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MURPHY'S MADNESS

LYNN HAGEN

The
ManLove
Collection



BRAC PACK 15

Brac Pack 15

Murphy's Madness

Murphy Clover is in for the ride of his life. Maribel professes to be his number one fan when she finds out he secretly writes e-books. Murphy politely declines her attention, letting her know he's gay. This only makes her more determined to have Murphy, and now she has escalated to violence.

Ludo Chernov was wrongly accused of giving a mate unwanted attention, and now he tries his best to stay away from them. The only problem with that plan is that he needs the help of one of them to find his mate.

Murphy knows Maribel is real. She's hurt him twice already. When Ludo thinks she is a figment of his imagination, Murphy starts to question his own sanity. But there are a few mates who know he isn't crazy, and they escape the estate to prove his innocence. Will the mates help Murphy in time, or will Ludo have him locked away?

Note: Each book in Lynn Hagen's Brac Pack collection features a different romantic couple. Each title stands alone and can be read in any order. However, we recommend reading the series in sequential order.

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Paranormal, Vampires/Werewolves

Length: 29,001 words

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MURPHY'S MADNESS

Brac Pack 15

LYNN HAGEN

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Chapter One

Murphy ran around the bookshelves, trying to escape the lunatic with the hammer. This was not one of his better days. "Now, Maribel, be reasonable." He begged as he ran up one aisle and down another.

His heart was thundering behind his ribs as he tried to escape the nut job chasing him around his bookstore.

"Reasonable?" she shrieked. "You haven't come out with a new book in a month, and you want me to be reasonable?" she tried to cut him off, but Murphy saw what she was doing and countered the move. This was insane!

"I've been busy, you know, living." Murphy jumped over the stack of murder mysteries he had yet to put away. That would teach him to procrastinate. He ran down the aisle and around the sofa, wishing he had stayed in bed this morning.

He almost made it to the door when Maribel swung the hammer down, hitting his wrist with painful accuracy. "Damn it, Maribel." Murphy howled as he instinctively pulled his arm to his chest, cradling it. She shifted from foot to foot, as if she were getting ready to pounce.

"I want that new book started or next time it will be your balls." Her nostrils flared as she huffed then levered the hammer on her

shoulder. "I mean it. No excuses." She narrowed her eyes as she pointed her finger at him. "And I'll know, I always know."

Murphy watched as Cindernightmare stormed from his bookstore, slamming the door behind her crazy ass. Since when did e-book writers obtain a status worthy of a stalker? She didn't have a few screws loose. They fell out, and the box holding her brain had collapsed.

Murphy ran across the store to lock the door, his hands shaking uncontrollably as the lock snicked into place.

He wasn't sure if locked doors held crazy people back, but he wasn't taking any chances. She was a nut job with a hammer after all. "Who the hell carries a damn hammer around!" he shouted in frustration as he ran to his office.

Rummaging through his desk drawer, he found the ace bandage under a pile of legal pads. He grabbed it from the drawer as he laid his arm on his desk and inspected the damage. It was red and swollen with a big bull's-eye circle right above his hand from the hammer head.

"Now who's going to pay the medical bill for this?" he muttered as he rolled the bandage around his injury. No one, because he couldn't chance going to the Medical Center on the other side of town and them drawing blood.

He struggled to get the clasps to stay in place and then wiggled his fingers to make sure it wasn't too tight. Murphy winced when pain shot up his arm. Maybe he shouldn't have done that.

His head snapped up when he heard banging on the door. Murphy prayed she hadn't come back to make good on her threat. His balls tried to crawl inside of him as he peeked around the corner. If it was her again, he'd...hell, probably run around the store like a wuss again.

His head slowly rounded the corner as he peeked at the front door. Thank god it wasn't her. With a relieved breath he walked across the bookstore and unlocked the door, plastering a big smile on his face. "Hello, Oliver."

He hid his injury behind his back as he stepped aside to allow the young man to enter.

"Hey, Murphy, why was the door locked?" His faithful customer came strolling in, looking around before settling his eyes on Murphy.

"Bathroom." Murphy looked past Oliver to make sure Maribel wasn't lurking around. He wouldn't put it past her to do something like that.

One morning he opened the store to find love notes taped to his door. Another morning there were flowers in a vase sitting there waiting on him with a poem stuffed between the petals. The woman couldn't write a poem to save her damn life. Not that he wanted her crazy ass to do it.

Telling her he was gay hadn't swayed her to stop. In fact, it made her more determined.

It wasn't flattering. It was creepy as hell.

He couldn't understand what her interest in him was all about. At six one and one hundred and seventy pounds, he was all limbs and gangly. His hair was a mousy brown, and his eyes were a strange amber color. Geek city was where his body lived, so why the interest?

"I came to get some more books." Oliver strolled off to the romance section. Murphy would never have guessed a Goth man would read something like that, but life did come in different packages. Who was he to judge?

He flexed his fingers as pain shot up his arm. Murphy bit his lip to stop the cry from leaving his mouth. The wicked witch of the west had damaged something. He prayed it was only sprained.

Murphy planned on putting an ice pack on it once Oliver was finished with his perusing and left. He was so tired of Maribel and her unwanted attention. It had slowly escalated to violence, and he was a peaceful person. What would she do next? Murphy shuddered. He really didn't want to know.

Maybe it was time to relocate. He had done it once before when he lived in the city and a second-rate wannabe mobster was collecting

protection money from the business owners. He slowly packed his store up, not enough to be obvious, and then one night he had disappeared, ending up in this small town. Had he known about Maribel, he would have relocated somewhere else. Like Alaska.

“What happened to your hand?” Oliver had caught him in thought. He quickly pulled his hand back again, smacking it against the counter.

“Damn it.” Murphy instinctively jerked the injured hand toward his chest as his eyes watered from the pain. “Nothing, I hurt it tying my shoe.” Murphy mentally slapped his forehead. He was never good at lying on the spot. He wasn’t good at lying period.

The guy cocked his head and stared at Murphy as if trying to figure him out. Oliver finally gave a shrug of indifference and then leaned against the counter. “If you say so.”

He was relieved that Oliver had bought his excuse. “Yep, have to buy Velcro now.” Murphy rang up Oliver’s books and shoved them in a bag. “I’ll add it to your tab.” He wanted to get Oliver out of there so he could lock up. A quick lunch at the diner then he was going to start packing. Enough was enough. The ice pack could wait, his sanity couldn’t.

“Thanks.” Oliver stared at him then down at his hand for a moment longer before turning around and walking out of his bookstore.

“That was close.” Murphy ran to the back, shut his computer down, and then grabbed the keys to the store. It was a shame he had to move again. This was a nice small town. Maybe he could get a restraining order against her. Murphy snorted, *yeah, and when she became violent again he could tape it to her forehead.*

Twisting the sign around to “closed,” Murphy locked the door and walked down to the diner. He glanced around to make sure the nut job wasn’t anywhere in sight.

He opened the diner door and quickly scanned the place to make sure it was Maribel-free. The waiter waved a hand at him to tell

Murphy to sit anywhere. He sat in a booth that kept him far away from the big window up front and anyone, like Maribel, who might see him. It bothered him deeply that he lived like a coward, but what could he do? Chicken blood ran strong in his veins, and he highly doubted that would change anytime soon. He was surprised he didn't pop out an egg when Maribel came near him.

"Hi, Murphy." One of his other faithful customers greeted him with a pad and a pen at the ready. Murphy liked Tangee. The man had way too many tattoos, but he was extremely nice to Murphy every time he came into his bookstore. Yes, he was going to miss this small town.

Murphy picked up the menu, noticing his hands were shaking uncontrollably, so he laid it down, smoothing his hand over it, as he smile up at the waiter. "I'll just start with an ice tea."

"Gotcha." Tangee went off to get his drink. It gave him a moment to try and still his trembling hands as he glanced around the diner.

No one should live like this. It wasn't healthy for him to live in constant fear, and Murphy knew he had to do something about it soon.

It only cemented his resolve to move on.

* * * *

Ludo stretched his legs in front of him as he sat in his Alpha's office listening to lunacy. He couldn't believe that the rogue vampires and rogue wolves that had been attacking their town lately were doing so because of a little girl.

The wolf physician and the mate, Dr. Nicholas Sheehan, had met with Alpha Maverick after finding an anomaly in her blood. The little girl, Melonee, had been sick with chicken pox, and after an examination, Nicholas had seen something strange and drew her blood.

The blood was then given over to the wolf physician to be examined, and now Maverick was saying that Melonee was fey? Why would rogues want her? That was the question everyone was scrambling to figure out.

Her mother was in the Eastern pack healing from a car accident. Her brother Tangee worked at the diner and lived here. She was adopted as an infant according to Tangee.

Magical creatures such as the fey were elusive and rare. They were also very well guarded. So how did one of their offspring end up being adopted? That's what Maverick really wanted to know.

Ludo ran his hand over his black goatee, scratching at it as he listened to Maverick explain how Melonee was to be under twenty-four-hour watch, never to be left alone. Ludo could understand that. She was small and defenseless, something he hated to see.

Defenseless people should be protected by those who were stronger, more able.

This is why Ludo was still not speaking to his pack mate and fellow warrior, Storm. When his mate, Kyoshi, showed up with his cousin Keata, Ludo had been accused of giving Keata's backside unwanted attention when the young man fell and Ludo picked him up and brushed him off.

The warrior had accused Ludo's hand of lingering too long, which was asinine to say the least. He had figured out in two seconds Cody was the young man's mate.

Cody's bugged-out eyes and instant stiffness when the two men entered the house was a dead giveaway.

"Ludo."

Ludo came out of his thoughts. All eyes were on him, and his Alpha was speaking to him. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" he sat up straight as he listened to Maverick.

"I said, could you go down to the diner and relay this meeting to Keata's mate, Cody?" Keata was the last person Ludo wanted to be around, but he wasn't one to run away even when wrongly accused.

"No problem, Maverick." Ludo shot a glare at Storm before looking back at his Alpha.

Storm used to lower his eyes in shame for the false accusation. Now he just rolled them. Ludo didn't care. A thousand apologies couldn't fix the damage Storm had done when he confronted Ludo in front of other warriors and mates.

They all had looked at him as a degenerate for a long while afterward. It hurt that they would look at him like that. He understood how protective all of the warriors were toward the mates. It wasn't like he didn't feel the same way, but they could have given him the benefit of the doubt.

What bothered him the most was the fact that now he doubted himself. That wasn't something he was used to, and he didn't like the feeling.

He still talked with the mates. He just kept a respectable distance. One false finger was enough to last him the next seven hundred and seventy-four years, which would be the rest of his life.

A very long time to be shunned by your own pack.

Ludo stepped out of Maverick's office, heading down the hallway when the mate, Johnny, came up beside him.

"What happened to your accent?" Johnny asked as he followed Ludo down the hall.

"I lost it. Let me know when you find it, I would really appreciate it." He actually did have a Russian accent, living as a pup in Moscow, the Central Federal District. His family immigrated here about one hundred years ago, so he was very good at dropping the dialect when he chose to.

Johnny tilted his head at Ludo and grinned. "You're teasing, right?"

He chuckled and nodded. He watched Johnny race off and jump into Hawk's arms.

Ludo found it hard sometimes to watch the mated pairs, knowing he and Montana were the last bachelors. There were the Santiago

brothers, but they didn't count. They kept to themselves mostly. Ludo yearned to find his mate just like any other shifter.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Ludo grabbed his truck keys, heading to do as his Alpha requested. Their town was only ten minutes away, less if you pushed the accelerator harder, but Ludo was in no rush. He was just delivering news after all.

He pulled close to the diner, getting out of the truck. Before he took a step further, he reached into his front pocket, extracting the coated black rubber band he used to tie his shoulder-length hair back.

He pulled the diner door open, stopping to inhale the scent of George's cooking. The mate was an excellent cook. The Timber wolves found themselves running more often to get rid of the extra pounds the mate was determined to put on all the warriors.

Ludo regarded the three stools in front of him and decided to sit in the one furthest from Keata, keeping a safe distance as Cody came from the kitchen.

"Hey, Ludo." Cody smiled at him as he walked through the door from the kitchen, automatically going to the coffee pot and pouring him a cup of coffee.

Oddly enough, Cody was among the few who hadn't treated Ludo like a leper when Storm accused him of patting Keata's ass, and the wolf was the guy's mate. That gained a lot of respect from Ludo for the warrior.

"Thanks." Ludo accepted the mug and then sipped at the black brew, letting out a relieved breath as the dark liquid calmed him. "Maverick sent me." Ludo sat the mug down and looked around, seeing no one in listening range. He relayed to Cody what had been said in the meeting.

"Damn." Cody shook his head. "Melonee?" Ludo knew how he felt. It still seemed unreal that a fey child was the cause of all the upheaval. The question of why was still a mystery, though.

Figuring he might as well get himself something to eat while he was there, Ludo yelled into the kitchen for George to fix him a plate

of whatever was ready. He wasn't picky, and at six five and two hundred ninety pounds, he could put it away.

George dropped a plate of pork roast and little baby potatoes in front of him. The serving size was enough to feed three people. Oh yeah, baby. He was going to enjoy this.

Cody looked at him strangely when the fork hovered at his open lips. Ludo couldn't move. He was frozen.

Dropping the fork, Ludo looked around the diner. He tilted his head back as he sniffed the air in the direction of an empty booth. The smell was faint, but it still lingered in the air. His wolf was whining as Ludo looked around.

Timber wolves didn't have a great sense of smell. They relied on their hearing, but when it came to finding their mate, fate made sure all shifters could smell them.

