to exactly explain it, but I do think I could open it. And with my dream, I feel like I might be able to get us there."

I stare at her briefly and nod. She wants to do this. She doesn't want to have to possibly face a man who helped in creating her. And going to the Fae, it would come with a price, just as anything does. As much as I don't want to put Lake in the way of danger, my every instinct tells me to shield her from it, but the Fae could demand her in reward for their help.

If Lake thinks she can take this one and be safe about it. Then maybe, just maybe, it will work. I can protect her at the same time getting her family back. Corbin's right, we can level the field if we bring them here.

"Alright, little Fae, you think you can do it, we'll give it a try."

Chapter Eighteen

Lake

“It’s all going to be okay, Lake. It’s all going to work out. You can do this,” I mutter to myself, pacing back and forth just outside the back of the clubhouse.

Technically, I’m not supposed to be out here, but I needed to be. I needed to be free of the stuffy walls I felt collapsing in on me.

Tucker was in church with his brothers, all of them planning how to best go about going through with getting into the dragon realm and doing what they need to do and get back. I’m not a big fan of it, but if it means they’re able to go and bring my dad and uncles back, I won’t argue. I only hope that they’re able to do it without anyone getting harmed in any way.

I also get they don’t want me to help. I felt it in Tucker when I suggested it. I thought he’d tell me to drop it and that I wasn’t to be a part of it all. That they were going to contact Nyx or another Fae. But he relented and agreed.

I can do this. I’m sure of it. Scared maybe, but I’ve no doubt that I can take them where they want me to.

Needing to focus, I stop pacing and plop down in the middle of the grassiest area. Images of what I experienced when Tucker took me that first time filter in my mind. Everything is so clear and real that I feel as if I were experiencing it all over again. It’s beautiful and vibrant. Tucker made me feel so alive, so treasured.

Beneath my fingertips in front of me, I feel the grass growing, tickling my palms, curling around my fingers. The dirt beneath hums. I look up ahead, and there it is, the strands that I'd seen the other night. They call to me, sing in fact, wanting me to reach for them, to peel back and open up to another world.

I reach up to touch it with one hand to see how easily my fingers thread through the strands of time. That's exactly what they're called. Touching them, they tell me what they want. What to do. How to control them. I didn't think something so simple could have a voice, but it does. It's unlike anything I've ever heard. It's like it's filling me with a knowledge as old as time itself. I suppose that's precisely what these strands are.

Without them, time wouldn't exist. They wouldn't be able to separate the many different dimensions. Like the one that belongs to the dragons. Another that belongs to the Fae people. Both realms or kingdoms upon themselves, without them all connecting in one way or the other through the threads of dimensions, the world itself would cease to exist.

Both dragons and fairies have the ability to come through dimensions, but can't stay for long, not without a connection to the other.

"Beautiful Lake," the strands call to me, whispering over my skin. Wanting me to come through, to explore what only I can see.

Without thinking, I stand and take a step forward. "Come, Lake, join us."

"Lake," Tucker roars, his voice sounding farther away than it should.

I look over my shoulder and frown. Why is Tucker running? How did I get so far from the back door?

I yank my hand back from the strands just as Tucker makes it to me and blink up at him, the strands still visible behind him, surrounding us.

“What’s going on?” I ask, confused by the furious expression on his face. “Why do you look mad at me?”

Tucker’s eyes bore into mine, and he looks ready to strangle me. “You serious right now?” he snarls, eyes glowing gold. “You even realize what you were just doing?”

I shake my head. All I was doing was . . .

My face pales as I think about what I’d been doing before I heard him roaring my name.

“Do you have any clue what could have happened had I not felt you? Heard the thoughts going through your mind?” Tucker’s grip on my body doesn’t lessen. In fact, it tightens to the point it’s painful. “I could have fuckin’ lost you. Who the hell knows where you would have ended up.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, lowering my gaze.

I didn’t know what I was doing. I’d been enthralled by the strands, learning of how they work.

“You can’t be doing shit like that without me, Lake. I can’t risk you being taken from me.” There’s no missing the fury in his voice, but he loosens his grip just a bit. “I won’t lose you.”

“I don’t want you to lose me either,” I admit. I haven’t known this man, this shifter, for more than a week, but he’s gotten under my skin. I slump into him and plant my face into his chest. “I’m really sorry. Can we go inside?”

Tucker just stands there holding me for a long moment before shifting us in the direction of the clubhouse. “Come on, little Fae.”

A few steps toward the back of the clubhouse, Tucker stops and scoops me in his arms. “We’re going to have to talk about you doing things like this without me,” he states, carrying me the rest of the way to the clubhouse. The door opens for us, and standing just inside are several of Tucker’s brothers.

Great.

Talk about feeling embarrassed.

To avoid looking at any of them, I curl into Tucker and bury my face in his neck.

“Everything good, brother?”

I hear Corbin ask, but don’t lift my gaze. I don’t need to in order to know he’s pissed. Pissed at me.

“Yeah,” Tucker grunts. “I’m gonna have a talk with Lake, then rejoin y’all in church.”

There’s a long pause before Corbin says anything else. When he does, it’s one simple word. “Right.”

A shiver runs through me, and it’s not because I’m cold, though I feel the chill coming off him, and it’s aimed at me.

Tucker carries me the length of the hall and down another to his room. Once inside, he sets me down on my feet, facing him. Only then does he speak again while reaching up with both hands to palm either side of my face.

“You can’t do things like that without me present, Lake,” he says far too gently.

“I was just sitting there, and then the next, I was reaching for the threads that weave together,” I tell him, being honest. “Did you know those threads are called the strands of time? That they can speak? They have a voice. They’d been telling me how everything works, showing me how I can use them.”

“Fuckin’ hell, Lake, it was stealing you away from me,” Tucker remarks, sliding his hands from either side of my face into my hair. “It wasn’t just showing you.” He dips his head forward and presses his forehead to mine. “You were being taken from me, little Fae. I felt it. It was consuming you, into whatever the fuck it was taking you into.”

“It was showing me how I can go through any dimension. I could stay wherever it took me or go to another,” I explain and jerk my head back when I realize the rest it was showing me. “Tucker, I can go to any dimension because of my lineage. I can’t be imprisoned in one or the other. It wasn’t stealing me away from you. It was taking me through to show me that where others can’t, I can. I can control the strands of time, whereas it cannot be done by any other.”

“We can’t know that for sure.” Tucker protests, shaking his head.

“I can,” I tell him. I stretch my arms up to be able to curl my hands around Tucker’s neck to keep him still enough to meet my gaze. “Listen to me. Listen as only you can listen.”

Tucker goes still. His body tightens. Still, he doesn’t take his gaze from mine. I can feel him inside me as he can feel me inside him. His beast is raging inside him, fighting for control to be able to reconfirm the bond between the two of us. What’s going through him can only be described as feral. A part of me wishes for him to lose all control and take me. Force me to submit in ways that I won’t ever allow another

person to control me.

Tucker jerks back, snarling, eyes narrowing. “You want the beast, Lake?” he demands, voice graveled rough. Nearly animalistic.

“Yes,” I answer honestly. Somewhat breathy-like.

“You want to fuck a beast?” he asks, lips curled back, baring his teeth.

“Yes.” My answer is barely loud enough to be considered a noise.

With a growl, Tucker wraps his arm around me. His mouth slams down on mine, tongue spearing in and taking control.

None of his other kisses have been like this. It’s different, and my body instantly reacts to it.

Twisting us so that I’ve got my back to the wall next to the door, he lifts me by my bottom. Fingers digging in, and his hardened cock presses into the most sensitive area. Even with the barrier of my jeans and his, I can feel just how hard he is.

He feels good, and I want more. I want to scream for him to do more. Take more. Force me to accept more.

But in a split second, everything goes from heated passion to full-on terror as I feel the dark energy of the enemy wash over me. Calling to me. Demanding I come to them.

I swear I hear the words whisper in the air of complying with what they want, or they’ll kill Tucker and everyone within the walls of the clubhouse. How could they get through the barrier? Get this close.

Dread replaces the lustful thoughts, and without meaning to, I reach for those strands of time, and in a moment of fear, I take not just myself through but Tucker as well. I won't let them get me. Nor will I let them harm the man who is my mate. This shifter who has always been the one I've dreamed of as mine. My tiger prince. I can't let them strike at him and destroy the last only hope I have at finally feeling something more than loneliness and despair.

Chapter Nineteen

Tucker

“What the fuck did you just do?” I demand, fury raging through me, realizing we were no longer in the clubhouse.

“I . . . I’m sorry, Tucker, but I couldn’t let them hurt you. Or anyone else.” Tears stream down Lake’s cheeks. In the little time I’ve known her, not once have I seen her cry or felt her anguish.

Still, neither breaks through my anger.

Pulling away from her, but keeping a hand on her waist, I glance around to see where she’s taken us. Standing in the middle of a red and black haze. The ground looks charred, and the trees burned. The air was thick with the smell of sulfur.

Fuck.

She’s brought us right to the realm of the Drakon King. What was she thinking?

I get her fear, but it doesn’t give her the fucking right to take us away in the midst of danger springing up around us. She sure as fuck shouldn’t have brought us here to the very damn place that holds the creature that wants to take her from me.

“You need to get us the fuck out of here, Lake,” I tell her.

Lake nods and glances around, her brows drawn together. “They’re close.”

“Who’s close?” I demand and reach out with my senses, smelling only that of the fires burning and sulfur.

“My dad and uncles,” she answers. “I can feel them.” She presses her hand to her chest, right above her heart. “I don’t know how to explain it. I just feel it.”

Nodding, I focus on the other scents, the ones the stench of sulfur and fires cover. She’s right. Not far, I can smell the scent of shifters. Granted, I can’t say for certain that it’s her family.

With us this close, we could go ahead and at least see just how close before we get the hell out of the place. It’s bad enough that the very air is going to absorb into mine and her skin. We aren’t going to be able to get the stench off us for a while. It’s already singeing my nostrils with its pungent scent.

I take Lake’s hand, holding a finger up to my lips, giving her the sign to keep her mouth shut. She nods and does just as I do. I’m surprised at the fact she can move without making a noise. I guess her dad and uncles at least taught her something.

Together, we make our way about a mile before coming to a tower of sorts that was broken and charred. I draw Lake to a stop when I spot the dragon sitting perched up on a large boulder, not on the other side of the tower. The three-headed beast looked as disturbing as the one I’d seen the other night. What the fuck is up with these ugly creatures? I thought dragons were supposed to be mystical and beautiful. These beasts are just plain ol’ ugly.

“Tucker,” Lake murmurs so quietly, I’m lucky to hear her call my name.

“If we get to them, think you can get us all the fuck out of here before that thing sees

us?” I ask, a plan of action forming in my head.

“I think so.” That’s not exactly the answer I’m looking for, but I’ll take it. With us being this close to them, there’s no way in hell she’s leaving without them.

“Then let’s go, little Fae, and you best hope that we don’t get eaten before we get to them.” I grunt and start walking, not giving her a chance to say another word.

I’m still pissed with her, and that’s not going to change. Not until I get her the fuck out of here and can be sure that my brothers are safe. This bullshit can’t be happening. I sensed the danger just outside the clubhouse right before she’d took us away.

Fuckin’ made us vanish right out of my room. I didn’t even think it were possible.

The very fact she’d been able to do it in the first place astounds me. She’d only just come into her gifts. Yet, she’s growing stronger with every breath she takes. Orpheus’s words ring in my head about the prophecy and how she needs me. Without me, things for her could go very wrong, and I won’t let any of that happen.

Not again.

Together, Lake and I move around the tower, edging closer with each step to the door. The smell of shifters becomes stronger, and the scent becomes intangible. It’s more than just a few shifters inside. All of them remained quiet. Barely even breathing.

I give Lake’s hand a squeeze and move through the open doorway, only to come to a halt as I take in the cell that’s holding no less than twenty shifters, all of them tigers.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

This isn't what I expected.

"Daddy," Lake whispers and starts forward, but I squeeze her hand, stopping her before she can do anything more.

"Easy, little Fae," I tell her, hoping like fuck that beast can't hear us.

Already, I can hear the shifting in its breath.

Callum's eyes go from Lake to lock on mine. He doesn't speak a word. He just stares at me with hard eyes. His body is scarred worse than I'd ever seen on a shifter.

"You have to unlock the door and get us out of here," he mouths. "Magic won't work in here."

How the fuck . . .

I shake my head and reach into my pocket. I'm not about to ask him right now. I'll wait until we're in the clear. I pull out my knife and move to the heavy wrought-iron door. Lake stays right at my side, her hand touching my lower back. Keeping constant touch, like she knows I need her to do this.

I can feel her emotions. I hear her thoughts in the back of my mind like a whispering echo. She's upset and blames herself for the condition of those behind the cell walls. If I weren't trying to get us the fuck out of here, I'd take the time to reassure her everything was going to work out. Right now, however, time is of the essence.

I work the lock until I hear the clink of it unlocking. Stepping back, I fold the knife back up and shove it in my pocket. Taking Lake's hand in one of mine, I yank the cell door open with the other and move back a handful of steps. One by one, each of the tigers in the cell steps out, eyeing me cautiously.

Callum steps forward first, not looking at his daughter, and I feel the hurt inside her that he hasn't looked at her again. But I get his reasoning. He's a warrior, and she's his weakness. His daughter. Just as she would be mine, as my mate, I'll kill anyone who gets in my way.

I nod to Callum, then jerk my chin toward the entrance of the tower. Time to get the fuck out of here. Moving to the door, I peek out to see that the three-headed beast is still asleep. Thank fuck for that. Smoke rises from the thing's nostrils.

Holding tight to Lake, I motion for everyone to proceed toward the burning woods. Once we're far enough away, I'll see what Lake can do about getting all of them and us out of here.

Time is of the essence, and it's only a matter of time before we're found if we don't get out of here soon.

Finally, we all reach the burning woods, and I look to Lake. "Think you can do it, little Fae?" I ask her quietly.

Her emotions are swirling through her and around her. There's no way none of those surrounding us can't feel it. She's projecting a bit more than my liking.

"Yes," she finally murmurs and plops to the ground, sitting with her legs crossed and eyes closing. I open my mouth to say something when I realize what she's doing. She's connecting with the earth.

A moment later, she stands, her eyes opening, a slight haze over them. She reaches out, and suddenly, our very surroundings begin shifting. The particles of the world strip away, circling around us all until they come to a halt once again. Getting my bearings, I quickly realize we're back at the clubhouse, and the back door opens to Corbin along with my other brothers standing there.

“Everything good, brother?” Corbin asks, brows drawn up, his eyes darting behind me. “What the fuck?”

“I was able to bring us back to when we were outside when you came out to get to me,” Lake announces quietly, lets my hand go, and rushes to the clubhouse, past the others, and inside.

Her pain is more than obvious.

“The hell happened?” Justice demands as Abel pushes forward.

“How the fuck . . .”

“You’re Cassius’s son,” Callum announces from behind me, his voice grated and sounding like he hadn’t spoken in years.

“Tucker, you wanna explain what the fuck is happening here?” Corbin demands, not giving Abel a chance to confirm or deny.

Knowing we don’t have time, I shake my head. “Sorry, Prez, but we don’t have time for explanations. I’ll fill you in after we deal with another problem. Let’s get everyone inside.”

Corbin holds my gaze for a moment before nodding. “Get ‘em in here then.”

Turning toward the shifters behind me, I meet first Callum's gaze, then his brothers, and then those standing around. “Once we get inside, we’ll discuss what’s going on. That is after we deal with another problem.”

Callum nods and motions for his brothers to move. They do as he says, and the others follow, but Callum doesn’t. Instead, he stands closer to me. “I need to see my

daughter again.”

“Right now, your daughter is hurting and doesn’t understand why you were cold toward her when we first found you. You didn’t even acknowledge her with a look,” I tell him.

“I know. But I still need to see her.” Callum grunts.

“Let me deal with the threat looming ahead, then I’ll see what I can do,” I tell him and turn toward my Prez. I close the distance between the two of us. “Don’t have to give more, but Lake took us away through the strands of time. Ended up in the Drakon King’s realm. Found them, got them out, then she brought us back to before the reason she took us away.”

Corbin blinks once, shakes his head, and lets out a breath. “Fuckin’ hell. Let’s get the fuck inside, and you can tell me the rest.”

“Will after we get rid of the dragons that should be here any second.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Justice snarls.

“Fraid not.” I grunt.

“You’ve nothing to worry about right now,” Karsyn announces, appearing next to Corbin out of thin air.

Fuck, I hate when she does that. It’s not often now that she’s learning to control it.

“What do you mean, Syn?” Corbin asks.

“Lake did what the Earth and Moon Goddesses wanted her to do. And in doing that, it

stops a battle from happening. The Drakon King called his dragons back to him the moment time shifted, altering the outcome,” Karsyn explained.

“Meaning she saved the club from being killed?” I state in question rather than asking out right.

“Exactly.” Karsyn gives me a small smile. “Don’t be mad at her, Tucker. She was doing what she had to do.”

I don’t bother giving the woman a response. She doesn’t give me a chance to anyway as she looks at Callum.

“You must be Lake’s father. Come on in, and we’ll get you something to drink and eat, then get you some clothes to change into,” she states and looks to Corbin. “I called Harmony and asked if she could come by with Cyrus. I figured you’d want to fill him in on what’s going on. I might have also asked them to stop at the store and grab some clothes that would fit.”

“Of course you did,” Corbin grumbles and shakes his head. “I’ll text Cyrus.” Putting an arm around his mate, he ushers her back down the hall.