"Who sat there?" Ludo turned to Cody, but his finger was pointing over to the corner booth.

"I don't know. I'll have to ask Tangee." Cody tilted his head at Ludo, examining him closely. "Why?"

Ludo ignored the wolf's question. He pushed himself from his seat at the counter, making his way across the restaurant, and sniffed closely.

His eyes slowly closed, enjoying the aromatic scent of a hot summer night and fresh roses. His cock hardened instantly, and his skin tingled as the aroma permeated his lungs.

"Ludo?"

Ludo turned. All eyes were on him. Keata was sucking his smoothie down with a straw as his eyes followed Ludo, Cody was leaning across the counter, his brows pulled together in confusion, and the few customers who were in the diner were watching him as well.

He straightened, not wanting the human customers to notice his strange behavior. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, fighting the change. The need to claim that scent was riding him strong.

“Where’s Tangee?” He desperately needed to know. His mate had been here, and from the scent, just recently.

“He’s taking his break in the kitchen with George.” Cody tossed his thumb over his shoulder, looking at Ludo like he had lost his mind.

Panic began to set in. What if he had been a tourist who was at this very moment driving away from here? Ludo knew his mate was a male. There was no doubt in his mind.

Ludo slammed the palm of his hand against the double chrome doors leading into the kitchen, making the mates behind the door jump.

“Could you tell me who was in that corner booth last?” Ludo growled, making the smaller mate pull back.

“Ludo, what the hell’s gotten into you?” George huffed when he witnessed Tangee’s reaction. The Alpha would kill anyone who abused a mate, and intimidating them fell into that category. Ludo knew better, but his instinct to find his mate was making him crazy.

Ludo cleared his throat, trying to still his racing heart. The thing was about to beat out of his chest. His mate had been here, *his mate*. After two hundred and twenty-six years, he was this close to finding him. The level of apprehension in him rose with the thought of his mate gaining miles away from him.

“I apologize. Could you tell me?” Ludo bit his bottom lip. “Please,” he added on.

“Which one?” Tangee slowly stood, heading toward the door. Ludo had to take a calming breath. The urge to shove the mate through the door quickly and point the booth out was making him edgy.

Following Tangee, Ludo’s hand shot out as he pointed to the booth he was referring to, getting more agitated by the second when the mate took his time answering him.

The dinner rush hadn't gotten underway yet, so it shouldn't be that damn hard to remember. Ludo took a step back. The need to throttle the slow-walking mate made his hands itch.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember." Tangee smiled up at him as if he was waiting for Ludo to ask who...again.

"Well?" Ludo gritted his teeth, almost positive a few were going to crack at the restraint he was using to keep his hand from cuffing Tangee on the back of his head.

"Murphy sat there."

"Murphy?" Ludo was about to explode. He had a name. That was a start. "Could you tell me who that is?" he asked through clenched teeth. He was feeling achy and agitated. Not a good thing when he needed patience right now.

"The bookstore owner." Tangee looked at Ludo with a *duh* expression.

Ludo left the mate standing there. He raced from the diner and rushed the few doors down to the bookstore. He racked his brain trying to remember if he had ever seen the man before. He'd never been to the bookstore, but had he ever seen him in the diner? He couldn't have if he'd never been there. God, he was losing his mind.

When one of the mates wanted to go there, the warriors had to escort them, but Ludo had never pulled the short straw for babysitting them while they browsed.

His mind raced at what his mate looked like, how his voice sounded, and how fast he could throw him down and claim him.

Everything came crashing down around him when the big blue and white sign hanging in the door told him his mate had closed early. "Fuck!" Ludo shouted in frustration as he fisted his hands at his side. Now what? Did anyone know where his mate lived?

Turning on his heel, Ludo walked at a fast pace back to the diner, almost ripping the door off of its hinges as he sought out Tangee.

Spotting him talking with a customer, Ludo tapped his booted foot, waiting. He shoved his thumbs through his belt loops as he fought for patience once again.

How long did it take to write down an order? God, this was frustrating. He wanted to shout at the people sitting there to make up their damn minds. Good god, there were only so many damn choices on a menu.

Finally, after a million years, Tangee smiled at them then walked away, placing the order ticket in the window for George to fill.

“Tangee,” Ludo called the mate’s attention.

Tangee turned his head and smiled at Ludo. “Did you find him?”

Would he be back here if he did? “No, he closed early.” Once again he found himself breathing out slowly. He loved the mates, but at times they could push someone’s blood pressure through the roof. “Would you happen to know where he lives?” Ludo asked through a tight smile.

“Uh, why?”

Argh! Just shoot me now and get it over with. What the hell did it matter? *He’s a mate, you can’t throttle him, he’s a mate, you can’t throttle him.* Ludo kept repeating the mantra in his head over and over again, hoping it worked. “I need to speak with him.”

“He’ll be open tomorrow.” Tangee offered as he walked over to another table and began to talk with the customers.

Ludo headlocked Cody and dragged him into the kitchen. He couldn’t kill a mate, but he could take it out on a warrior. They were built tough, and Ludo was actually losing his mind right about now. It didn’t matter which warrior, anyone would do.

“What the hell, man?” Cody shoved Ludo off of him. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I need to find the bookstore owner. Please help me out before Maverick kills me for harming a mate.” Ludo yanked the black band from his hair and ran his hand through it so hard he pulled strands out.

"What's going on, Ludo?" Cody leaned against the counter in the kitchen, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Why is everyone giving me such a hard time?" Ludo threw his hands up exasperatedly. "Can't anyone just answer a question around here?"

Cody's brow slowly lifted, but he said nothing, waiting for Ludo to answer him. He could see he wasn't going to get an answer until he gave one.

"Fine, he's my mate. Now will somebody in this place answer my fucking question?" Ludo couldn't shake that desperate feeling. Which was odd considering his mate was a resident here and not a tourist driving away. His whole damn body itched to get it wrapped around the elusive man.

He didn't remember any other warrior having such a strong reaction and wondered why it was affecting him like this. It was as if he had to find him before he lost him.

What sense did that make?

"Tangee," Cody yelled toward the dining area. About damn time he got some help. Ludo paced the kitchen as he waited for the mate to get in there.

"Yeah?" Tangee walked slowly into the kitchen, eyeing Ludo cautiously. He knew he must look like a nut job running around in circles shooting questions off that were bizarre to them.

"Do you know where Murphy lives?"

As Tangee shook his head, Ludo felt his heart plummet. "Sorry, no."

Ludo wanted to crumble to the floor and kick his feet in a tantrum. This was unreal. He went through all of this only to end up back at square one. No closer to his mate than when he'd started. The only thing he gained from this was a name and a damn migraine.

"Let me call the house, see if anyone knows." Cody pulled his cell phone out.

The only thing Ludo could do was have a seat back at the counter. He pushed his plate aside, no longer interested in eating. He wanted Murphy in the worst way. When you knew there was someone out there that was handpicked for you, it made it almost impossible to have patience. Fate thought Murphy would be perfect for him, so he desperately wanted to get to know the man. He wanted to lay his eyes on him and show him how wonderful they could be together.

Keata's hand shot over to him, stilling the fork he was beating against the counter. For once, he didn't jump away from a mate. He just started bouncing his leg instead.

How damn long did it take to ask where someone lived? He stood and started pacing the diner. Every time he passed the table full of human customers, they shrank back.

"Ludo, can you pace in the kitchen?" Tangee approached him, "You're scaring the customers."

Ludo gave a low growl as he tumbled hard back onto his seat. He wrapped his hair back in its band then began to strum his fingers. Once again, Keata reached over to still them.

"Sorry, Ludo." Cody finally got off of the phone. "No one knows."

Ludo pounded his fist onto the countertop, pissed that he had to wait until morning to see his mate. "Thanks." He mumbled as he got up and walked out.

There was an apartment building over by the police station, a few above some of the stores, and too many houses scattered around the urban area for him to go door to door. He had no choice but to wait. This was going to drive him mad.

As he climbed into his truck, his thoughts went back to what his mate looked like. He didn't care. Fate had chosen the man for him, but he was curious as hell.

Was he short like some of the mates? Or tall like the rest? What color hair did he have, and what was his eye color? How was his

temperament? What did he like to do? Ludo growled at the unanswered questions.

He may have to wait, but when he found Murphy, all bets were off. The man was going to be his.

Chapter Two

Murphy looked over his shoulder as he made his way to the bookstore. He continuously turned his head left and right, looking around so quickly he was becoming light-headed.

He was about to get whiplash if he didn't stop snapping his head back and forth.

If Maribel was going to strike, then he wanted to see it coming. Okay, maybe not, but not knowing when the next attack would come was driving him crazy.

He had practically packed his whole apartment last night. Now all he had to do was inconspicuously pack his bookstore and get out of town before sundown. There was no way he was sticking around to find out how accurate her aim was when it came to his bits and pieces. His sex life may be at a stalemate, but that didn't mean he wanted to be put out of commission.

He prayed his plan worked. If she caught him trying to slip out in the middle of the night, he wasn't sure what she would do. His balls clenched once again.

Picking up the pace, Murphy hurried to get to his bookstore and begin his packing. He brushed the wayward locks from his face, feeling his face flush from the exertion of speed walking. His wrist had turned an ugly shade of greenish purple, and he feared she had done more damage than originally suspected.

Crazy bitch.

Scrambling in his pocket for his keys, he nearly jumped out of his skin when someone shouted his name. He turned to see the most amazing face staring at him from a few doors down. The man was all

dark looks. Black shoulder-length hair, dark eyes, and a body to give sin a bad name. Did Maribel send a henchman?

Murphy fumbled to get the stupid key to go into the lock. It wouldn't go! He shot a look over his shoulder to see the man quickly eating up the distance between them.

Oh god, he was dead for sure. Finally getting the tumblers to turn, he glanced one more time before pushing the door open and slamming it shut, he engaged the lock and ran to his office.

Murphy bit his nails as he heard banging at the front door. The henchman didn't sound like he was giving up. The knock sounded angry. Oh god, oh god, what was he going to do? He felt trapped as his heart felt like it was going to explode out of his chest.

"Murphy, I just want to talk to you," the man shouted outside the door.

Yeah, up close and personal, he bet. There was no way he was allowing that gorgeous man in. Even if he was hot, no way, no how.

"Murphy, answer the door."

Not likely. He may be a spineless geek, but he wasn't stupid. There was no way that hot-ass man out there wanted to talk about dollies and tea cups. No, he wanted to talk about immense pain from the looks of him.

"Murphy, if you don't open up, I'm going to force my way in." The banging continued as the guy rattled the door handle.

What to do, what to do? Okay, he would talk with the man through the door, and if he seemed a threat, then Murphy would...do what? Throw a book at him? Slap him over the head with the latest magazines that had come in? Or better yet, give him a paper cut from the new calendars?

"Murphy." A warning tone shot across the store and to his racing heart. Okay, don't make the madman angry. Keep the musclehead calm.

Murphy took an unsteady breath as he walked to his awaiting beat down. He prayed they had cable television in the hospital room he was about to check in to.

* * * *

What the hell was wrong with his mate? If he didn't know any better, he would say Murphy was terrified of him. But why? They hadn't even met yet.

This damn door was coming down in five seconds if his mate didn't open it. He needed to be near him, see him up close. Hell, who was he kidding, he needed to claim him and carry him home to fuck him into the next century.

Ludo saw a head of beautiful brown curls peek around the corner, and big amber eyes wide with fear. Just exactly what was going on? His heart stuttered then began to beat again at a faster rate when a tall and totally breathtaking man came from around the counter and inched his way to the door at a very slow pace. What was it with people and turtle-walking lately?

His cock filled in less than two seconds, his canines dropped a fraction of an inch, and the need to howl was riding him strong. His leg almost tapped a thousand times a minute as his mate slowly made his way to the door. Murphy was sinfully edible. Ludo's hands itched to touch skin, hair, cock. He'd settle for a toenail at this point.

"Can I help you?" Murphy asked through the glass in the door.

Ludo stood there stuck on stupid for a moment, his mind going blank at that wickedly erotic voice. *Say my name, love.*

"Can I speak with you without a door between us?"

"Why? I can hear you perfectly fine from here." Murphy shifted anxiously from foot to foot. His hand came up to brush away his hair. Ludo noticed a bandage around his mate's wrist.

He had to stop the growl at the sight of his mate's injury. If someone had purposely done that to Murphy, he was going to string the bastard up by the balls. "Please. I just want to talk."

His mate sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and then reached out to unlock the door. Ludo pushed it open, taking in the intoxicating aroma of his mate. It was stronger and so much sweeter when coming directly from his mate.

"So talk." His mate backpedaled until he was behind the counter. His hands were flighty, touching this and that, not settling on one thing. His moves were nervous in nature. Did Murphy feel the pull? Was that why he was so nervous? Ludo's heart melted for the smaller man. He'd be gentle since his mate was so skittish. Ludo would make sure Murphy was comfortable with him before he claimed him. Now that he had his mate close, he felt a calmness settle inside of him.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his rubber band, securing his hair in place. His mate's eyes widened as he took a step back. What the hell was wrong with him? Ludo shrugged his leather off, tossed it on the couch that sat opposite the counter, then turned back around.

Where the hell did Murphy go?

"Murphy?"

"Yes?" a small voice squeaked. Ludo leaned over the counter, spotting his mate crouched down behind it.

Ludo walked around the counter, knelt down next to his mate, and reached a hand out. "Come."

Long, slender fingers trembled as Murphy laid his hand in Ludo's palm. He gently pulled his mate until the man was in his arms. Oh god, this was what he had been waiting all night for. His cock jumped behind his jeans, straining at the zipper to be free and to play with this beautiful creature.