“She’s a witch,” Callum states, sounding confused. “Karsyn is more than just a witch. She’s an earth witch who is able to speak with the Goddess herself. She’s also a hell of a lot more powerful than you might think a simple earth witch could be,” I inform him.

“As is my daughter. You don’t realize just how special she is,” he says, moving down the hall, following after my Prez and his mate.

I stay planted just inside the back door. Those words ring in my ears.

Just how special is Lake? What else could be hidden in the depths of my little Fae?

Chapter Twenty

Callum

Freedom .

My brothers and I were finally free, us and those who'd been captured alongside us. I started to lose hope that we'd one day be free, that my daughter would find her mate. That her mate would find her.

I'd done everything I could for her until I'd been captured to keep the Drakon King from getting his hands on her. I haven't seen my beautiful girl since she was just thirteen. Lake has grown into such a beautiful woman. She looks so much like her mother. If not for the scent of Fae that clings to her, you'd never know her biological father wasn't me, but rather a Fae.

My mate, who I lost far too soon after I found her, she'd given me the best gift, even if she wasn't mine by blood. She shares my mate's blood. Her scent. She's the reason my mate had been able to escape so long ago.

The gifts that Lake was born with are the reason she's so special. Not just that she can breed a dragon, Fae, shifter, or a human, it's only once mated she is supposed to be safe, unfortunately, the Drakon King doesn't care. He wants my daughter as he'd wanted her mother. But he wants my daughter more than ever because of what she can do.

"Where's Lake?" Rohan asks when I take a seat next to him.

Walker slides a bottle of water in my direction. I take it and immediately open it. I bring it to my lips and swallow down the cool liquid. I hadn't had water in days. It's been even longer since I've had clean water, let alone cold.

The Drakon King didn't allow us to have much to eat. Mostly, we've survived on meagering moldy bread. Sometimes, if he felt gracious, he'd give us a deer or two. I always let the others eat before me. I didn't want them to go hungry. At first, they'd protest they weren't eating ahead of their leader. But I knew they needed the energy more than I did. Besides, I wasn't their leader. Tigers didn't have actual leaders. We had our streaks, but mostly, we were solitary. However, they all understood the significance of the dreaded future ahead of us. On top of all that, I knew the bastard Drakon wasn't going to allow me to starve to death. He intended to use me and my brothers as pawns to get my daughter to heed his demands once he caught up to her.

Thankfully, she finally found her mate, though.

And now, we're all free.

My sweet mate once told me of the prophecy that she heard. She explained to me the importance once I told her she was pregnant.

"I don't know. Her mate went to find her. I'm sure he knows where to find her," I answer and glance around us. My eyes land on Cassius's son once more. I didn't have to catch his scent to know whose son he is. He's the spitting image of our big brother. The only one of us who, until me, had found his mate. I never understood why he took off with his mate. I never met her and hadn't even known her name. Cassius had simply abandoned his streak to be with his mate. Now, I understand. I can smell it on his son. He's a crossbreed.

"What are we going to do now?" Trace asks.

“We stick close. We no longer need to run to protect Lake. She’s come into her powers in full. Her mate will need us. We will be able to fight as we were always meant to.” I tell them to scan the rest of the room, seeing the different shifters. Wolf, coyote, lion, leopard, and tiger. So many different breeds under one roof. It has to mean something that Tucker, the last tiger prince, would surround himself in such a place.

My brothers and I have always been friends with those of other breeds. Some of those within clubs such as this, but they were nothing compared to this one. Something about their leader, Corbin, I heard Tucker call him, he’s an alpha wolf. For Tucker to allow himself to be a part of something that he’s not leading, must surely mean Corbin is a strong leader. I hoped as such, especially with the battle that will surely be coming forth soon enough.

“You think he’ll be able to do it?” Jair asks, glancing around.

“I believe he can,” Rohan answers. “The way he looks at Lake and then pushes aside what he feels she’s feeling proves it.”

“I agree,” Walker mutters. “He’d been able to get us out of that blasted tower without waking the beast. He made sure that Lake didn’t say more than she did.”

I nod, grimacing at the memory of seeing her again. I wanted to pull her in my arms and hold her tight. To give her what she seemed to want so much, it shimmered in her eyes, radiated off her. She wanted me to do all of this, and yet I didn’t. If I had, we’d have woken Urgan, and all of us would be dead. All but Lake, who would then be in the grasp of Zurri.

It would be even worse for us if Urgan called to the beast that we’d only seen twice in the time we’d been captured. Dytar is only called upon by Urgan or Zurri himself. Dytar is known as the Breather of Eternal Ice. He’s only allowed out of his

confinements when commanded. Both times he'd been released was when the Fae decided to attack in the Drakon realm.

“Zurri himself will be coming now. He won't be able to help himself. Tucker will use his command of the true Alpha to take him on. We will fight to protect Lake.” And maybe when this is done and over with, I can finally join my mate wherever she is.

A tiger could only hope for something so simple. I've longed for that of my mate long enough. Our daughter is grown, and once this is over, I'll be able to be at peace with the one woman I've loved yet not had enough time to love her as she deserved.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lake

What was I supposed to do now? Everyone either hates me or is mad at me for what I've done. The dismissive look my dad had first given me when I'd first seen him in that blasted tower said it all, he and my uncles all. They didn't want anything to do with me.

Dad had spoken to Tucker and looked at him. After that first look, he hadn't looked at me again.

Tears stream down my face at how my life has gone. I didn't know all of the things I could do, and now, I'm finding it all a bit overwhelming.

Everything I can do, there's still a price to be had. A weight to carry. The burden of everything I do. The strands of time told me so. For every time used, it's me who will pay. I dare not tell anyone, not even Tucker. If he knew, he'd demand answers as to what the price is. I won't tell him it's my very soul they'll chip at piece by piece until I'm nothing like I am now.

I can't let that happen. Messing with the fabric of time could destroy me just as anything else could. To make it worse, I'd taken us back to just a few minutes before we left, right outside the clubhouse, when he found me.

Tucker's probably still furious with me for taking us back in time.

A part of me is screaming that they'd all be better off without me. That I should go back to the Drakon King's realm and surrender myself to him. Let the others be as they are. They don't need me. I didn't deserve to have any of them in my life. Not my dad. Not my uncles. Not even Tucker.

All I keep doing is screwing things up and letting those I love end up hurt or placed in danger. Even those I just met. I placed them in the face of danger just by being here at the clubhouse.

Swiping at the tears, I can't keep up with the amount of them streaming down my cheeks. Why couldn't I be a normal person? Then I wouldn't have to worry about any of this. I could be Tucker's mate and not have to worry about anything else.

The other part of me shouts even louder that I need to snap out of it. That there had to be a reason for my dad to ignore me the way he did. That Tucker had every right to be pissed at me the way he'd been.

Even mad at me, Tucker pushed it to the side to protect me. He could've refused to go into danger, taking me with him while we'd been in the Drakon King's realm. Instead of rescuing all of the shifters we did, he could've demanded I take us right back. He didn't do this. He'd gone after them. Making sure I stuck to his side the entire time.

I wonder if any of them is even looking for me right now. I started to go to Tucker's room but changed my mind. It would be the first place he looked for me. I found myself leaving the clubhouse altogether. I was pulled through by an invisible tether, drawing me out another door of the clubhouse and through the woods. I'd gone deeper into the woods before stopping. Only then had I sat down and allowed the tears to stream down my cheeks. I let the anguish rake through my body as it never has before.

The snapping of a stick has me jerking my head to the right, “Who’s there?” I call out. It’s stupid. I know.

“The hell you doing out here, little Fae?” Tucker demands, coming into view.

“Nothing,” I mutter, turning away from him. “Go away.”

“You know I’m not gonna do that, Lake,” he states, coming closer.

With each step he takes, I realize he’s doing them purposely for me to hear. He could’ve moved just as he had done to get to me. The man is a predator. He doesn’t do anything without purpose.

“You gonna tell me what you’re doing out here?” This time, he asks, his arms going around my waist, his body coming flush against my back.

I could feel his thickness pressing into my lower back. My body starts to come alive with need all over again. Just as it does anytime he touches me. I close my eyes and allow myself to soak in his heat, to feel the warmth of him surrounding me. Only when he’s holding me do I ever fully feel safe. For that matter, do I feel whole.

“You gonna answer me?”

Sighing, I lean my head back, pressing against his chest. “I couldn’t handle being in there. I needed to be alone.” I wasn’t going to tell him that I was drawn to this very spot.

“You could’ve gone to the room,” Tucker grunts and strokes his thumbs on either side of my waist. The very motion does a number on my libido. Even with him chastising me. “You’d have been safer in the clubhouse, but got no problem with you coming back to the very spot I took you the first time.”

“What?” I blurt, jerking from his grasp to face him. “How do you know this is where you and I . . .” I can’t finish my question.