"I'm Ludo." His hands sought out skin. They rubbed the nape of his mate's neck, feeling the tension knotted in Murphy. His thumb massaged the tense muscles, his other hand rubbing circles around his

mate's back. Ludo closed his eyes, basking in the knowledge that he was holding his mate for the very first time.

Murphy leaned back, his amber eyes telling of the fear and apprehension that coiled his body tight. "Damn, you smell good." Murphy looked at him in amazement.

That wasn't exactly what Ludo thought would come out of his mate's mouth. Shocked but pleased, a wide smile split across his face. "So do you." His hand slid into the back of Murphy's hair, his fingers massaging his mate's scalp as he pulled those delicious-looking lips closer to his, closer to paradise.

"Wait." Murphy slammed on the brakes. His hands planted firmly on Ludo's chest in an effort to stop him. "I don't kiss henchmen. So do your worst." His mate cringed back as he placed his hands over his head.

Ludo was stunned into silence for a second. "Henchman?" The question wasn't aimed toward his mate, more of his brain asking the question to figure out what the hell was going on.

"Okay, so maybe I'm not up on the latest lingo of your job description, but you get the point. Now could you stop stalling and get it over with? If I'm going to be in the hospital, I want to get there in time to see my soaps. Marla's been cheating on Derek, and he walked in on her. They had the nerve to cut the scene right there, can you believe that? I just know his dumbass is going to forgive her."

Ludo's brows pulled together as he tried to understand what the hell Murphy was talking about. Was his mate mentally disturbed? He would think someone who knew Murphy would have said something, a forewarning at least. "Murphy, I'm not here to harm you."

"Yeah, right. And I'm supposed to believe that? Try again, buddy." His mate pushed away from him, getting to his feet. He rolled his shoulders back, took a deep breath, and then nodded. "I'm ready."

"For what?"

"My beat down."

Ludo got to his feet as he tried to understand what the hell Murphy was going on about. He'd never lay a hand on his mate. He had to be insane. Was his mate into pain like the mate at the Den, Blair? He wasn't too sure he could deliver. Pain wasn't his thing. Dispensing or receiving. "I'm not going to touch you."

"Oh, I see. Your method of torture is the suspense of not knowing when it's coming. You really are sadistic, you know that?" Murphy crossed his arms over his chest, the injured one lying gently on top as he narrowed his eyes. "Two can play at that. I may not know when it's coming, but you won't know if it hurts or not because I promise that I won't utter one single sound. Bring it on."

Ludo could only scratch his head. Was the guy off of his meds? A trip to the Medical Center to see the mate, Dr. Nicholas Sheehan, was in order. Maybe they could up the dosage.

* * * *

Had Murphy lost his damn mind? He was actually giving the man permission to hurt him. Yeah, he'd lost it.

"I'm not here to hurt you, *rebenka*."

On the outside he was all bravado. Inside he had fainted a hundred times already. "Does that mean idiot or fool?"

"No, *rebenka*, it means baby." Ludo took a step toward him.

Murphy looked over the counter at the door, wondering if he could clear the glass encasement and make it to the door before this god-like henchman tackled him.

"Oh, I see. You want to fuck me before you split my wig? Not happening." Fear was making him sound asinine. He couldn't help it. The brain to mouth buffer dissolved when he was afraid, and right now he was at the pinnacle of fear. This man was huge, could do a lot of damage to Murphy. He tucked his hands further under his arms, not wanting to let the man see how badly they were trembling.

"I'm not into pain, but I could slap you if you're really wanting it, although I must say, it wouldn't please me."

"Wanting it? What do you think I am, crazy?"

"Maybe mentally disturbed would be a better word, *rebenka*."

Oh, this was golden. *He* was the one who was crazy? There must be a sign above his door welcoming the nut jobs because this dark and lovely man was the second person to show up in his store spouting crap and wanting to harm him.

The man was hot, though. Murphy gritted his teeth. His head wrapped in lust and lunacy at the idea of kissing the dark stranger, the henchman.

"I'm not crazy. You are."

The man growled and took another step forward. Murphy had an urge to pee his pants at the sight. The henchman looked so damn menacing. If he wasn't so damn afraid, he'd be turned the hell on at such a display of raw power and honed muscles.

"You're the one begging me to beat you down in time to watch your soaps, *rebenka*."

Murphy was tired of this conversation. If the man wasn't going to be Maribel's henchman, then he had packing to do. "Can you leave, please? Come back when you've made up your mind."

"Fine, if you want a beat down, then come here, *sumashedshiy*. Madman." Dark and lovely advanced toward Murphy. He cried out as he tried to hop the counter, but he only managed to bend his injured wrist back. He shouted in pain as his legs scrambled frantically to clear the glass, but Ludo grabbed his waist and pulled him back.

"Please, I changed my mind, don't hurt me." Murphy sobbed, holding his wrist and tired of being a victim. This was too much for him to deal with. He pathetically fought as Ludo pulled him into strong arms.

"Hush, *rebenka*. I'm not going to hurt you."

"But you just said—"

"No, I wasn't serious. Hush." His tears were kissed away as the man's eyes became hooded and dark, well, darker. The irises were black already. His face was cupped as dark and lovely kissed him carefully, tenderly. If that was the kiss of a madman, then he was willing to live in crazyville. Murphy tried to climb up the man's body as his lips were devoured.

Murphy broke the kiss as he stared into those deep black eyes. "What's your name?"

"Ludo," he answered, and then he reclaimed his lips, crushing Murphy to his rock-solid body.

He grabbed Ludo's shoulder-length black hair, pulling the coated rubber band free and running his fingers through it. His cock was rock hard, throbbing to be satisfied in the most primal way.

Ludo began to kiss him down his neck. "*Rebenka*, if we don't stop, I'll take you right here." He may have said the words, but Ludo kept right on kissing him. Murphy could feel the large knot in the front of Ludo's pants, ecstatic that he wasn't the only one affected by the kiss.

His cock was having a smack down with his common sense, and the common sense seemed to win. "I can't. I don't have sex with crazy people." *Really?* His cock yelled at him. *You just told the guy you weren't crazy.*

"Then you don't masturbate. Sorry to hear that." Ludo chuckled as his kisses trailed down Murphy's neck.

Oh, to hell with it, if the crazy man wanted him, who was he to argue? Murphy opened his mouth wider as Ludo trailed back up his neck and took possession of his lips.

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Someone howled from behind them.

Murphy jumped away from Ludo as Oliver walked in. "Hit it for me," Oliver teased.

"Does Micah know you escaped your cage?" Ludo growled.

“You two know each other?” Murphy had to clear his throat, the question coming out as if he were going through puberty once again. He licked his lips and mentally moaned, as he still tasted Ludo lingering on his lips.

“Yeah, I know Ludo.” Oliver waved his hand and then headed to the back. Murphy turned toward the man.

“You’re really not here to harm me?” Murphy took a deep breath in relief.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Murphy. I’m not here to harm you. I’m here to date you.”

Murphy strummed his fingers on the glass counter. “I thought you said you weren’t crazy?”

Ludo’s laugh was deep and rich as he pulled Murphy back into his arms. “Crazy for you.” Ludo rubbed his nose over his.

“So cheesy.” Murphy knew he was wearing a big, goofy-ass grin. Why a gorgeous man wanted to date him was beyond his realm of reality, but he wasn’t actually nutty enough to pass up the opportunity.

Even if it was just a roll around in the sheets, it would be better than the celibate life he had been leading lately. He usually didn’t do one-night hookups, but being in Ludo’s arms was making him quickly rethink his stance.

Murphy’s heart came to a halt when he saw Maribel pass the big storefront window. He didn’t need this right now. “Excuse me.” He pulled from Ludo’s arms. Well, it would have been nice to have been with the guy. Rounding the corner and walking toward the back of the bookstore, he pushed the bathroom door open and locked it behind him.

Standing on the toilet, he pushed the window open and climbed through. Falling unceremoniously on his ass, Murphy got to his feet and took off down the backside of the buildings until he made it to the woods. Thank goodness he had shoved his keys into his pockets after opening the store. He could get into his apartment without breaking

and entering. Would he have been arrested if he was breaking into his own place?

* * * *

Ludo looked behind him in the direction his mate had run off to. What was taking him so long?

"Is Murphy here?" the lady who walked in asked. Ludo thought she must assume he worked here because he was standing behind the counter.

"He's indisposed at the moment. Something I can help you with?" he asked without a clue as to what he was doing. How hard could it be to ring up a few books, and where the hell was his mate?

"No, I'm here to see Murphy." The woman leaned sideways, looking in the direction Ludo had just turned from. Was she Murphy's girlfriend? The idea made his stomach hurt. He knew his mate was at least bi. No straight man kissed another guy with such passion.

"He's not here right now," he snipped at her. He couldn't help it. Ludo looked at her like competition, and he wasn't used to competing for any man, especially his mate.

"You just said he was indisposed." Her eyes narrowed, looking him up and down with a look of disdain. An overwhelming urge to throttle her made his hands itch. Before yesterday, Ludo thought himself a peaceful man. This mating thing must be playing havoc with his mind.

He had to go see what was taking Murphy so long and to see who this woman was in relation to him. "Oliver, watch the store," he called out. The mate nodded as he walked behind the counter and smiled at the woman.

Ludo walked to the back of the bookstore and turned the knob to the bathroom.

"What the hell?" Why was it locked? Okay, he knew why someone would lock a door, but it had been ten minutes already. Ludo

leaned his ear to the door, hoping his mate wouldn't get mad at the invasion of privacy. When he heard nothing, he shoved his shoulder into the thin wood, the door giving way easily. Ludo cursed when he spotted the open window. Just exactly what was going on?

"Is something wrong?"

Ludo peered over his shoulder to see the woman customer standing behind him, trying her best to see into the bathroom.

"No." For some reason his protective instincts kicked into high gear at her nosiness.

Ludo walked back to the front of the store, opening the door, and waving at the two warriors standing outside. They were waiting for Oliver. No mate went anywhere unescorted. Things had become too dangerous around their small town lately.

"Montana, Dagon, come here." He stepped back to allow them to enter. Ludo glanced around, wondering where the pesky woman had gone off to. He turned back to the warriors as he lowered his voice.

"My mate has gone missing. I need you two to watch his store for me."

"What the hell do I know about selling books?" Montana asked.

"I don't know, guess at the price." How expensive could they be? "Sell them for four bucks each."

"If you say so." Montana shrugged and took up post behind the counter with Oliver.

"Your mate will kill you if Montana sells his books for that price." Oliver chuckled.

"Then help Montana out. Micah wouldn't mind a break from you anyway." Ludo ignored the flipped finger as he exited the store and walked around back. He could see where his mate had fallen. Timber wolves were superior in their tracking abilities. Locating his mate shouldn't be a problem.

He tracked his mate to an apartment building located by the precinct. Looking up the names on the mailboxes, he found what he

was looking for. He jogged up the steps until he reached his mate's apartment. "Murphy, open up." Ludo banged his fist on the door.

"How did you find me?" Murphy yelled through the door.

"I'm not going to play 'Let's talk through the door' again with you."

The door cracked open, one eye peering at him.

"What's going on?" His mate tried to shut the door, but Ludo wedged his boot in to stop the action.

"Why would you ask me that?" Murphy squeaked as he backed away. It was obvious to Ludo that his mate wasn't going to be forthcoming in his answer.

"Escaping from a bathroom window gave it away," he replied.

"I didn't escape. I, uh...forgot I left the oven on." Murphy chucked his thumb over his shoulder and gave a nervous laugh.

"So you crawled out of the bathroom window?"

"Sure, it is an exit." Murphy sat down on his couch, staring up at Ludo with the most innocent amber eyes. Too bad it was an act, erotic-looking as they were.

Ludo pulled his leather off and draped it over the arm of the chair, sitting on the couch next to Murphy. "Come here."

"No."

"Don't be shy." Ludo slid his hand into Murphy's, giving a slight tug to persuade his mate to scoot over.

"Look, my soaps are on. Usually I tape them to watch when I get home, but since the chicken is hiding in his coop, I'm watching them now."

Ludo leaned forward, grabbed the remote, and turned the mind-numbing tube off.

"Hey, I didn't even program to record." Murphy grabbed for the remote, but Ludo held it just out of his grasp. He was enjoying his mate leaning toward him to get at the remote. When Murphy pouted and sat back, Ludo wanted to pout as well.

"Come here." Ludo leaned over and tugged at Murphy's hand.

“No, every time I get around you my brain melts into a messy puddle. I need my wits about me.” Murphy tried to pry his hand free, but Ludo reached over with his other hand and wrapped it around Murphy’s waist, pulling him into that strong lap.

Murphy’s shoulders shot up as he hissed. He looked down to see the bandage on his mate’s wrist and cursed. How could he have forgotten about that? “What happened?” His fingers were gentle and light as he turned his mate’s hand this way and that, then looked up to Murphy for an answer.

“I sprained it playing polo.”

Ludo could tell by the way his mate’s eyes were darting around nervously that he wasn’t telling the truth. “Liar, tell me the truth.”

Murphy shook his head, pulling his hand free as he laid his hands in his lap and bit his bottom lip, looking vulnerable to Ludo. “I don’t even know you. Why should I volunteer any information?” he asked softly as he ran his fingers over his jeans.

His mate was adorable when he was suspicious. His brows pulled down to make his amber eyes crinkle. Ludo ran his hand up his mate’s back and through his hair as his fingers closed around the strands, pulling his mate’s head back.