Tucker smirks and prowls toward me, eyes shifting to that of gold. The animal inside him is so close to the surface that his stripes are visible. “You don’t think I can smell the pleasure still that lingers here? I marked this area as mine. It’s where I took you. Took your virginity. Claimed you as my mate. Now, you wanna explain what you mean by being drawn here?”

“How did you . . .” God, I’m stupid. Did he hear the rest of my thoughts before he announced himself?

“Yeah, little Fae, I heard quite a bit,” he answers, reaching for me once again, this time tugging me forward, his hand gripping either side of my shirt. “We’ll get into that shit later.” Tucker jerks my shirt up and over my head. “For now, answer me about what drew you here.”

“I don’t know.” I really didn’t know. “It was like a tether drawing me here. Once I stopped, I just knew I could allow myself to let go.”

Tucker’s eyes shift side to side, taking in my expression. Seeing the truth rather than listening.

A second ticks by then another. Finally, he does something I was really hoping he would.

Tucker kisses me. Deep and thoroughly. His tongue commanding my own. With only his kiss, he has my blood burning inside me hotter than it ever has. My heart pounds so hard in my chest I’m sure he could hear it. Between my legs, I ache for him to take me. To lay me on the grass and take me.

Yet another part of me wants more . . .

As the thought comes to my mind, I manage to rip my lips from his and press a kiss to his jaw. With trembling fingers, I grip the belt, unbuckle and unsnap the button on his jeans, then slide the zipper down.

“What are doing, little Fae?” he rasps gruffly.

“Doing something I want too,” I tell him as I lower myself to my knees and slide his jeans down enough for his cock to jut out.

The head of his cock was thick and bulbous, with a clear liquid already beading at the very tip. I lick my lips and look up to find Tucker staring at me with such intensity that I start to get nervous.

“Don’t back out now, baby, go ahead and suck my cock. Wrap those lips around me. I’ll guide you through it,” he states, his hands coming to tangle in my hair.

Not taking my gaze from his, I lean forward and lick the clear liquid from his cock, moaning at the sweet and salty taste of him. Tucker growls and tugs me toward him.

“Open up, little Fae,” he commands, and I do just that.

I take him in my mouth, his hips thrusting slowly inside. I stroke Tucker’s cock with my tongue and hollow my cheeks. I’d read about this once in one of my books. The taste of him is different than I thought it would be. Even the sight of his cock is different. The little stripes make me even wetter. I’d never known something like that could be so appealing to me. That it would cause me to ache for him all the more.

“Fuck, Lake, your sweet little mouth is so damn good.” Tucker growls, his fingers tightening in my hair. “I wanna fuck your mouth, you good with that?”

I hum my answer around him. God knew I wanted him to do just that. Tucker snarls, tightens his grip even more, and goes about doing just as he wants. He fucks my mouth. His cock touching the back of my throat makes me gag at first, but I learn quickly to relax my throat to take him deeper.

One time, I swallow, causing him to curse. I thought I did something wrong until he orders me to do it again. Tucker repeats this motion repeatedly, and I feel myself growing wetter, aching for him to be inside me. The throb between my legs sharpens, and I find myself sliding a hand down into my jeans to stroke over my clit.

“Get your hand away from what’s mine,” Tucker snarls, jerking his cock from my mouth. “You don’t pleasure yourself, Lake. That’s my job.”

Quicker than I thought possible, Tucker moves, taking me to my back, jerks my jeans off, and slices my bra in the middle, revealing my breasts.

He spreads my legs, slides between them, and in one fluid motion, he thrusts partially inside.

“Tucker,” I gasp.

“Fuckin’ love how tight you are around me, Lake,” he bites out. He dives in deeper.

“It feels so good,” I tell him, reaching for him.

“Damn right.” Tucker moves inside me, filling me until he’s seated fully inside. He surprises me further by lifting me completely off the ground, his body balanced on his knees. “Wrap your legs around my waist, baby.”

I do as he tells me and am rewarded with a pleasure unlike anything else. His mouth comes to mine and grips my waist, holding me in place as he drives up into me.

Taking me hard and fast. His mouth matching his rhythm. All I can do is hold on. The experience is unlike any other.

The moment my release takes me, I break the kiss to be able to scream from sheer pleasure.

Tucker growls his approval and takes me even harder, extending my orgasm. As he does this, he moves to my shoulder and clamps his teeth where he's marked me each time he's taken me. His cock does that thing locking him in as his release fills me. I could feel the tip of his cock pulsating with each spurt.

Never, not even the other times he's taken me, have I felt such a thing.

In that second, something comes to me, the reason for me being drawn here to this one spot. It's where he claimed me, and I need to claim him as well.

I need to finish what he started. Yes, he claimed me as his mate, but I'm not a shifter. I'm a nymph and Fae. They have a different way of claiming their mates.

As Tucker lifts his head, eyes coming to mine, I slide my fingers up to either side of his face. I tighten my legs around him in case he tries to pull out and whisper to him the words that come to me as if I've known them all my life.

"You're of my soul as I'm of yours. No part of us shall be lost without the other. My soul is complete within yours, and yours within mine. Never a day will pass without you a part of me. Where in this time you are, I shall be. No matter the past, present, or future, my life is now tied to yours."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tucker

The moment those words leave Lake's mouth, I'm caught off guard by the effect they have on me. I thought in my claiming her, she was my mate in every way, but now, it's completely different. Not only could I feel her inside me, hear her thoughts . . . fuck, I can't even put words to what I'm feeling. It's like she's a part of me. Maybe even my very soul.

"Wow," she says, her body still locked around mine. My cock still seated inside her. Her hips rolling, causing a sensation that tops every damn time I've ever fucked a woman. Including claiming my mate.

"I didn't need to know that, Tucker," she states, sliding her hands to my shoulders. "It's not nice to say things like that."

"What, you heard me?" I ask. I'd been able to shield her from my thoughts for the most part.

"Yes, and I don't need to know about women you've been with before me. Granted, I do appreciate you thinking I'm better than they all were." Lake giggles and presses herself closer to me. "Think we could do it again?"

I grin, knowing exactly what she's asking. "Damn right, we can."

I slant my head, claim her lips, take her to her back, and give her just what she wants.

What she needs. What I need. Taking her, I realize I feel what she feels with me inside her. It's extraordinary in a way I've never thought possible. We were truly mated not just by my claiming her or her being my fated mate.

Lake was mine. She'd given herself to me, made the choice. Fuck, the very thought is enough to send me over the edge, taking her with me. The tiny barb-like spikes shoot out, sticking into the walls of her pussy, locking me in place all over again.

I roll us until she's lying sprawled over me with her head on my chest. I could lay like this forever and never grow tired of it. Hell, I could stay right here for the rest of time itself and never grow old of having my cock buried inside her sweet heat.

It sucks that I won't be able to do just that. I've got to get my mate back to the clubhouse.

"I'm not ready to go back," she whispers, not lifting her head. She keeps herself pressed against me, one of her fingers making circles on my shoulder.

"You hear that or just stating?" I ask, mostly joking but also curious as to how deep our connection goes.

"I was just stating," she answers and lifts her head. "But I did hear you."

I give her a grin and slide a hand up her naked spine into her hair. "Gonna have to get used to that, little Fae."

"Me too." Lake smiles softly. "Can we just stay out here for the time being?"

As much as I want to give that to her, I can't. "We need to get back. I'm not sure if and when shit's gonna go down. I need you protected. Plus, you gotta talk to Callum. He wants to talk to you."

“Now, he wants to talk to me.” She scoffs, shaking her head.

“Lake,” I call her name, stilling her movements with tightening my hand in her hair. “He knew if he did anything, let alone look at you again, that he’d get them all killed. The man loves you. But he’s also a warrior. One of the strongest tiger shifters there is. Just as all of those with the Wildthorn blood.” It’s what makes them pretty much royalty. Hell, the alliance my family has always had with them does make them so. Now, with my mating of Lake, they officially are a part of my streak.

Lake doesn’t say anything at first. She simply stays curled to my chest, fingers drawing circles. The motion tingles, and it’s all I can do to keep from taking her again. Hell, with my cock still seated deep inside her, I’m having a hard time not thrusting into her. The image of her on top, moving, fills my head, and damn it, that’s not something I want.

A moan comes from the little vixen sitting astride me, and she shifts her hips.

“Fuck me, you heard my thoughts again,” I grunt.

“I didn’t just hear them, I saw it in your mind,” she says and presses her hands into my chest to push herself up until she’s sitting fully atop me.

Lake swivels her hips, and I clamp my fingers into her hips, helping her as she rides me. I’ll give her this moment, then after I take her back to the clubhouse. There’s no way in hell I could stop my mate from seeking a pleasure like this. Not when I get to enjoy the views of her beauty as she does so. Plus, watching her experience something new, me giving it to her, makes it all the much hotter.