Murphy gasped, and Ludo closed the distance, thrusting his tongue into Murphy’s mouth. The touch of his lips was a delicious sensation. His cock was throbbing and aching and pleading for some sort of release. Ludo pulled his mate down onto him harder, grinding his cock into that sweet and tempting ass.

“I told you I don’t have sex with crazy people.” Murphy moaned into Ludo’s mouth as his fingers clutched to Ludo’s shirt.

Moaning sounded so good leaving his mate’s mouth. It was like a symphony of jazz and starry nights that played across his mind like a summer breeze. He planned on making Murphy moan, scream, beg, and cry out in the most pleasurable ways. Ludo twisted his body, laying his mate on the couch as Ludo’s hand danced over Murphy’s

body. He hovered over his slim form, wanting nothing more than to bring him to the place Ludo was at in his mind.

Murphy's head fell back, his lips parted, and his eyes slowly closed as he gave himself over. Ludo was lost at the sight under him. He stopped when small canines emerged from Murphy's mouth.

Chapter Three

“Oh, my sweet *rebenka*. You’re a half-breed,” Ludo said softly as his fingers played over Murphy’s lips.

“Get off of me.” Murphy tried his best to stop the heavy weight from crushing him. He pushed at Ludo’s chest, but the dark and lovely man wouldn’t budge.

“Calm down, Murphy.”

“No, that’s never happened before. I can’t understand why it would happen with you.” Murphy could feel the hysterics coming on, and there was no way to stop it. Ludo had seen his canines. It was a well-guarded secret. What would happen to him now?

“Murphy.” Ludo gently called his name.

“What are you going to do? Are you going to call the government, secret service, or NASA and have me hauled away?”

“Murphy.”

“I can’t live my life in a lab. I won’t.” Murphy struggled to free himself. This just couldn’t be happening, first Maribel and now this. “What have I done so wrong that my world is crashing down around me? I lead a good life. I run an honest business. I don’t cheat people, and I pay my taxes. I always give to causes and donate my gently-used clothing. I—”

“Murphy!”

Murphy blinked a few times then looked up at Ludo. A twitch began under his right eye. He reached up to feel that his canines were still extended. “Please.” He whispered.

“It’s okay, *rebenka*. It’s going to be okay. Calm down.” Ludo’s hand rubbed the side of Murphy’s face, soothing his worries with the

pads of his soft fingers. He flinched when Ludo leaned down and kissed each extended tooth. Was he insane? Murphy tried to curl his lips in, but the sharp ends cut into flesh.

"Don't hide them from me." Ludo's lip pulled up into the sexiest half-smile Murphy had ever seen. Oh hell, he could see now that Ludo was going to have his heart no matter how hard he would fight it. "They're sexy as fuck."

Murphy's lips twisted to the side of his mouth as he considered Ludo's words. "And you call me crazy?"

"Adorably crazy." Ludo smiled.

Murphy crumbled up the notion to stay celibate and tossed it out of the window. No matter what this man decided to do later, he was getting some of this yummy now. He reached behind Ludo and squeezed the sexy man's ass cheeks. "Nice grippers."

Ludo chuckled inches above his face. "Nice what?"

"Grippers." Murphy gave an added squeeze to emphasize his meaning, and this man had a lot to squeeze. Ludo's ass was all tight muscle and bubbled out. Yeah, he had checked it out. Who wouldn't with a man that looked as dark and delectable as Ludo?

He would have to be certifiably insane not to.

Murphy released the tight muscles and ran his hand through Ludo's hair, tucking the right side behind the man's ear. "Why?"

"Why what, *rebenka*?" Ludo was leaning forward, his lips barely touching Murphy's skin, grazing them over his neck and face. What had he asked? Oh, yeah.

"Why me? You're like...and I'm like." Murphy blew a frustrated breath out. He couldn't think with this man's erection pressing into his. "We're like beauty and the beast."

"Then that makes me the beast." Ludo growled low and sexy as he nipped Murphy's chin.

"Hardly. You're the beauty, and I'm an undisruptive man lucky enough to gain your attention."

“Are you always this hard on yourself?” Ludo asked as he continued to taste Murphy’s skin.

“No, not always, I have Sunday’s off.” Murphy moaned as Ludo nipped at his neck. He scraped his teeth along the hollow of Murphy’s collarbone, the tip of his tongue trailing behind. His teeth teased the lump in Murphy’s throat, kissing it as Ludo pulled their hands up and twined their fingers together.

“There is nothing”—Ludo’s tongue traced a path from his mate’s neck to behind his ear—“absolutely nothing”—his lips kissed his skin until he reached his mate’s shoulder—“I would ever”—Ludo inhaled along his neck until he was at his mate’s mouth—“change about you.” Their lips collided together in a hail storm of manic tongue-dueling. Murphy swore Ludo was trying to suck his tongue down the man’s throat.

“Please don’t break my heart,” Murphy thought to himself as he broke the kiss for much-needed oxygen.

“I won’t.”

Oh god, he had said that out loud? That buffer sure picked a hell of a time to malfunction.

* * * *

Ludo couldn’t believe his mate was a half-breed. He wouldn’t have cared if he was a purple alien with feathers sticking out of his ass, well, maybe not purple, but Murphy had shifter blood in him. He felt a kinship with his mate over this fact.

Ludo reached between them, his mate’s jeans opening at the flick of his wrist. His hand pushed past the waistband, excitement mounting as he reached for the prize. Where the hell was his mate’s cock? All Ludo felt was pubic hair. He pushed back to his knees and looked down. A rush of relief whooshed from his lungs when he saw the bulging erection down his mate’s pant leg. For a second he thought he had mated with a very manly female. That would have

been disastrous. Not that he had anything against females, he just preferred men.

"Something wrong?" Murphy asked as he pushed himself up onto his elbows. God, his mate was sexy with his disheveled hair and kiss-swollen lips. His fingers spanned over his mate's abdomen, feeling the slightest of quivers.

"Not a damn thing." Ludo curled his fingers into Murphy's waistband and slid the denim down, freeing the silken shaft. His heart raced at the sight of the throbbing and leaking cock, the head an angry purple. "Scoot up."

Murphy did as he was told, watching Ludo's every move.

Henchman, Ludo mentally laughed at the things that came out of his mate's mouth. Speaking of which...Ludo grabbed the base and pushed his mate's legs apart with his arms, getting comfortable in the V of Murphy's legs.

Murphy licked his lips, staring at Ludo with a deep smoldering desire in his eyes, longing and begging mixed in to create such a seductive look. Ludo flicked his tongue out like a serpent, tasting what was fated to be his for the first time.

Pre-cum dissolved on his tongue, sending his senses reeling. The softness of his mate's skin amazed him. Ludo pushed the cock past his lips and let it slide down his throat, watching his mate the whole time.

His heart melted when Murphy brushed aside Ludo's hair and smiled down at him.

Ludo flattened his tongue then rubbed it up and down his mate's shaft, tracing the large vein that ran the length of it. Murphy groaned and fell back onto the couch. His hips hitched up, and his hands shot out, one grabbing the coffee table and the other fisting the back of the couch.

While keeping the length secured in his mouth, Ludo moved aside and pulled his mate's jeans the rest of the way off, turned him, and

then pulled Murphy's legs onto his shoulders. Much better. Now Murphy was sitting straight up as Ludo knelt on the floor before him.

"Holy crap, crazy men know how to suck cock." Murphy panted.

Ludo chuckled around his mate's shaft. He cupped Murphy's balls, rolling them around as he sucked the flared head, and flicked his tongue into the slit. Murphy's cock was weeping heavily with the delicious taste, and Ludo cleaned every drop that emerged. He pulled back, kissing the head before pushing Murphy's legs back to his chest.

"No, no, no, put it back. I'll give you whatever you want if you put my cock back into your mouth. You want my store? All yours, now suck it." Murphy babbled. As his head rocked back and forth.

"*Vasha kozha kak letnī briz, kotoryī laskaet mne mozhet ,*" Ludo whispered against Murphy's skin and then flicked his tongue across the head of Murphy's cock.

"Yeah, if you say so." His mate writhed under him.

"Your skin is like a summer breeze that caresses my soul," Ludo translated for his mate. He nipped Murphy's thighs and then kissed away the sting before running his tongue across Murphy's perineum.

Ludo ran his tongue over Murphy's hidden jewel. He bathed the tight hole, sucking the skin up, then used the tip of his tongue to circle around it.

"Okay, okay," Murphy chanted. Ludo glanced up at Murphy, his mate's eyes darkening with desire. The amber color danced around like small flames. His lips slammed over his mate's puckered opening, and then he slid a finger in, the skin stretching and welcoming his invading touch.

His tongue languorously worked the muscle until it relaxed, allowing another finger to join the first. Ludo licked around his knuckles, wetting the entrance so that his fingers easily slid in and out. "So beautiful." He breathed out roughly.

Murphy's head was thrashing from side to side, his lips slightly parted as he panted and moaned.

"You taste so fucking good." Ludo praised the muscle at his lips. He dipped down and bit into his mate's thigh. Lust, desire, and every damn sexual emotion under the sun were burning through him. The need to claim Murphy was eating at his very soul.

Ludo had to lean back and take a deep breath. Never in his life had he felt such strong surges of neediness, possessiveness, and a yearning so maddening that he thought he was losing his mind. He was told that when he found his mate the need to claim would be strong, but no one ever mentioned how all consuming it would become.

"I'm ready, I swear." Murphy pushed down on Ludo's fingers, impaling himself and pleading to be fucked. Ludo thrust two more fingers in and stretched his mate, twisting and turning his wrist.

When he felt his mate could handle his cock, Ludo removed his fingers and stood, kicked his boots off, and then shucked his jeans. He tossed his shirt over to the pile of clothes and then knelt before his mate, claiming his mate's pouting lips, the intoxicating scent still lingering on his lips, sharing it with the man that he would love forever.

"Need you."

"I know, *rebenka*." Ludo pulled Murphy onto his back, hiking his right leg over Ludo's arm. His mate's cock lay so prettily on his lower abdomen. The sight had Ludo's mouth watering for another taste.

Next time.

Next time he would savor the long, thick, and blood-filled cock. Right now he needed to be inside his mate, buried so deep they became one entity.

"Fuck me, Ludo," Murphy whimpered.

His mate began to writhe around, pushing his ass down toward Ludo's protruding erection.

"Hold still." Ludo placed a hand on his mate's stomach. "Let me love you." Ludo lined his cock up and felt Murphy's body opening for

him, accepting him in like a long-lost lover. The tight hole firmly gripped his shaft and pulled him in.

Ludo fought the itch in his gums. He did not want his mate to be frightened until he could explain to Murphy what he was.

Though his mate was a half-breed, he wanted Murphy to accept him with a clear head and knowledge of what it meant. For now he was going to enjoy his mate's body and bring him to the heights of pleasure.

He pulled back, swiveled his hips, then pushed back in. Ludo's hips snapped, bucked, and gyrated. He watched Murphy's passion flash across his gorgeous face.

"Ludo, so good." Murphy's head tilted back, his small canines emerging once again. The sight threatened Ludo's sanity. Ludo swooped down, running his tongue over the lengthened teeth, the tip of his tongue pressing into the tip of his mate's canines.

Murphy bit down, sucking his tongue in and the small amount of blood Ludo was sure welled up. Murphy sucked as Ludo snapped his hips, his cock swelling further, bringing him closer to release. Ludo tucked Murphy's legs around his waist and tweaked Murphy's nipples. They tightened under his fingers as Murphy shuddered.

He tweaked harder, and Murphy's back came off of the couch. "Damn," Ludo whispered into Murphy's mouth. He broke the kiss, looking down to see the reddened skin under his fingers.

So damn sexy.

Ludo grabbed Murphy's wrists when his mate started waving his hands around, so lost in passion, being careful of the bandaged one. He pushed them above Murphy's head and thrust harder, deeper, and faster.

"Yes, just like that," Murphy cried out as he tried to pull his arms free. "Like that." Murphy tossed his head from left to right, his mouth opening and closing. Ludo placed his neck at Murphy's mouth, allowing his mate to bite into his flesh.

"Fuck." Ludo jetted into him. His skin was on fire and his head swimming in a fog. He pulled back, leaving just the head in, then slammed forward.

Murphy released him and cried out, his cock exploding and painting both their bodies with his release. Ludo wasn't too far behind. He stiffened, growled, and then a kaleidoscope of colors burst around him. His nails extended, but he managed not to embed them into his mate's skin.

His cock became ultrasensitive, his body jerking as his balls emptied the remaining seed he had. Ludo collapsed onto Murphy, all his strength gone. Murphy lay under him, sweaty and spent, gasping for air. He could hear his mate's heart beating out of control.

Ludo let go of his mate's arms and pushed his under Murphy's back, pulling the smaller man close to him. He nuzzled into Murphy's neck, inhaling deeply.

"About my store." Murphy ran his hands over Ludo's hair. "I wasn't really serious about giving it to you."

"I didn't think so, *rebenka*." Ludo chuckled then pecked his mate on the lips. "Although having my own business is tempting."

"You wouldn't?" Murphy asked in a voice laced with dare.

"No, I would never take from you."

Murphy tried to push Ludo off of him. "Oh shit, my store. I left it open."

"Not to worry." Ludo settled his weight back onto Murphy. "My friends are watching it."

"They know how to run a bookstore? I do have some rare books there."

Ludo jumped up and grabbed his clothes. "Crap, let's go."

* * * *

Murphy jumped around as he tried to get his jeans to cooperate. "I swear, if they sold them for a dollar, I'm going to be really pissed."

Murphy finally got them on and pulled them to his waist, snapping them, and then shoved his feet into his sneakers. He ran a hand through his wayward curls and then grabbed his keys.

"I'll pay for whatever loss they have caused," Ludo promised as he bent at the waist and tied his boots up.

Murphy watched the dark and handsome man. He had to be Russian from his accent, but his skin was dark like a Middle Easterner. What was the guy's nationality? "What are you?"

Ludo stiffened, his eyes slowly rising to meet Murphy's. "What do you mean, *rebenka*? I'm a man, why would you think otherwise?"

"You speak Russian, but your skin is so golden and tanned." It didn't slip Murphy's notice that Ludo looked relieved. What had the man thought Murphy meant? If he thought about it, he didn't really know this guy. Sure, his hormones took over and the sex was out of this world, but what did he know about Ludo?

"I am Russian, my name is Ludovic Chernov. I also have ancestors from Cairo. Mixed blood." Ludo finished tying his boots and stood. He snagged Murphy in for another one of those toe-curling kisses before letting him go. Murphy stood there still puckered up, his mind skipping along in la-la land as his skin buzzed with excitement.

"Come on, let's go see what Montana and Dagon have done with your bookstore." Murphy followed along like a lost puppy, gazing at Ludo's back as he sighed. At the last second he remembered to lock his door.

They walked back to his bookstore together, Murphy watching out for Maribel. He wasn't sure if Ludo would help him. He *had* just met the guy. What right did he have to expect this hunk to step in and rescue him? He was quite sure Maribel would strike even if Ludo were standing right next to him. The crazy bitch would probably swing her hammer *because* Ludo was standing right next to him.

Ludo held the door open as he stepped into his store, looking around to see if his shelves were cleared out. Thankfully, it seemed to be as he had left it. "Hi." He nodded toward the men standing around

his store, looking more like steroid-induced bouncers than book sellers.

The two men and Oliver smiled at him. "We sold a few books. Was twenty bucks apiece okay?" the bald-headed man asked, looking very proud of himself. His chest was overinflated, and he had a cocky grin on his face.

"Depends on which books they were." Murphy prayed it wasn't any of his rare finds. *Please don't let my luck be that damn bad.*

"Murder Mysteries," Oliver answered, looking just as pleased.

"Twenty bucks? That's a little steep." He would have to find out who the man sold them to and credit them.

The bald man's face fell as he glared over at Oliver. "Sorry, I was going to sell them for four dollars, but Oliver said that was too low."

Ludo smiled at Murphy, leaning in as he spoke in his ear. "This is Montana. You can kick his ass if you want."

Yeah right. Then right after that he would win the lottery and be rich. That was so not happening. The guy was only an inch shorter than Ludo, and that wasn't short.

The dark and lovely man that was stealing his heart had to be about six five, and they both were muscular as hell. Murphy felt like the geek on the beach next to muscleheads.

Montana shrugged. "I tried. I told you I didn't know what I was doing." He stepped from behind the counter with an *oh well* look on his face.

"Thank you." Murphy shook his head as he walked off into his office. He had to check his online orders to see what needed to be done around here. Visions of a dark and rippled body filtered through his mind. He shuddered as he thought of those softly spoken words, and those sexy-ass eyes. Murphy shivered again when he thought of how Ludo was a master of seduction.

His mind stopped dreaming of the sexy man when he noticed a note taped to the monitor.

He peeled the tape from the screen and opened the piece of paper.

*Tick tock, tick tock.
Write it or be written off.*

Murphy's hands began to tremble. She had been in his office, used his very own computer to type the note, and then printed it. *She had been in his office!*

Murphy jumped when arms circled around his waist and a chin rested on his shoulder.

"What's wrong, *rebenka*?" Ludo grabbed the note from his hand and scanned it. "What is this?" he growled as he looked up at Murphy and waited for an answer.

"Oh, that." He chuckled nervously and waved his hand dismissively. "It's a reminder that I have to write some checks before the due dates." He bit his lip, hoping Ludo didn't question him any further. The man would probably drop him like a hot potato if he found out Murphy had issues. Who wanted to date a man with drama in his life? The people on those trashy talk shows never looked like Ludo, and he wasn't chancing losing the man's interest.

Ludo gave him a penetrating stare. "Uh-huh. So you write an ominous reminder?"

"Hey, it scares me into writing those checks, so it works." Murphy's eyes jumped from one thing to another, never looking at Ludo. He probably should keep his mouth shut. He was going to screw the lie up if Ludo kept questioning him.

"Okay. Weird but effective, I guess." Ludo handed him the threatening note back. Murphy offered him a grin, knowing damn well the man wasn't buying it. He was going to mess this up, he just knew it.

Murphy had always been a little off kilter in his way of thinking, which never bothered him before, but the thought of his screwed-up brain patterns running this man off bothered him now. Lying just wasn't his forte.

"The guys left. Sorry about Montana gouging your customers."

Murphy shook his head as he stepped around Ludo. "No problem. I'll credit the customers and all will be right with the world again."

Why wouldn't the guy stop looking at him suspiciously? Other various lies ran through his mind, but Murphy decided to keep his trap shut. He was digging a hole for himself, and it was getting deeper. Soon he would be buried so deep, he'd meet and greet Satan. He shuddered at the thought.

He walked over to the computer and printed off the list of books he needed to gather for an order. "Work calls." He pulled a tight, false smile up onto his face as he held the paper up to Ludo.

Practically running out of the office, Murphy hummed to himself as he gathered his list, trying his best not to think of hot, sweaty skin and the most explosive orgasm he had ever had. His cock didn't listen. It filled out the front of his pants, begging to be let out again.

Thoughts of Maribel and her twisted sense of reality were gone. Thoughts of a mouth so warm and wet around his cock made him want to run into the bathroom and relieve the pressure. He looked over his shoulder to see Ludo relaxed on the sofa and thumbing through a magazine. The man was even hot reading *Home and Garden*.

Murphy just stood there drooling, watching that seductive tongue come out to lick Ludo's finger and turn the page. God, how he wished he were Ludo's thumb. Murphy's tongue came out and licked the air, imagining it was Ludo's cock.

He caught himself, cleared his throat, and then turned back to the shelves. The need to drop to all fours and crawl over to the sex god was strong. He chanced another look to see that Ludo was grinning as he read the magazine. Was something in an article funny, or did Ludo know about how horny he was?

"Round two?" Ludo asked the page. How the hell did the guy know?

Murphy's mouth opened to answer, but all that came out was an "Ung."

The dreamy man tossed the magazine aside and pushed from the couch. The predatory look in his eyes made Murphy back away. The man looked so...hungry. How could Ludo look that way for him?

"Come, *rebenka*." Ludo spoke low and husky. Murphy's whole body shivered at his command.

He dropped the books in his hands, barely noticing them hit the floor as he walked in a trance toward the hypnotic voice.

With a voice like that, Ludo could talk him into selling cheese on a corner and Murphy would do it with a big goofy grin on his face. He was such a goner.

Chapter Four

Murphy bit his thumbnail as Ludo pulled onto a gravel driveway and drove up to a humongous mansion. He had agreed to meet his family. Who the hell met family after just meeting a guy and two rounds of hot-ass sex?

A crazy person, that's who.

"Don't be nervous. They're just normal everyday men."

"You have no female relatives?"

"Melonee, she's the princess running the house." Ludo turned the truck off as he opened his door.

Murphy nodded, unbuckling his seat belt and sliding out. This was insane. The men in his family would probably take one look at Murphy's scrawny ass and laugh him out of the front door. If they looked anything like Ludo, the possibility was real.

He watched Ludo use a fob to enter through the front door. Boy, talk about highfalutin. This place was fancy as hell. He felt terribly undressed walking into a crib like this. Although Ludo was casually dressed, Murphy wasn't used to being around people with money.

"Come." Ludo held his hand out, and Murphy took it. He recognized some of the men from visits to his bookstore. He didn't know their names, but nobody could forget such handsome faces.

"Murphy?" Drew asked as he entered the hallway, Oliver following close behind.

"Hi, Drew, Oliver." Well, this was strange. It seemed his loyal customers lived under the same roof. He nervously looked around. Would Maribel pop out on her broom at any moment?

"Murphy is my...boyfriend," Ludo said to Drew and Oliver.

A knowing look passed between the three. Murphy wondered what the word “boyfriend” meant in their lingo because it seemed a little too cryptic here, and he forgot his decoder ring in the box of cereal he ate twenty years ago.

“Glad to have you here.” Drew smiled at him. Yeah, like he trusted that smile. Drew was a little too smiley for him after that knowing look he shared between them. He wasn’t falling for that damn innocent look.

“Yeah, welcome.” Oliver tapped knuckles with Murphy. Murphy lowered his hand, looking Oliver up and down. And to think he had thought Oliver was a nice guy. That shared look meant something, and Murphy was going to find out. Nobody got one past him. No siree, Bob.

“Okay.” Murphy glanced around the large home, wondering if Ludo owned all this. He really wasn’t into sugar daddies. He enjoyed his independence, and if Ludo were rich, he had a feeling this hot-ass-sex thing they had going on would come to an end.

“Hello.”

Murphy looked down at a cherub-faced little girl. This must be Melonee. She was cute as a button. “Hello, Melonee.” At least she didn’t have that knowing look on her cute little face.

Her eyes grew round. “How do you know my name?”

Murphy shrugged, pointing to his nugget. “I’m psychic.”

“Really?”

Murphy touched a finger to his forehead, scrunching up his face. “And you’re the only girl here.”

“Wow.” Melonee looked at him with wide-eyed wonder. “Can you tell me where my lion is?”

“In Oz?” Murphy looked over at Ludo for help. Did they really have lions here? No, they couldn’t have, must be a stuffed animal.

“Come, *rebenka*.” Ludo chuckled as he pulled Murphy along. He looked down once more at the little girl before allowing Ludo to lead him away.

The guy walked him into a large office with leather chairs and a leather sofa. He liked the bookshelves on the far wall. His eyes scanned the room, settling on the man sitting behind a desk with long black hair, big gray eyes, and dressed like he belonged in a biker gang. This guy was someone Murphy intended to stay as far away from as possible. He looked dangerous.

"*Rebenka*, this is Maverick."

"Hello, Murphy." Maverick nodded at him. Murphy would take Maribel any day over this man. He scooted behind Ludo, afraid the man would rise and the gates of hell would appear behind him.

Wait, how did the guy even know his name? Murphy bit his bottom lip. Did he shake the man's hand or bow in front of him and worship the demon? "Hello." That seemed good enough to him.

Maverick just chuckled and shook his head. "Don't be frightened. I only eat the bad guys."

Yeah, now was a good time to pee his pants. He tugged on Ludo's arm, wanting to get the hell out of there. Thank goodness the man understood his whimper.

"I'll just show my *mat* around."

Once they were in the hallway Murphy rounded on Ludo. "What does *mat* mean?"

Ludo smiled at him, his fingers tugging at Murphy's chin playfully. "It means mate, boyfriend, or friend. However you wish to translate it."

Murphy liked this less and less. He shoved his hands in his front pocket only to wince. How had he forgotten about his wrist?

"Now you can tell me about your injury." Ludo gently lifted his wrist and examined it.

Murphy sighed. He couldn't remember the lie he had told, so the truth seemed the safest route. "I have a stalker. She hit my hand with a hammer."

Murphy looked at him like he didn't believe a word he said. "Liar, now tell me truth."

“That is the truth. I swear.”

Ludo shook his head, looking at Murphy with disappointment in his eyes. “Maybe one day you will be comfortable enough to tell me.”

This was unbelievable. He finally broke down and told someone about Maribel, and they didn’t believe him, just fucking great. “Her name is Maribel. She wants me to write another book.”

“You’re an author?”

Well, that just chapped his khakis. He wasn’t sure if he should be offended by the surprised tone in Ludo’s voice or not. Murphy just shrugged. It was better to remain silent. He had done this to himself with the lies he had told. Now the man didn’t believe a word out of his mouth, and this time it was the truth.

Ludo gave a low growl. “Come, *rebenka*.” He tugged on Murphy’s good arm, leading him away once again.

Murphy wondered why his life always seemed to go fine for a moment then *bam*, all craziness broke loose and his life was no longer his own. First in the city with the wannabe mob boss, then Maribel with her cackling insanity, and now Ludo with his macho, “*come, rebenka*”. Murphy was going to have to look that word up. He was sure it meant crazy.

Why couldn’t he move somewhere crazy free? And why the hell was he letting Ludo pull him around without even asking where they were going?

Boy, you get some good dick in your life and all of the sudden you’re following the golden cock around like you traded your brain in for a few cosmic orgasms.

Which reminded Murphy, he forgot to tape his soap. Damn it, now he wouldn’t know what was going on. Did Derek forgive Marla? Shit.

Murphy dug his fingers under the bandage, scratching his dry skin. Maybe he needed to remove the bandage and let his skin breath for a little while. He struggled a little when his fingers got caught in the material. This just wasn’t his day.

Murphy screeched and jumped on Ludo's back, trying to climb to the top of his head when a tiger came walking around a corner. Maybe that lion Melonee asked about was a real one. That meant there was a lion running around here as well.

"What the hell is going on here, Ludo?" Murphy yelled.

* * * *

Ludo cursed.

This wasn't the time for Keata to take a walk around in his were form. He hadn't even had a chance to explain to his mate about the wolves that lived here yet. Guess the cat was out of the bag now, literally.

Ludo sidestepped the small mate until he reached his bedroom then closed the door, prying Murphy from his head. "Calm down, mate."

"Mate? Why do I have a feeling that doesn't mean chum or pal?" Murphy climbed down his back and set his feet on the floor. His mate straightened his clothes then looked at Ludo with narrowed eyes and thinned lips. He was in trouble now.