Lake’s lips part, and her hands slide from my chest to curl around her tits.

Fuck yeah. “Pinch your nipples for me, little Fae,” I rasp, eyes locked on her chest.

“Show me what you want me to do with them. Tell me how good it feels.” I don’t need her to tell me. I can feel it as if I were in her skin.

“It feels so good, Tucker, so good,” she pants.

Sitting upward, I help her move faster on me while taking one of those sweet peaks into my mouth. If I didn’t get my mouth on her, I was gonna end up going mad from the sensations she’s pouring into me.

Lake’s movements become sporadic. Fingers digging into me, and I know she’s close. My own release not far away. Flipping her to her back, I come over her, claim her lips with mine, and pound into her, absorbing the sweet cries.

I take her, filling her, and the moment her pussy clamps around my cock like a vise, I feel my release boiling in my balls ready to fill her. I rip my lips away to search for the spot where I’ve marked her. I sink my teeth in and let my own release shoot through me, filling her. In my head, repeating the very words she’d given me only moments ago. Or was it longer? It doesn’t matter. Even repeating them in my head, she can hear them, and it somehow seals both our fates as one.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lake

Walking hand in hand with Tucker, I do my best not to feel the fear threatening to overwhelm me with terror. I hated leaving the woods. I felt connected to the one spot as I've never felt connected to anything ever before.

I take that back. I feel connected to that area, but I'm more connected to the man at my side. I glance at his bare chest with his cut over it and find myself grinning. He'd given me his shirt yet again. In his hand, he carried my clothes. I didn't want to put them back on. They smelled like sulfur, and I didn't want that on me, not after spending so much time in the woods with Tucker inside me.

I'll dress after we got to his room and take a shower. I didn't want to think about what would come after that.

Tucker's explanation of why my dad acted when we first found him and the others makes sense, but it doesn't make the hurt go away. Or any less.

Neither of us speaks a word, they aren't needed right now. I'm able to feel Tucker's emotions and thoughts in a way I didn't think possible. They're far more intense than what they'd been when he'd first claimed me. I didn't know speaking those words I did would make things so . . . so complete. Somehow, I'm able to see through Tucker what he sees in me, feels when touching me, moving inside me.

In a way, it makes everything we've done that much more special.

I wouldn't take anything back, though I'm scared of what's to come. I now know, without any doubt, he's going to be there for me, and I hope he knows I'll do the same for him.

Tucker gives my hand a squeeze, not saying anything aloud. With a tug, he leads me into the clubhouse straight to his room, then to the bathroom, where he kisses me thoroughly beneath the spray of the shower. Once again, he takes me, but this time with my back to the tile, my legs around his waist as he works quickly inside me.

By the time we finish, the water is running cold. But even that doesn't bother me, Tucker's warmth is all I need.

"Time to get dressed, little Fae," he whispers and presses a kiss to my forehead as he slides out of me.

"I know," I murmur, sliding down to stand.

"I'm gonna be right there with you, Lake."

Nodding, I wait for Tucker to shut the water off. Together, we get out. Tucker takes time to dry me off first with one of the towels. When he's done with me, he runs the towel over his body swiftly and follows me back into his room. I dress in a pair of leggings and a cropped tank, not bothering with putting on a bra or panties. It seems any time I wear them he rips them.

I turn in Tucker's direction, hearing him chuckle.

"It's not funny," I tell him and snatch up my brush. "I'm going to run out of undergarments because of you."

"You do, and I'll buy you more." He grins and shoves his feet into his boots.

Looking at the scuffed-up boots, a thought crosses my mind, and I find myself voicing it. “Later, do you think we can go out on your bike again?”

I loved being on the back of his bike. Granted, the one time I had been, my mind wasn’t in the right state to completely enjoy it. Still, I’d felt the freedom it could be.

Tucker catches my gaze. “I’ll take you anytime you want, little Fae.” He steps closer and strokes my cheek. “First, let’s see about getting rid of the threat against you. Then we’ll worry about getting you on the back of my bike. Alright?”

“Okay,” I agree, seeing the reasoning.

“Good, now, let’s get this next part out of the way. I still gotta meet with my brothers and figure out the next step since we’ve already got your dad and uncles.”

Yeah, I guess I messed up their plan. “Are you still mad at me?”

Now, why did I have to go and ask him that?

Tucker takes my brush from me and grips my chin, keeping me from being able to look away. “You did what you did for good reason. The outcome came out good. We got those we needed to save. Yeah, I was pissed with you. You took things into your own hands, and you can’t do that. I know what you’re trying to hide about going through the strands of time. You aren’t shielding that as much as you thought you were. And since you aren’t gonna be doing that again, we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question,” I tell him.

“It’s a hard question to answer without hurting your feelings, Lake,” he states, leaning in and pressing a kiss to my lips. “You’re a hard woman to stay pissed with,

but yeah, I'm still slightly pissed. I'd be more so if I hadn't just come inside you as many times I have. That sort of thing seems to help in putting me in a mellow mood."

I stare up at him and silently nod. What else could I say to that? Nothing really. He has a right to his feelings, and I can understand it.

"Time to face your dad, little Fae," Tucker announces, dropping his hand from my chin to take my hand.

I suck in a breath, giving him a look of reluctance. As much as I want to see my dad, I'm scared that he'll hate me. It's because of me that he ended up where he did for so long.

Tucker moves down the hall, walking in front of me, shielding me, protecting me in his way. Keeping me from the sight of the others until I'm ready to see them. They'd be able to catch my scent, but I wouldn't have to see them until I knew I could handle the look of anger in their eyes.

The moment we step from the hall into the main room, silence descends on the room. The noise I'd heard echoing in the hall was now complete silence.

"I see she completed the mating with you," my dad says, ending the silence.

"What's going on here?" Tucker demands, ignoring my dad's statement.

"Cyrus and his club have agreed to stick around and help in getting this situation taken care of," Corbin grunts.

"Yeah, Big Daddy would have my ass if I didn't help in this. Bonus, kicking dragon ass sounds like fun."

I peek around Tucker to look in the direction of the guy who was talking, and I see a man looking similar to Corbin. His brother, I'm assuming. Big Daddy, I knew, was their dad. I met him once when he came by with Corbin's daughter. She'd been staying with Big Daddy, where Corbin knew she was safe until all my troubles were dealt with. I couldn't blame the man. If I had a child, I'd do the same thing.

Cyrus's gaze shifts toward me, and he cocks a brow.

I quickly jerk back behind Tucker and clinch my fingers in the waist of his jeans.

I don't know why I did something so chicken. Maybe it's my nerves are on edge.

"Lake, come out here, sweetheart," my dad calls. I know that tone. He used to use it anytime I would hide under the bed or in a closet. "We have to talk, and we can't do that with you hiding behind your mate."

"If she wants to stay behind me, she can." Tucker grunts, sending waves of reassurance through the bond we share. "I'm not going to force her to move when she's not ready. Enough has happened, and she needs to have at least one thing she's in control of right now."

"I get that," Dad mutters. I could hear the hurt in his voice that he's doing his best to hide. "Still can't fix things with her if she's hiding from me."

"Lakey, come on, squirt, come out," Uncle Rohan calls. "None of us blame you for what happened."

"Nope," Uncle Jair remarks. "You're still our little spitfire of a niece. Now, come on and give your uncles hugs."

"Back off and give her time," Uncle Walker growls. "Can't y'all smell her

trepidation. She's hurting because of all the bullshit."

Uncle Walker's right about that.

"We know that, asshole," Rohan mutters. "Why the fuck do you think we want her to come from behind her mate? Hell, if her mate was anyone else besides the damn last tiger prince, I'd already have snatched her away."

Tucker snarls at this, and I can't help but giggle. Granted, I keep my giggle quiet. I know what my uncle is trying to do.

"Little Fae, I think it's safe for you to come out, considering you're laughing," Tucker states gruffly.

"Are you sure?" I whisper.

"Yeah, baby, I'm sure. If you don't, the five of them might gang up on me to get to you." He snorts, reaching around his back. "Promise, if any of them upset you, I take my claws to them."

Now, it's my turn to snort. He knows I wouldn't want him to do that.

I take a deep breath, place my hand in Tucker's and allow him to pull me around in front of him. He lets my hand go, and his arm goes securely around my waist, holding me to him.

My gaze goes straight to my dad's, and I see him taking in this action. Slowly, his gaze comes to mine, and he gives me the smile I've dreamed of seeing for so long.

He moves, coming close, reaching out a hand to palm my cheek. "You look like your mother did in so many ways."

Tucker drops his arm, and I find myself moving without even thinking into my dad's arms, mine going around his waist and I burrow my face in his chest. Tears I thought I'd never shed again come bursting from me, and I cry as I've never done. My dad's arms clutch tighter around me, holding me close, shielding me away from the others.

I can feel my uncles moving in close, doing the same, not allowing anyone else to see me in a moment of weakness.