"Have a seat." Ludo waved his hand toward the bed. "I have some explaining to do."

Murphy eyed him but sat on the edge of the bed. Ludo paced back and forth, trying to figure out the best way to explain everything. His mate was a half-breed. He should understand, right? It's not like the paranormal stuff was new to him.

Ludo looked over at his mate as he pulled his black coated rubber band out and tied up his hair.

Where to begin? He stopped to look at Murphy once again. The man was stunning. His big, trusting amber eyes, those soft tendrils that curled around his face, and the sexiest body he had ever seen sat in front of him. Ludo shook his head. He was getting off track here.

"You know how you're a half-breed, a wolf?"

Murphy cleared his throat and stared down at his hands. "Are we back to that again? I thought we were talking about the zoo here. Next you'll tell me you have bears. That would complete the ensemble. *Oh my.*" Murphy chuckled nervously at his own joke.

Ludo sighed heavily. He wasn't explaining this right. He walked over to his mate and knelt in front of him, grabbing Murphy's hands as he made sure Murphy was looking him in his eyes. "I'm a wolf, too, only I'm full blooded."

Murphy pulled back from Ludo, anger crossing his face. "You don't need to lie. Stop making fun of me," he snapped.

"I'm not." Ludo released his wolf, his canines elongated, and his eyes shifted to crimson.

Murphy kicked back and scooted further onto the bed. "God damn it. Can shit stop getting crazy around me for once in my life? How the hell are you a wolf?"

"What do you mean, how? Wasn't at least one of your parents a shifter?" Ludo couldn't understand how his mate didn't know. Sure, he had waited to tell his mate, but that was because he wanted to sit down and talk to him, not have him accept him in the heat of the moment. But not having any knowledge was baffling.

"I was orphaned. I learned who I was from a drifter that used to hang at my bookstore in the city. He explained about shifter tigers. That's what I thought I was. Now you're telling me I'm a wolf? Talk about identity crisis." Murphy twisted his hands in his lap, looking lost and on the verge of tears. Ludo reached out, but Murphy batted his hand away.

"If you are a wolf, then why did I see a tiger in the hallway, hmm? Explain that one to me, buster."

"Long story short, Keata and Kyoshi were kidnapped from Japan, brought here to be sex slaves, the warrior Storm saved them, and now they live here. When they mated, they found out they were tigers." Talk about an edited version. Ludo didn't want to spend the better part of his day trying to explain that long and sordid story.

"What's going on, Ludo? I'm confused as hell," Murphy whispered.

"I am a full-blooded wolf shifter. Fate has allowed me one mate, and you are it, *rebenka*." Again, the edited version. He put all the facts out there. If his mate wanted details, then Ludo would give them to him.

Murphy looked around the room, his eyes misting with tears. "Who am I?"

Ludo crawled onto the bed. The desolate look in his mate's eyes tore at his heart. How could he take the pain away? How do you give your mate what he never had? A sense of identity, or the knowledge of where he came from, or even what he was? "Look at me, love."

Murphy wiped at the tears, sniffled, and then looked up into Ludo's eyes. Ludo cupped his face and laid a gentle kiss on his lips. "It's going to be okay."

"You can say that. You know who you are." Murphy leaned into his touch. Why was Murphy not mentioning the revelation of being mates? Ludo knew it was going to take a very long time to figure this adorable yet confusing creature out. He pulled Murphy into his arms, kissing him gently, trying his best to reassure him that he was there for him.

"Mates, huh?"

Now he mentions it? Ludo smiled. The guy definitely looked at things in a backwards order. "Yes, mates." He skimmed his hand down his mate's side, wanting naked flesh under his hand, not clothes.

"You're making my brain melt again." Murphy groaned. His mate kicked his shoes off then pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor. "Crazy talk later, crazy sex now."

Ludo couldn't agree more. He pulled from his mate's grabbing hands and quickly tossed his own clothes aside. "Get your pants off."

Murphy lifted his bottom and pulled his jeans down, that gorgeous cock standing proud and erect. Now, now he was going to savor the

flavor. Ludo grabbed Murphy's ankles and pulled him to the edge of the bed. "Hold your cock, offer it to me."

"What, this?" Murphy grabbed the base and shook his dick. "Wanna taste my skinsicle?" His mate laughed.

"How many licks does it take to get to the center of *your* Tootsie Pop?" Ludo growled as he dropped to his knees.

"Oh, *please*, let's find out. Just don't pay me any attention if I offer you my bank account next." Murphy showed his beautiful white teeth as he grinned widely at him. Ludo wanted to take a picture of that heart-stopping smile and have a mural made over his bed. It was so breathtaking. The way his mate's eyes sparkled in mischievousness was heart-pounding.

Ludo licked Murphy's fingers first. His tongue lapped between the digits, running from one knuckle to the next. It was erotic as hell to see his mate's own hand on his cock as Ludo worshipped it.

He pushed Murphy's legs apart, burying his nose under his mate's balls and inhaling deeply, the musky scent making his own cock jump. Ludo sucked in one orb, lapping his tongue around, enjoying the feel of it moving around as he tongue bathed it. The view from down here was better than a Picasso.

His mate started pushing down, hissing and groaning. His hands slid down between his legs and offered Ludo his sac. Shit, he was going to come just watching those long and slim fingers massaging his own balls.

Ludo ran his tongue over sac and fingers, bathing them both. Murphy lifted his sac, offering Ludo his hole next. Ludo went nuts when Murphy shifted around, reached under his ass, and separated his cheeks. Ludo's head swam in lust.

His mate's entrance was so intoxicating that he'd almost forgotten that he wanted to make his mate come in his mouth. His cock was beating out a plea to be buried inside of that tight hole. Ludo rimmed him, stiffened his tongue, and fucked that sweet temptation.

"Yes, keep doing that, that right there," Murphy panted. He pulled his cheeks further apart, his fingers digging into his own skin. Ludo laid his hands on his mate's fingers, shoving his tongue deep.

"Gonna..."

"No, not like that." Ludo growled and came up, swallowing Murphy's cock down his throat. He bobbed his head, concaving his cheeks to add a powerful suction. Again, his mate grabbed the base and pumped his cock as he mewled and writhed. Ludo relaxed his throat muscle and took him all the way down, his nose hitting his mate's hand. He batted the fingers away and finished his downward journey.

"Oh hell, use those jaw muscles, crazy man." Murphy cried out as he fucked Ludo's mouth in an erratic rhythm. He pulled at Ludo's hair as his hot seed splashed down Ludo's throat. "Good, so fucking good," Murphy praised.

Ludo licked his mate clean, pleased that he maintained the patience to complete a blow job without dropping the cock and fucking Murphy into oblivion.

"*YA hochu k poshel na hui.*" Ludo grabbed the base of his cock as he let the head kiss Murphy's tight star, breathing out deeply before pushing it past the ring and entering his mate.

"What was that?" Murphy asked before a whimper escaped and his head began to thrash back and forth.

"I want to fuck you." Ludo growled.

"Fuck away, just don't stop. Please do not stop."

Ludo stilled his hips. *Wait for it...*

"Damn you, I'll give you all my net worth if you shove that cock up into my throat." Murphy dug his nails into Ludo's biceps, trying his best to pull Ludo down to him.

Ludo laughed, that's what he had been waiting for. He loved how Murphy lost all sense of self-preservation when laying under him. Ludo began thrusting his hips again, grabbing Murphy under his

knees and pushing his mate's legs back. His canines extended, an action he couldn't stop even if he had truly wanted to.

"Fuck me, man. That's caveman erotic." Murphy licked his lips, his eyes begging. Ludo leaned forward, shoving his cock all the way into his mate's asshole until there wasn't an inch to spare.

Murphy licked over Ludo's canines, his own extending and his eyes shifting to crimson. Ludo felt a jolt of electricity a second before his cock exploded, the sight more erotic than ever imaginable. He hissed, and grunted, groaned, and then finally shouted as he unloaded into his mate's ass. His hips locked up as he strained his muscles, the best orgasm of his life yanking his balls through his body.

"Me next, me next," Murphy passionately begged.

Ludo blinked a few times to clear his head as he grabbed Murphy's fully erect cock and pumped in frenzy. He slammed forward, shivering at the small aftershocks zinging through his body as his mate bucked then cried out, an eruption of seed warming his fist.

"I want to claim you, Murphy." Ludo growled, the sensations still ping-ponging through his body. He had been so lost in the sight of his mate that the opportunity had passed to claim him while fucking him. Yes, he wanted to talk to him first, but the primal need to claim what was his, let everyone know this man was off limits, was consuming his rational thoughts.

He pushed his half-hard cock up into his mate, eliciting a whimper from Murphy.

"It's that mate thing, isn't it?" Murphy groaned and pushed his ass down onto Ludo's dick.

"Yes, one mate, one lifetime. Will you accept me?"

"You've already stolen my heart, just don't throw it away and let some homeless person find it."

Ludo stilled and tilted his head. What the fuck? Ludo shook his head, his cock coming fully to life at his mate's psychotic answer. "Is that a yes?"

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you accept me as your mate, Murphy?”

“Yes, Ludo, yes,” Murphy cried out.

Ludo struck, his hips snapping into his mate, his canines embedding into soft flesh as he took what was needed for the claiming.

“Oh shit, I feel it.” Murphy gasped as his hips bucked and his ass slammed down on Ludo’s cock.

Ludo could, too. He felt the ribbons of his soul lift away from his body, dance around Murphy’s, entwine together, then settle back down inside of him, their hearts synchronized and Murphy settling within him. Murphy was his, bound to him for the rest of his life.

* * * *

Murphy lay curled up in Ludo’s arms, his back to Ludo’s chest. What in the fuck had he just done?

Mates?

Murphy rolled over and stared at the sleeping man. How could someone so devastatingly handsome want *him*? The thick black eyebrows over Ludo’s eyes arched beautifully. The soft hair around the guy’s mouth was drool-worthy. He had never had sex with a man that had a goatee before. It made Murphy’s skin tingle every time it brushed his skin.

Murphy ran the strands of Ludo’s silken hair between his fingers, watching as they slipped through. For a crazy man, Ludo was heartbreakingly gorgeous.

Murphy studied the sleeping body. God, to have so many muscles, he could slam dunk Maribel without breaking a sweat.

He ran his finger over the large vein that crossed over Ludo’s thick bicep. His skin was almost brown it was so tanned. Murphy leaned forward, kissing the man’s full bottom lip, the lips that brought him so much pleasure.

Ludo moaned and pulled Murphy closer to his body. Was this sexy-ass man really his? Murphy never had anyone to call his own before. Growing up in foster care didn't allow that attachment, and then adulthood was just as lonely. Fear of anyone finding out his secret kept him from making any friends.

When he moved here, he started to grow fond of Drew and Oliver, even Cecil and the other men that had wandered into his store, but he never reached out to make a connection with them. Who would have known that they were knowledgeable about the bizarre world he lived in?

Murphy slipped from Ludo's arms, his stomach announcing its starvation. He hadn't eaten since lunch.

He slid his pants on and stuffed his feet in his sneakers. With a smile, he grabbed Ludo's shirt instead of his. The smell of the man lingered in the fabric, making Murphy feel closer to him for some strange reason.

He closed the door quietly behind him and explored that large home. It was the middle of the night, so he didn't see anyone else around. Finally finding the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator to see what he could find. Man, he had never seen a kitchen so well stocked before.

He rummaged around, grabbing things to make a plate with leftover roasted chicken and macaroni salad. The chicken should make a good sandwich. He normally didn't eat heavy at night, but with little food today, it felt like his stomach was trying to claw its way out and smack him for not taking care of it.

Murphy turned to set the items on the counter and screamed at the top of his lungs.

There, in the kitchen window, was Maribel.

Chapter Five

Ludo shot off his bed and grabbed his jeans, quickly putting them on before running down the winding staircase and into the kitchen. His mate was passed out on the flagstone floor. Warriors swarmed the kitchen as Ludo pulled his mate's head up, checking for lumps and bumps. He had a nice-sized goose egg on the back of his head. What the hell had happened in here?

"Maribel," Murphy whimpered as he raised his hand to his head, cradling it.

"Your stalker?" Ludo asked.

"In the backyard, she was staring at me right through that kitchen window." Ludo pulled his mate close, feeling tremors rack Murphy's body as his mate pointed to the empty window. Was he telling the truth earlier?

Montana and Dagon shifted to wolf form as they searched the backyard. They came back in a few minutes later in human form, and shook their heads. "No tracks, nothing," Montana said softly, looking down at Murphy with pity in his eyes.

Ludo looked back down at his mate. Maybe Murphy being crazy wasn't a joke.

The only thing that puzzled him was the fact that there was no way he could fake such a response, but if his mind was off-balanced, then Murphy would think it was real.

Ludo glanced back down at his mate's hand. Had Murphy done that to himself?

Ludo hugged his mate to his chest as he began a slow, rocking, back-and-forth rhythm. He felt tears stinging his eyes and a lump

form in his throat. If Murphy was mentally ill, then he would make sure he received the best care possible. He would spare no expense in helping his mate get the treatment he needed to get better. Murphy had to get better. He would expect nothing less from whatever facility took his mate's case.

"What's going on?" Maverick asked from behind them.

"I'll talk to you as soon as I put him to bed." Ludo pulled Murphy from the floor and carried him upstairs, feeling like every step was weighted down. He pushed the door open and crossed the room to his bed. Ludo tucked his mate in, kissing him on his forehead as he brushed his beautiful brown curls from his gorgeous face.