"I'm sorry I failed you, Lake," Dad whispers. "But know this, you're not to blame for anything that has happened. I would do it again in a heartbeat because you are and always have been my special little girl."

"Is it because of what I am the reason you call me that?" I blurt the question, not knowing the answer I'm hoping to hear.

"No, Lake, it's not because of your gifts or the power you carry that I call you my special little girl. It's because you brought your mother to me. Helped her escape the hell she was living in. You saved her before you were even born," he explains.

"But she died giving birth to me." I didn't understand.

"No, she didn't," Karsyn states. Her voice no more than a whisper as she steps through my uncles, Corbin right behind her.

"What do you mean?" Confusion mars Dad's expression. "I was there. I saw her. I placed her body in the tomb myself."

"You did, but she was not dead. Only in a deep slumber." Karsyn's gaze shifts, and she looks past them, yet at nothing that anyone else can see.

"What is she doing?" Uncle Jair asks.

“Give her a minute,” Corbin commands, his arm surrounding his woman, a hand going protectively over her stomach.

Karsyn blinks and smiles. “The Earth Goddess wants you to know that though she still slumbers, she awaits you. You’ve sacrificed enough in the past years, and so you shall be rewarded. But so long as the evil that marks both mother and daughter as a target, you won’t be able to find your way to her.”

“So what? We kill a dragon, and my brother gets his mate back?” Uncle Rohan demands.

“Yes,” Karsyn agrees and tilts her head to the side to look at Corbin over her shoulder. “I’m tired now and want to go lie down. You need to meet with your brothers. The next coming days are going to be a struggle.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tucker

It didn't sit well with me letting Lake leave my side. I didn't want her away from me. The only thing keeping me from losing it is that she stopped crying, and her emotions weren't all over the place anymore. I could feel her and knew she wasn't far. She was actually in Corbin's room with Harmony and Karsyn.

From the thoughts coursing through her, she wasn't exactly sure what to think of either of them. She wanted to like them, but considering her past, she's never truly had friends.

"Does Lake still have her night-light?" Callum asks, drawing me from my thoughts.

"Yeah, out of everything she owned, which wasn't much at all, that was the one thing she clung to and asked to bring with her when I brought her to the clubhouse," I tell him, cocking a brow. "You gave her a light that had my markings on it."

"I did because the Moon Goddess told me that she would be your mate." The confession catches me off guard. Out of all the different things I'd thought, I hadn't even thought that.

Interesting.

The Moon Goddess has a way of doing things to tangle with fate when she feels like it. It pisses me off that she'd taken all of my streak from me, but in a way, what

happened with them, made me who I am now. I'm harder than I was. Deadly. I'm not an Enforcer of this club for no reason. I thrive on causing the enemy pain.

"Why do you ask about the night-light?" Justice asks before I can.

"That night-light isn't just any old night-light. The wood is carved from that of the land that belongs to the Fae," Callum announced. "When Lake's mother escaped, she'd been holding onto some branches. She claimed that the wood was from a tree known to be able to kill a Fae but also was deadly to the Drakon King himself."

"I don't get how it'd be deadly to the Drakon King. Does it work on the other dragons as well?" What exactly does he mean by it being deadly to the Drakon King? I mean, shouldn't it affect them all?

"It's deadly because the, unlike the other dragons, the Drakon King is different. He's both dragon and Fae. It's why he hates Nyx so much, because Nyx shares his blood."

"And because Nyx shares the same blood with Lake, he's able to track her," Jair finishes for his brother.

And this fucker wants my mate as his dragon bride. He's sick and twisted. I get some things need to stay in the family, but not that. Even shifters aren't that wild about incest. They're about pure-blooded. Some shifters look down on those who mate with humans or others not their species. For centuries, my own streak did. They didn't look outside tiger shifters.

Now, I wasn't just mated to a woman who wasn't a shifter. She was both human and nymph. I don't even want to think of what they'd say. Hell, I couldn't give two shits if they wanted to cast me aside. I'm the damn tiger prince and can pick who the fuck I want. And my fated mate is the one I'd choose every damn time.

Lake's thoughts come across the bond, and I'm guessing she not only felt but heard my thoughts. There's no keeping her out. I won't hide anything from her. Meaning, she probably knows exactly what else we're in here discussing as it filters through my mind.

The last thing I need is for her to know what's going on, but I'm not about to hide it from her either. As much as I hate it, she has a right to know.

Something spears through my mind, one of her thoughts about the night-light and it only pisses me off more.

"Hold up," I snarl, lip curling, and level a glare on Callum. "You made a night-light out of wood that could harm a Fae? Your daughter, my mate, is part Fae. Why the fuck would you give her something that could do anything to her?"

Callum narrows his gaze as well, palms flat on the table, and comes out of his seat. "I did what I had to do. It might have if it had cut her, but it didn't. I made sure of it when I shaped the wood and smoothed it. I created something special for her so that she'd never lose it. The wood can be sharp enough to pierce Zurri's skin. It would weaken him enough to kill him."

"And why hadn't you done it before?" Corbin asks.

"Who says I haven't tried?" Callum sneers, darting eyes to my Prez. "Trust me, I tried. My brother nearly lost his life when Lake was only ten. But it's not me that has to kill him. Or even go up against him." Those eyes of his come straight back to me. "Thing is, Zurri isn't stupid. He's calculated. Will send Drakon warriors before coming himself. He prefers to sit on his throne and watch from a distance rather than deal with those beneath him."

"And how do you know all this about Zurri?" Justice quires.

“You have a bastard like him after your daughter, you learn every damn thing you can about the enemy,” Callum remarks, and I have to agree.

“So, who exactly is supposed to be the one to kill ‘em?” Abel grunts, lounging back in his seat and looking relaxed, but those of us who know him best, know he’s anything but. He’s ready to fight whoever he has to.

“Who else do you think, kid?” Jair growls, shooting Abel a look.

From the way I’ve seen Lake’s uncles react around Abel, they’re surprised at the sight of him. They don’t know how to handle the news. Just as I’m sure Abel’s struggling with the fact he’s got more than just Lake now, but uncles. It almost makes me wonder how his mom will respond to the fact her mate’s family now knows about him.

That woman can be a bit intense with her protectiveness toward Abel. She hadn’t been able to have any more cubs after him, so she tends to make it a habit of popping up often. Luckily, she’s off on some vacation with some friends of hers. It’s a good thing since it’ll give him time before he has to tell her.

“It’s got to be Tucker,” Callum answers as he pops Jair on the back of his head. “It has to be him. But even still, you need an army behind you. Zurri won’t go toe to toe. He won’t fight fair in any fashion.”

“Then it’s a good damn thing he’s got us,” Dane growls, rolling his head on his shoulders. The popping of his neck could be heard throughout the room.

I cock a brow in his direction and grin. “You ready to get that fur singed, brother?”

“Fuck you, man, I’m just looking forward to a fight. I’m itching for it.”

“Then, let’s get this all sorted,” Corbin states. Before he can continue, the door opens.

I shouldn’t be surprised by it, but still, I find I am when Orpheus steps in with several of his men with him.

“Sorry to intrude, Corbin,” Orpheus remarks, his expression blank. “We wanted to offer our assistance in taking care of the problem that’s coming to your door.”

“What do you know of it? Other than what you already know?” Justice asks cautiously.

Orpheus’s eyes darken for a split second before he shrugs. “I know that the Drakon King is preparing to come to Redwich. I give him maybe a day, no more, before he makes his move. It could be as soon as in the next hour, though.”

“Fuck.” Just what I need.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lake

Time seems to want to take its ever-loving time. I ended up excusing myself to go to Tucker's room. I couldn't just sit there and pretend pleasantries with Karsyn and Harmony. No matter how nice I thought they were.

I was just having a hard time sitting still and talking when I wanted to know what was going on. Several times, I've found myself going to the door and stopping from going any farther.

Tucker asked me to give him time with his brothers and everyone else who was there to help plan their next course of action. I could hear his thoughts, which I still found weirder than I ever thought possible, so I knew what he was sharing with me through the connection between us.

I want to be able to help, but I've got a feeling they won't let me. Tucker won't want me to. He's made that clear. He didn't have to say or even think it. It was in the way his body tensed.

Let's not forget how he was while in the Drakon realm. He'd been pissed with me, more than a little. Furious. He didn't like what I'd done, but he also didn't want me there because of the danger of the situation.

Tucker has to know he can't bubble-wrap me. I can't be sealed away and kept out of it. It's because of me all of this is happening. I won't let him.

Twirling around the room, my eyes land on the night-light. Tucker thought something about it just a bit ago, how the wood could hurt the Drakon King. But I don't want them to break my night-light for them to be able to do it.

I wish there was another way to take care of all of this without anyone getting hurt.

They all want to draw the dragons here to Redwich. I don't think that's what they should do. There are too many innocent people who could get caught in the crossfire.

"There are no innocents when it comes to war."

I whirl around to come face to face with a man I've never seen before in my life. "Who are you?" I ask, but I've a feeling I know. He's too beautiful looking. Hair is dark as night itself. The clothes he's wearing seem to mold straight to his body. The top partially open, displaying his upper torso and chest. There's a shimmer of some sort surrounding him, making him seem to glow. But it's the eyes that send a shiver down my spine. I would know those eyes. I see them when I look in the mirror.

"I would think it obvious as to who I am, Lake. You do share my eyes and blood," he says, almost like he was actually singing the words. Tucker once said I do the same thing. I wonder if it's a Fae thing.

"What are you doing here?" I demand, shoving all other thoughts from my mind. I don't need to be worrying about anything else other than the very issue at hand.

"Is that a way to speak to your father?" Nyx asks, clucking his tongue, one eye cocking mockingly.

"You aren't my father," I snap. "Before you go all Darth Vader on me with the whole ' Luke, I am your father ' bit, you can save it. We might share blood, but you aren't a damn thing to me. Just the man who stole my mother away, impregnated her, and

kept her prisoner.”

Nyx grins deviously and crosses his arms over his chest. “I did do that, and if I remember correctly, she was delightful. Served her purpose as I expected.” He somewhat reminds me of what the devil himself would look like with his devilish appearance.

“You’re sick.” My stomach churns, and the need to vomit grows with each and every word this man, no, that’s not the word, this sadistic fairy allows to pass his lips. “Why did you come here in the first place?”

“Curiosity?” Nyx states in question rather than answering me. Moving gracefully, so light on his feet, I find it nerve racking. He walks around me. “I found myself wondering what has Zurri in such a fit to get his hands on you. Though I did know he would be when I got your mother pregnant. I’d hoped to use you myself.”

“I’ll kill you before I let that happen,” I mutter and move toward the door, ready to get away from him as quickly as I can. I want Tucker here with me to shield me from this devil.

“I allowed your mother to take those branches with her,” Nyx finally states, halting my steps. Slowly, I turn toward him without speaking a word. I don’t think I could if I even tried. I simply stare at the Fae, with who I share nothing but the color of my eyes with. He looks at me with such a chilling expression. “I allowed your mother to escape from Faery and find her mate. Allowed her to take what could kill something as you and me with her. I didn’t know that she wouldn’t be with you while you grew up.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I finally manage to croak out.

“I find myself not liking the pain coursing through you right now. The fear and need

you feel for your mate.” He shrugs. “I might be a sadistic fairy, as you believe, but I do have morals. Granted, they’re mine, and I can change them at will, but for some reason, I do not wish to see you harmed. You’re the blood of mine.” Nyx cocks his head slightly. “Not just that, but you hold the power of my mother.”

“Your mother?” I blurt, totally shocked by this.

“Yes, my mother. Your paternal grandmother. She passed over a thousand years ago at the hands of my brother, who wanted the powers you now have. She refused to gift them to him. It’s why you are known as the dragon bride in the prophecy.”

“I don’t understand,” I murmur, my brows furrowing as the door behind me is thrown open. I feel him without looking, but I don’t let his presence distract me from what Nyx just shared. “Why does it make me the dragon bride?”

“Because, my daughter, you hold the power to command the dragons in a way he cannot. He wanted you at his side because he’d use you to keep his kingdom the way he wishes. All you must do is embrace that side of you. With the help of your mate, you’ll be able to. You simply use the voice within you. The very same one you used to command the strands of time, and they shall listen.” Nyx looks behind me to Tucker. “You will treat her like the gift she is, or I’ll come upon you in a way you will not wish. You now have the answer to defeat Zurri.”

In the blink of an eye, Nyx vanishes just quickly as he appeared.

Slowly, I turn in Tucker’s arms. “Well, that was interesting.”

Tucker looks near on murderous, and his thoughts and emotions match just the expression perfectly. “The fuck just happened here.”

“I think Nyx just gave us a way to stop any bloodshed before it ever happens. We

could go back to the dragon realm and put an end to all of this before Zurri can get here,” I remark, suddenly feeling elated by the truth.

“A little late for that.” Tucker growls, curling an arm tight around me. “They’ll be here at any time. But if we can end this without my brothers being killed by the fire-breathing fuckers, then we’ll handle this the way it needs to be done. He turns his head to the nightstand where my light sits. “Gonna have to take your light apart, little Fae. Don’t wanna fuck it up, but knowing what it’s made of, I ain’t about to keep it. I’ll fix it myself after this is done. Refashion it with a different wood. I don’t want you not to have it . . .”

“I don’t need it anymore.” The words come rushing from my lips without my stopping them.

What surprises me is how true it really is. As long as I have Tucker, then I’m okay. He’s my tiger prince from the light. Being able to hold him, to have the real thing, I don’t need the light.

“You’re always gonna have me, Lake. You and any cubs we have. I’m not goin’ anywhere. Glad you don’t think you need the night-light anymore. Regardless, I’ll still be fixing it later on. Maybe you can put it in our baby’s room.”

“What?” I blurt.

Tucker grins. “Definitely not the right time for this shit,” he states, pulling me tight to his front, one arm around my waist, the other going up to tangle his fingers in my hair. “But I don’t give a fuck. Just means one more thing to fight for. To strike where it won’t just hurt him but kill the fucker. You’re pregnant, Lake.”

I want to be thrilled, but a shiver of dread courses through my veins. What happens if I end up like my mom? How do I know how to raise a child?

“We’ll figure it all out together later on, little Fae. For now, put it out of your mind and worry about being able to use the voice Nyx told you to use,” Tucker orders, his tone gentle but firm.

He’s right. For right now, I need to worry about other things rather than being pregnant. The first order of business is to make sure the bloodshed is left out of the equation. If Zurri can’t use the other dragons, he’ll have no choice but to face off with Tucker.

At least, that’s what I’m hoping for.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tucker

I didn't like it, none of it, but it makes sense. Damn if it doesn't make sense. Weird as it may be, I understand it.

What I don't understand is why the damn fairy decided to come here and tell us this at all. He didn't have to. He could have stayed in it. But he'd shared what he knew about Lake that was so simple yet a pain in the ass all in one. She was going to have to face the dragons alongside me. My brothers and those who also came to help by putting themselves on the line to face off with fire-breathing dragons. Who the hell knew how many Zurri would be bringing with him.

I'd be lucky if she didn't have to be a part of it, but no, of course, fate would not allow this to be so simple.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Come on, little Fae, let's get out there and fill everyone in on the latest situation. At least the plan doesn't have to change too much for it to all work out." I take her hand in mine, and without waiting for her response, I tug her out of the room. The sooner we get everything organized, the better it will all turn out.

I fucking hope.

The next hours seem to tick by slower than usual. Corbin sent all the doxies away

from the clubhouse for their protection. The looks they shot Lake on the way out, pissed me off enough to snarl at them all. If they can't respect my woman, then they'd learn real quick it wasn't going to be tolerated just as they'd learned to respect Karsyn.

I don't give a fuck if they want one of the club members to claim them as an ol' lady. It wasn't going to happen. My brothers aren't stupid enough to go for a bitch everyone's already fucked so much their pussy is too loose to really enjoy.

Plus, finding my mate, my fated mate, I don't see how anyone could deal with just picking. Then again, you find a woman that you can fall for, it doesn't really matter.

"Air's shifting," Dane says, pulling me out of my thoughts. Turning toward him, I see he's got his nose to the air. Out of all my brothers, except for Corbin himself, he's got the sharpest sense of smell.

"They're coming," Lake murmurs, tilting her head back, fingers clutching at my cut. "The strands are shifting."

I cock my head down to meet her gaze. The very look in hers tells me what I could already feel inside her. She's scared out of her mind.

"Don't worry, little Fae, I'm going to be right here with you. Remember, I'm not letting you get away from me. I won't let him win. You're my mate." Fury coils inside me, and it's all I can do to keep the beast inside me at bay. Together, him and I must defeat Zurri. Take him out and end this once and for all.

We need Lake to command the other dragons to her. The moment she does that (if it works) then we'll be able to end this quickly. If not, then we're all in for one hell of a battle.

“I know.” Lake nods as the wind starts to pick up.

Jerking my head back up, I look around, scanning the area and seeing how the sky darkens. The trees are swaying, leaves falling from them blowing around. A sudden piercing screech noise fills the dark sky. The noise comes from more than just one. I’d say at least fifteen, maybe twenty.

“Here they come.” Corbin snarls and half shifts, allowing his wolf to come forth.

I follow suit, as do those of my brothers who can. The ones who can’t shift into one or the others that they’re cross-bred between.

Stay near me until the fight starts. Once it does, you stay with your dad and uncles . I tell her through the bond we share.