"I'm not crazy. She was out there," Murphy mumbled as his face pressed into Ludo's hand.

"We'll talk about it later, *rebenka*." Ludo kissed him once more before shutting off the light and closing the door.

He searched out the resident doctor, asking Nicholas to have a look at Murphy's bump on the head before descending the stairs and finding Maverick in his office.

Ludo closed the door and took a seat on the leather sofa. He rubbed his hands over his face as he stared at the floor for a moment, trying his best to make sense of the situation. He knew every warrior was gifted with a mate who had issues to work out, but Murphy's seemed so devastating. It wasn't a habit he could fight to control, or an ugly past he had to get past. This was mental. How the hell do you deal with something like that? He knew he had a long and hard road ahead of him.

Ludo wiped at his eyes as he sat back and stared at Maverick. "I'm not sure what's going on. He claims that some woman is stalking him, hurting him."

"And you don't believe him?" Maverick asked.

They sat silently for a long time as Ludo tried to work everything out in his head. He couldn't come up with a solution. He felt so damn lost.

"I don't know." He pulled the rubber band free and ran his hands through his hair. "No tracks were found outside in the backyard. I'm positive he's lied to me more than once. What am I supposed to believe?" He was desperate for any advice he could get. The thought of his mate being mentally ill made his heart hurt. Murphy was so witty and handsome, so full of life. There had to be a way to help him.

"That's a tough call. The only thing I can tell you is keep an eye on him, watch for anyone hanging around his bookstore, and watch him. You should be able to figure it out sooner or later." Maverick leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You know our mates come to us with issues. They all have so far. Murphy's may be mental, but we're all still going to be there for both of you. Just keep him safe, even from himself if that's the case."

Ludo stared down at his hands that were resting on his knees. He picked at his thumbnail as he worried that it all might be in his mate's head. "And if it turns out that this Maribel is a figment of his imagination?"

"Then we cross that bridge when we come to it."

Ludo blew out a weary breath and nodded. The weight of the world felt as though it were perched on his shoulders. He needed to find out if Maribel was real.

His mate's very sanity depended on it.

* * * *

Oliver sat back on the couch in the den watching the other mate's play the video games. "Do you think he's really crazy?"

Drew shrugged as he splayed his hands in front of him. "He never seemed crazy to me."

"Yeah, me either." Oliver ran his hand over his jaw. He'd never met an unbalanced person before—this didn't include his father—but Murphy didn't seem the type. A little nutty but not crazy.

Something just didn't add up. He saw the woman in the store, had seen the fear in Murphy's eyes when she walked past the window. He didn't think the mate was lying, and he definitely didn't think he was crazy.

He would keep his eyes and his ears open. There had to be a way to prove the bookstore owner—and now mate—wasn't making things up.

Oliver just prayed he could find the proof. He liked Murphy and didn't want him to be locked away.

* * * *

Murphy pulled the blanket up to his chin, his fingers curling around the fabric. The images of Maribel standing in that window, the night a backdrop to her crazed look burned into his brain. He had never seen anything more frightening in his life.

Too bad no one believed him. He knew she was real, even if no one else did.

He reached up and rubbed the lump on the back of his head and winced. He was about tired of being injured and really tired of being a victim.

Murphy grew angry as he thought of all the things Maribel had done and how he was the only one who thought she was real.

He threw the blankets back. Fine, if no one believed him, then he didn't need to be here. Pity was one thing he wasn't going to watch enter everyone's eyes when they looked at him.

He wasn't crazy.

Murphy pulled Ludo's shirt off. An overwhelming sadness took over at the thought of leaving the dark and lovely wolf, but he wasn't going to stay somewhere he was pitied or they thought he was lying.

He tossed the oversized shirt roughly to the floor as he pulled his shirt over his head and tied his sneakers back onto his feet.

Fuck all of them. He was getting out of this damn zoo and never looking back. His apartment was almost packed, and all he had to do was hire a packing and moving company to get the store taken care of. He would leave Maribel in the dust and all these wild kingdom animals as well.

That'll teach them to think he was lying. He didn't have to put up with this. It wasn't as if he was stuck here. He could walk out the front door anytime he wanted to.

That golden dick wasn't worth being locked up in a padded room. To hell with proving anything. Once he was halfway across the country, he wouldn't have to worry about their asses anymore.

Murphy opened the bedroom door and jogged down the stairs, heading straight for the front door. He'd walk back to town. Darkness didn't scare him, just the people who lurked in it. How had Cindernightmare found him? That was the scariest thought in his mind when he considered walking home. As angry as he was, he'd drop her crazy ass in a ditch if she tried anything tonight. Just try him, just try him, damn it, and he would go buck wild on her psychotic ass.

"Where are you going?"

Murphy gulped. Maverick. The one person he never wanted to run into again. That voice took all the steam out of his mental tirade.

"Home." Murphy kept walking. He may not be brave enough to give the large man a piece of his mind, but no one was stopping him from leaving. Not even the man that looked like a biker from hell.

"Let Ludo take you."

Murphy waved a finger as he kept going. "I don't think so. He thinks I imagined her."

"Did you?" Maverick asked.

Murphy could feel his temper rising. He should have kept his big mouth shut and never told Ludo about her. Look where the hell it got him. Murphy waved a dismissive hand at Maverick and opened the front door. He didn't have to answer to anybody. He didn't break any

laws, so they couldn't stop him. Murphy took a step outside and stopped in his tracks.

Ludo was standing on the other side.

"Crap, I really don't need your shit right now, Ludo." Murphy pushed past the man, wanting to curl into his arms instead of walking down the gravel drive and away from the one man that seemed to want to keep him. He brushed that thought aside and took the first step away from the wolf. He could do this, no problem whatsoever. Ludo didn't have a hold on him.

"I can give you a ride."

Murphy spun around and pointed an angry finger at the wolf. "Oh, you have done that already. I bet you want to stuff me in that truck of yours and give me a ride straight to the funny farm, not happening, buster." Murphy turned back around and stormed off.

Ludo jogged to his side, keeping up with him. "You can't just walk home from here."

"You see these shoes?" Murphy pointed down to his sneakers. "They're moving me further and further away from that loony bin you call a home. Watch my ass shake from side to side as it slowly disappears from your sight. You got some crazy booty. So go brag about it to your family and leave me the hell alone." Murphy walked along, listening to the gravel crunch under his feet as he thought of the most erotic man to enter his life. To hell with him, Ludo wasn't worth admitting he was crazy when he wasn't.

No dick was that good.

"I'll walk with you." Ludo came up next to him, walking right beside him.

"Look, it was fun, mind-blowing, and heart-stopping. The ride is over. I've put my pants on backwards and strolled out of your front door to meet my next adventure." Murphy turned and sneered at Ludo as he jabbed his finger into that solid ass chest. "And you aren't a part of it. Go seduce someone else and then rip their heart out. I'd rather have the homeless man."

"You think our mating wasn't real?" Ludo pulled on Murphy's forearm to stop him.

Murphy yanked free. "About as real as you think Maribel is. I think you had a good time biting the shit out of me, now go." Murphy's heart was hurting, but he wouldn't allow it to rule how he handled this situation. He was done being everyone's victim. They could all kiss his pale ass.

Murphy held his hand up in front of Ludo's face, stopping him before anything else left his lips. "I'm done. It's been fun. Now go the fuck away." Murphy turned on his heels and walked quickly to the paved road.

"I'm not letting you walk home, at least not alone." Ludo stubbornly walked beside him.

Murphy ignored him. If he looked over at his dark and lovely wolf, he was going to relent, and he wasn't going to do that. He did have his pride. "Then send the tiger to escort me."

"He's too young."

Murphy almost stumbled at Ludo's words. He wasn't really having this conversation, was he? He just wanted the man to leave him alone. Okay, not really, but he didn't want Ludo looking at him as if he had escaped from a mental ward with a straight jacket tossed away somewhere.

"Will you talk to me?"

Murphy walked faster, trying his best to leave Ludo behind along with his heart. "Why? You don't believe a word I've said," Murphy spat.

"You have lied to me, admit it."

"I'd admit it, but then you would call me a liar. A big ole catch twenty-two going on here." He had lied to Ludo, but he wasn't going to admit it. That would only give the man fuel to his hellish fire.

Murphy hit the ground when a heavy weight landed on his back. At first he thought Ludo had attacked him until he saw his wolf fighting another guy.

“Get the hell off of me.” Damn it, not again, no more being a victim. He’d had enough of that to last him a lifetime and then some.

Murphy tried to roll over but the guy held him firm. He grunted as he struggled to free himself. A searing pain shot across his shoulder and down his back. “Are you seriously trying to eat me!”

The man hissed and sank his teeth in deeper. “A relative of Ludo’s?” Murphy asked as he bucked and screamed. It felt as though skin were being torn away. Murphy reached over his shoulder and yanked the guy’s hair, hard.

The pain in his wrist was nothing compared to what this guy was doing to him.

Murphy gasped when the weight was suddenly gone. He rolled over to his back and saw wolves fighting the men who had attacked them. Oh, this was just too damn much for him. Murphy pushed to his feet, pulled his shirt off, and pushed it into his shoulder.

He took off running, getting as far away from the pandemonium as possible. Fuck packing, Murphy was out of here tonight. He didn’t care about the store or his belongings anymore. All he wanted was thousands of miles between him and this *Resident Evil* setup.

He skidded to a halt when a dark figure came from behind a tree. Oh, this was so not good.

* * * *

Ludo took down the last vampire. They were becoming one big headache anymore. He was sick of fighting them. Everyone knew they were after Melonee because she was fey, but enough was enough already.

Ludo looked around for his mate, but Murphy was nowhere in sight. A tremor of fear shot down his spine.

Where the hell was his mate?

He walked over to where Murphy had fallen and saw so much blood that he became queasy. Fear and anger ripped a growl from his

chest. If one of those fuckers had taken his mate into the woods to finish him off, Ludo was going to make sure they died a slow and painful death.

He looked around and found a blood trail leading away from where they had been fighting. He followed the trail as it led to the woods. Ludo studied the earth, looking for signs of Murphy as he entered the forest in his wolf form.

He followed the speckles of blood. They dotted the earthen floor in a wayward pattern that had him growing more worried by the minute.

Ludo feared he would come across his mate's dead body. His heart raced in his chest as he thought of the worst-case scenario.

He whined as he grew closer to the small town. Murphy's blood trail was growing wider. The loss of blood was becoming greater.

There was no possible way Murphy was walking on his own, not with this much blood loss. Whoever had his mate was going to pay dearly.

There were two warriors flanking him, following Murphy's trail as well. The blood on the road was his mate's. *His mate's*. None of this seemed real to him.

Ludo was going nuts as he slowly tracked what was spilling from Murphy. If he went any faster, he could lose the trail. Something he couldn't afford to do.

This pace was too damn slow. He felt like hours were passing. Ludo's muzzle pulled back and his canines shown when he found a bloody T-shirt lying on the ground. It was Murphy's, the one he had worn earlier.

Rage unlike anything else he'd ever felt before in his life tore through him. It felt like it was consuming him, tearing a whole in his chest as he found it hard to breathe. Ludo didn't know what to do with so much fury clawing at him. He thought he would suffocate under the intense pressure of the negative emotion.

The need to have his mate safe in his arms was driving him forward, quickening his pace when he couldn't afford to lose the trail he had. One of the warriors nudged his head into Ludo's shoulders, warning him to slow down.

Ludo ignored Montana and raced to the bookstore when he saw the glass in the door broken and littering the ground. He leapt through, listening for any sounds. He heard a scream coming from Murphy's office.

Ludo's heart froze in his chest as he raced around the counter and into the back.

He stumbled in the doorway as the sight before him chilled his blood and tore a howl from deep within his soul.

* * * *

Oliver, Drew, and Cecil crept quietly from the house. They stole into the darkness awaiting them.

All the warriors were so occupied with fighting that it gave them a chance at escape. They knew where all the cameras were placed, but they also knew how to get around them undetected.

Although Nero was behind them one hundred percent in their quest to retrieve Murphy, a warrior was manning the monitors.

Cecil touched his index finger to his lip and pointed over to the gravel drive. Two Sentries were having a heated debate. It didn't matter what it was about. They only cared that they got away.

They knew the wolves had superior hearing, but with the men arguing, they prayed they went undetected.

The three dropped to their bellies and crawled into the forest on the side of the house, using the trees for cover. Murphy was being set up, they just knew it, and the mate needed their help.

The three were determined to prove that Murphy had a stalker, that this Maribel was real.

All they needed was proof.

This wasn't the ideal time to go after it, but what better chance did they have than when the warriors were being distracted? They only hoped that they weren't the vampires' next meal.

There was no way two humans and a half-wolf could fight off one vampire, add any more to that and they would be signing their death warrants.

The thought had crossed their minds to stay safely tucked away in the Den, but that would only benefit them.

What about Murphy?

He was a mate, too. He needed just as much protection as all the rest. Just because everyone was falsely accusing Murphy of being crazy, he didn't deserve any less than what they were given.

It was up to the three to find him, prove he wasn't lying, and kill the bitch that was setting him up.

They liked Murphy. He was a bit strange, but that didn't make him mentally ill. If that were the case, half the warriors and a few mates would be living in a rubber room right now.

Murphy had always been kind to them and made sure their orders were taken care of. He was a mate now and one of them. The mates stuck together. Through thick or thin, they had each other's back.

Cecil had to put his foot down when everyone wanted to come with them. There was no way they *all* could have gotten away, there were just too many of them now.

The rest reluctantly stayed behind but made the three promise to get Murphy back.

"Hurry," Drew called over his shoulder in a low voice at the other two.