“I’ll be fine,” she murmurs, taking in my massive size in this form. She’s only seen me once, the night I took her virginity, and I scented the arousal that shot through her as she looked me over. I’d never take her in this form. If she’d been a shifter, then that’s another story. But I’d kill her if I took her like this. It doesn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy doing other things while in this form with her. They don’t call it the thrill of the chase for nothing.

“Don’t even think about that right now. The last thing I need is to get turned on.” She huffs, swatting at my chest.

Dane snorts and shakes his head.

“Focus,” Lake snaps and whirls around, her hair slapping my chest in the process.

The horrible screech of the dragons grows closer, and suddenly, they come into view.

Fuck, those are some ugly beasts. The three in the front, though, they're not like the others. They look different.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Lake moves in front of me. Her body humming, toes coming off the ground. Fuck.

Feeling what's going on with her, I step behind her, giving her the power she needs from me. I don't know how I know she needs it, but it comes through to me. I just do. Claws digging into her hips, I dip my head down and clamp my jaw on the mating mark.

Power rips through the both of us. Filling me more than I ever thought possible. Energy that I've felt course through Lake now courses through me.

The screeching of dragons grows silent, and suddenly, men are in the place of dragons as they fall from the sky, landing on their feet in graceful movements.

"My queen," one of the men states, going to his knee.

One by one, the others fall, doing the same thing.

"Get up, you fools." Zurri snarls. "She is not queen yet."

"We bow to the queen." the one who kneeled first states blatantly. "The power of Zirnitra runs through her veins."

"Zirni-who?" Lake whispers.

"You will not bow to her. Not until she is mine," Zurri commands, which his men ignore.

I step forward and wait for him to focus on me. “You want my mate, you’ll have to kill me first.”

“Then so be it.” Zurri snarls, throws his head back and shifts.

Zurri screeches and blows fire straight to the sky before lowering himself. “You will not defeat me.”

“Wanna bet?” I tell him, sneering and taking one of the bolts we’ve created out of Lake’s night light from Corbin, who held them for me until now.

Rushing forward, even as fire comes at me, I run right through, not feeling it burn me, only the heat of it. Still, it does nothing to me. With the bolt raised, I shove it through the scales, going straight for where I learned his heart would be. Sinking deeper, I shift my claw, digging deeper into him.

Zurri lets out a horrible screech, and magic pours through us both as he shifts back, my hand still in his chest. “Long live the king,” I snarl, my voice ragged in this form, barely understandable even to my own ears, and yank his heart from his body. Zurri drops down, and he’s left in a heap of bloody mess on the ground. I toss his heart next to his head, the bolt still lodged in it, and look to the men who’d come with him. “You ally yourselves with us or fight. Pick now.”

The all look to Lake, then back to me. “Our queen is your mate. We shall not go against her. The rightful power of Zirnitra courses through her.” Coming to his feet, he sticks his hand out. “My name is Barrydi, and if you will have me, I’ll lead the dragons for you honorably.”

Lake steps forward, her father and uncles behind her, takes my hand, and looks at the man. “It’s not me you need to follow. I’m no queen. If the dragons will follow you, then that’s fine with me. I just want truces between worlds. No more fighting. No

more wars.”

“We could do that,” Barrydi agrees, bowing his head slightly.

“Then work something out with Corbin, Cyrus, Tucker, and Orpheus. I want to be left out of this,” Lake says and turns to me. “Can we please go for that ride now?”

I blink twice, shake my head, shift, and draw her into my arms. “Yeah, little Fae, we can go for that ride.”

I knew just where I was going to take her. This part of our lives is over now, and for her, she’ll never have to worry again. I won’t let anyone dare fuck with her. I’ll strike them through the heart before I allow someone to take them from me. Let the word spread about how I took out Zurri. He was too easy to kill, but if he was blinded by his own power to see that Lake and I together are stronger than he could ever possibly be.

Glancing over Lake’s head to all those who stood around, I give them all a chin lift. Words aren’t needed to show my appreciation. They all understand that after something like this, the need to be with our mates.

Being with Lake is all I need or want right now. Feeling her beneath me is even more important. The need to show her how much she means to me even more so.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:58 am

Lake

One Month Later . . .

“Calm down, little Fae. It’s gonna be okay.”

Tucker’s words don’t do anything to ease the panic threatening to overwhelm me.

“How can I calm down in a time like this?” I snap, still pacing the length of the kitchen. A kitchen that sits in to the side of an open space home he’d moved us into not too far from the clubhouse. But far enough to give us privacy.

I love the house. It’s spacious, with plenty of rooms to fill. Tucker could even shift into his tiger form and not knock into walls or anything else. There are six bedrooms in total, five bathrooms. One in our room. One in what we’ve made the guest room. Two connecting between bedrooms. And one that’s off the living room, it’s more just a powder room.

The rest of the house is mainly an open floor plan, where I could see every bit of it. The living room was divided off by a sectional large enough for Tucker to be able to stretch out on. His big body can lay comfortably with me on top of him. Or to the side while watching the massive eighty-five-inch TV, which is normally set on something I want to watch. I’ve been obsessed with watching crime shows. I don’t know what it is about them, but I love trying to figure out who did it along with the cast.

The dining room and kitchen were mainly one big space with an island in the middle that we placed benches on one side of. I hadn’t picked out a dining table yet. Well,

Tucker wouldn't let me. He said he was working on something to put in there.

"If you don't calm down, Lake, I'm gonna take you to the bedroom and fuck you until you do."

"Really, Tucker." I whirl on him, eyes narrowed. "You're going to threaten me with sex? You know just how much I like having sex. That wouldn't work to calm me down. Besides, we don't have time for sex. Let alone you taking me to the bedroom." If he did, we wouldn't make it to the clubhouse on time. Sex with Tucker isn't quick. It's wild and hot. Passionate, and lasts for hours. Not that I'd ever complain. I find I thrive off him being inside me.

Tucker moves into my space, cornering me against the countertop. "Little Fae, you wouldn't be thinking about anything but my cock sliding inside you. You won't be thinking of all the shit that's got you worked up."

"I know that," I whisper breathlessly. "Still, we don't have time for it. Besides, I'm already dressed and ready to go." I was, and I couldn't wait.

Tucker promised he'd take me on the back of his bike today. Because of me being pregnant, he doesn't usually take me out riding. He didn't want to put our baby, cub, whatever people want to call him or her, at risk. However, he knew with what we were about to do, I needed to be on the back of his bike. To feel the freedom it gives me.

Since the day he killed Zurri, things have settled for us and the club. Well, as far as I know, it has. I know they're still dealing with blood witches and keeping them out of the territory they claim as theirs. I don't blame them. Those witches are nasty from what Karsyn and Harmony have told me.

I'd never met one myself which is fine by me. I hope I never do.

I have enough on my plate with the dragons. Like Nyx said, they kneeled to me. It's strange how quickly they were willing to turn against Zurri. They listened to me as I said I didn't want war between shifters. They needed to call a truce. Barrydi agreed, and I proclaimed in front of the others that he was to take Zurri's place so long as he ended the wars and just kept the peace. I didn't care if they lived in the dragon realm or not, so long as no harm came to others.

Barrydi agreed and formed the alliance with not just Corbin and Cyrus, but the Vampire King as well. Eerie as it was, it was complete.

Now, there was only one thing left to do. Which means Tucker has to get us to the clubhouse.

Tucker takes a look at my outfit, grins, and shakes his head. "Yeah, baby, you're dressed and ready to go," he murmurs, stepping away.

I thought he was going to move farther, but he doesn't. Instead, he grips my hips, spins me around, and whispers his order in my ear. "Hands on the counter, little Fae." I do as he says without thinking. My breathing picks up as his hands move, and he unbuttons my jeans.

"Tucker," I utter, looking forward to him being inside me.

"Don't worry, we'll be quick," he murmurs, sliding my jeans down the length of my legs. "But you'll be relaxed once we're done."

I bet I would be.

"Little Fae," Tucker murmurs, helping me off the bike. His gaze on me, but I wasn't focused on him. I was looking across the space of the yard of the club's property to where my dad and uncles stood. In the crook of my dad's arm, stood a woman who looked so much like me. She was beautiful.

We were late getting to the clubhouse, as expected, with Tucker taking me in the kitchen at the house. We ended up on the floor and were now over an hour late. We were supposed to be here before them.

But there they stood.

My mom and dad.

They were reunited at last.

“Come on.” Tucker curls me in the crook of his arm. “Remember, you’ll be okay.”

I nod and let him guide me to the woman who gave me life.

Without her, I’d never have Tucker. I wouldn’t have anything that I now have. Her sacrifice means everything to me. She gave up her life to have me. Her strikes in life were what brought me to Tucker.

My life finally has a meaning because I have him. I know who I am. Standing at Tucker’s side, I know he’ll always lend me his strength as I will for him. It’s a beautiful thing if you ask me, and I look forward to enjoying each and every day with not only my mate, but the children we make.