"We're coming," Cecil whispered to Drew.

"If Oliver wasn't wearing those chains dangling from his jeans, we could move a lot faster without making a racket." Drew narrowed his eyes at the two behind him.

“I can’t help it this idea was thought of on a whim. You didn’t leave me any time to change. Just keep an eye out for those damn bloodsuckers,” Oliver snipped quietly at Drew.

The three cleared the estate forest and took off running at breakneck speed, dodging between trees and over fallen logs. They had to be fast. Once the warriors found out they were missing, it would only be a matter of minutes before they were tracked down and brought back home. That wouldn’t help Murphy, so they needed to put fire under their asses.

Their plan *had* to work. If they failed, Murphy would be the one to pay the price. A price too high for anyone wrongly accused to pay.

Drew stopped in his tracks, Cecil and Oliver running into him as all three tumbled to the ground. Cecil looked up and gulped. This couldn’t be good.

* * * *

Maverick roared when he discovered his mate missing. With the battle they had just gone through with the vampires, his heart hammered in his chest at his mate’s disappearance.

He slammed both his fists into his desk, making the wood splinter under the abuse. His canines were fully descended, and his claws were fully extended.

His temper when unleashed was almost uncontrollable. His eyes landed on each and every warrior in the room. A sudden chill hung on the edge of his words as he spoke. “I want to know how in the hell they got past security.”

Micah and Remi were snarling and chomping at the bit when their mates couldn’t be found either. They had checked every room in the house, but the three mates weren’t anywhere in the Den.

No one had an explanation for him. His lips thinned with anger, and his nostrils flared with fury as he left them behind and headed for the kitchen.

The mates were being tight-lipped. Not even Maverick's overpowering presence and barely checked anger would make any of them talk. He appreciated their loyalty and wanted to throttle them at the same time.

He couldn't waste time trying to make any of them talk. Three mates were out there somewhere, and he was losing precious time.

Maverick stormed out of the kitchen door and shifted, not caring in the least about his shredded clothes. His large wolf form stalked the outside perimeter for any sign of the mates.

If one of those vampires had gotten past security and taken what was his and the others he felt responsible for, the bloodiest war in recorded were-history was about to take place.

But if Cecil had snuck out again, oh, what lessons his mate was soon to learn.

He had never seen Maverick's wrath aimed at him, but if he purposely put himself and the other two in harm's way, Cecil was about to see why he was the Alpha.

Chapter Six

Murphy whimpered as Maribel tied the rope around his neck. “I warned you.” Her tone was laced with a touch of madness and a touch of glee. “You had to go and involve the shifters. Bad mistake on your part.”

Murphy didn’t have the strength to argue. He didn’t have the will to care anymore. He was bleeding out, beaten up, and just plain tired of it all.

What was the use of fighting any more when his life seemed to be a never-ending battle to just maintain his sanity? The stress had taken its toll, leaving him feeling weary and beaten.

He just couldn’t do this anymore. His body was numb, and his heart was broken. He couldn’t think of one good reason to try and fight against the crazy bitch.

It’s not like he had the strength to do so anyway. His blood loss had left him barely able to lift his arms.

He winced when the coarse rope rubbed against the torn flesh at his neck. It felt like a hot knife against his abused skin. He could feel the tears threatening to spill over at the way his life was ending, but Murphy didn’t even have the strength left in him to allow them to fall. He was just so tired.

He prayed it would end quickly and that it wasn’t too painful. Even if he had his full strength, he wasn’t strong enough to fight her off. He’d never met a woman who had the power that Maribel had. It was as if she were two men instead of one woman. He never could figure out why she was so strong. And at this moment, he really didn’t give a shit.

"Get up." She pulled at the rope like an owner forcing a dog to his feet. Murphy's eyes lolled in his head as he looked up at her. He hadn't the strength to move his pinky let alone get off of the floor. Murphy could feel his life draining away as his body grew colder.

"Fine." Maribel tossed him over her shoulder and climbed the ladder. Murphy lay limp, his arms and legs dangling, his head rocking from side to side, as she ascended to the light fixture.

He closed his eyes, wishing for one last glimpse of his dark and lovely wolf. Just one more touch, a kiss, or even a passionate word spoken to him before his lights were permanently put out would have given him comfort in his darkest hour.

"Ludo," he croaked through a dry throat as a single tear escaped. He wanted his wolf. He wanted his forever.

"No one is going to help you, mutt." Maribel jerked Murphy around and then stepped back, his feet barely touching the ladder. "This wasn't really about a book. Just so you know. I'm not stupid enough to stand here and reveal my plans. Even idiots like you get lucky. I highly doubt it, though." She laughed as she climbed down. "Good-bye, Murphy."

Maribel kicked the ladder from under his feet, giving one last glance over her shoulder before she ran from his office.

* * * *

Cecil, Drew, and Oliver tore through the woods, the vampire close on their heels. They were lucky enough to get off of the ground before the thing spotted them.

Too bad Oliver's damn chains gave them away.

Drew ran so fast that his knees were hitting his chest and his arms where pumping faster than lightening. His heart was beating out of control as his limbs felt like they were on fire. The three ran until they made it to town.

Drew was going to wrap those fucking chains around Oliver's head for this.

Cecil ran ahead, trying his best to open the bookstore, but it was locked. His head twisted around in a three-sixty, looking for something as his arms swung around wildly.

Drew spotted bricks in a circular pattern outlining a tree on the curb. He rushed over and picked one up, heaving it at the glass door. They covered their heads as the glass exploded around them, shattering and then falling down like rain as it hit the ground.

All three ran inside, heading straight to the back of the bookstore to lock themselves in Murphy's office.

"Holy fuck!" Oliver shouted as he raced across the room and righted the ladder, quickly climbing up as Cecil slammed the office door closed and locked it.

Drew ran around the desk, looking for anything sharp to use. He pulled desk drawers out, letting them hit the floor as his eyes frantically searched the contents. He bent down and snatched a large pair of scissors from the floor, running back around the desk to hand them to Oliver. "It's the only thing I could find." He said desperately as Oliver snagged them from his hand.

"Drew, Cecil, I need you to grab his legs and push him up. I want to take the pressure off of his neck," Oliver shouted down to them.

Once they secured Murphy's legs, they heaved his limp body up. The rope gained enough slack to loosen it from around Murphy's neck.

Drew could see that it wasn't enough to remove the noose from around his neck. Whoever had done this was making damn sure Murphy couldn't get out of this alive. His blood boiled as he looked at Murphy's closed eyes and parted lips.

Drew shifted his eyes to Oliver, not wanting to remember the look on the mate's face. He held on tight to Murphy as Oliver went to work.

Oliver's jaw clenched tightly as he sawed the open pair of shears back and forth with a quickness born of desperation until the rope unwound and the final strand gave.

Drew and Cecil, still holding Murphy's limp body, fell to the floor with the sudden weight.

Oliver jumped down and threw the scissors across the room as he began CPR on Murphy.

They couldn't lose him.

He was one of them now. Drew prayed that Oliver put all his effort into saving the young half-wolf's life.

* * * *

Maverick raced through the forest at breakneck speed. He didn't need to take his time to track. He knew exactly where the three had gone.

If another mate was in trouble, Cecil would be there ready to battle and help out in any way that he could. He commended his mate for the honorable way he stuck by the others, but one day it was going to cost him his life, and that was something Maverick wasn't willing to chance.

They had been together for many years now, but everyday with Cecil felt like it was their first to him, and he wasn't willing to end it so soon. He loved his mate with every single cell in his body.

Although Melonee now held a special place in his heart, no one could ever take Cecil's place.

His mate was witty, sexy, fun, and full of laughter. He was kind, compassionate, and put others before his own needs. Cecil was everything and anything a man could want in a partner, a lover, and a best friend.

The image of his mate clouded his vision, the smile that made Maverick's heart stop every time he saw it. He put on a burst of speed,

feeling his chest constricting at the thought of losing the only man that had ever made him feel like he was alive.

Maverick entered town, making his way past the rec center and getting closer to the bookstore. As he shot across the street, a howl ripped from deep within his chest at the state the front door of the shop was in.

His ears tucked back, his hackles rising as he leapt through the front door. He didn't stop there as he spotted the vampire trying to break down the door in the back of the store.

Maverick leapt onto the vampire's back, savagely tearing him to pieces. He whipped his head to the side, letting the undead fly from his jaws and then head-butted the locked door with full force.

It crashed open as he ran into the room. The three missing mates jumped back and screamed, and then Oliver went back to his CPR.

It took only a second for Maverick to take in the scene, to see what had taken place. He shifted, pushing Oliver out of the way as he began to work on Murphy with diligence.

The mate pulled in a lung full of air, thrashing around as he opened his mouth wide and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

* * * *

Ludo howled in anguish as he lunged. He didn't give two shits that it was his Alpha he was attacking. His mate was on the floor fighting to get free, and Maverick was holding him down while the mates stood by and watched it happen.

Murphy came first. His mate would always come before any living creature.

He jumped on Maverick's back, sinking his canines into soft flesh as he fought for his mate's life. His claws scratched across the Alpha's skin as he struggled to get a firm hold.

Maverick roared and then shifted, knocking Ludo's hold on him free. Ludo flew into the desk as he heard the mates screaming, but it

sounded as if it were far away as he fought the hardest battle of his life. Ludo got up, shook his head to clear it, and then stalked forward. His muzzle pulled back as he circled around Maverick, snapping his jaws viciously. He may not win this fight, but he was too lost in protecting his mate to care.

Mine!

"No!" Cecil screamed from across the room.

"It's not what it looks like," Drew cried out.

"Maverick saved him," Oliver yelled at the top of his lungs.

Some of the cloud that had enveloped his mind cleared. Ludo stared at Maverick and then at the mates before looking down at Murphy.

Ludo couldn't breathe, he couldn't take in enough air as he shifted and dropped to his knees. His chest began to spasm as a sob broke from deep inside of him at the sight of the rope around his mate's neck.

Murphy had tried to kill himself.

Ludo's hands trembled as he pulled the rope off of his mate's neck. He wailed as he pulled Murphy close to his chest, rocking back and forth as he openly wept. He didn't care about the mates in the office or the warriors that began to fill the rest of the room.

His mate had tried to take his own life.

Ludo snarled when Maverick approached him. Nobody was taking his mate away from him, not even Murphy himself.

"We need to get him back to the Den, let Nicholas look at him." Maverick spoke softly. Ludo couldn't understand how Maverick could be so caring after what he had just done.

He looked around helplessly, holding Murphy closer as he shook his head. He couldn't think. He didn't know what to do. Ludo pulled back, looking down at his beautiful and broken mate. He seemed so angelic with his eyes closed, so peaceful.

Ludo cried out, clutching Murphy against him again, tears racking his body as it shook.

His beautiful *rebenka*. He'd almost lost his beautiful baby.

"We need to get him there now." Maverick placed a hand on Ludo's shoulder, squeezing it. He nodded, wiping his face as he stood, his mate clutched tightly in his arms.

Micah and Remi had driven, the large SUV idling in front of the bookstore. Ludo climbed in the back and slid to the opposite door. He ran the tip of his fingers down his mate's face. "Why?" he whispered. "Am I not enough to love?"

Micah drove back to the Den, Ludo staring out of the window into the darkness that now encased his heart.

* * * *

Maverick returned to a house of utter madness. The warriors were shouting and running around, no mates were anywhere in sight.

"What the fuck is going on?" Maverick shouted. This night was getting better by the fucking second.

"Melonee is missing." Storm stopped to tell him. "We've secured the mates in the tunnel. George and Lewis will watch over them."

Maverick threw his head back, and his arms fell to the sides of his body, as an unearthly sound ripped from his soul.

He lashed out, knocking the hutch by the front door over and smashing the mirror that hung close by. He grabbed Cecil and Drew, running them to his office.

"Don't fucking leave this tunnel, mate, or I swear I will tie you up for the next one hundred years." He threatened.

Cecil shook his head rapidly. "I promise, Maverick, I won't." His mate grabbed him around his waist, holding him in a death grip. "I love you, Maverick."

Maverick ran a hand over Cecil's hair, lifting his face and kissing him on his lips. "I love you, too, baby."

He closed the door, engaging the lock, and took a deep breath. If anything had happened to his mate...Maverick shuddered and turned

away. Leaving his mate in the tunnels that he feared the most was the hardest thing the Alpha ever had to do.

"Now who the fuck took my princess?" Maverick shifted, joining the others in their search.

* * * *

Ludo placed his mate on the bed in the infirmary that Maverick spared no expense to create. There was also an operating room and an office for the resident doctor, Dr. Nicholas Sheehan, who was also a mate.

Nicholas's mate, Jason, had yelled, screamed, and hollered that he wasn't helping to find the little girl as long as Nicholas was in the medical room and not secured in the tunnels. "Not even the primal source of the universe will tear me away from my mate," Jason roared at Tank. "I'm truly sorry she is missing, I really am, but Nicholas comes before even my own life. As long as he is treating Murphy, I stay."

"It's okay, Jas. Everyone understands. Stay with your mate and protect him." Tank patted him on the shoulder and then closed the door behind him.

Ludo paced back and forth, worrying about brain damage that Murphy may have sustained. He didn't know how long his *rebenka* swung by his own rope before the others found him. It was a damn miracle his neck hadn't snapped, a miracle that Ludo would always be thankful for. But he feared that asphyxiation may have caused severe damage.

Why? Why would his mate do this? Was it his mental instability? Ludo wanted to hold Murphy in his arms and never let him go. It didn't matter to him if his mate was mentally ill. He would stand by his side forever and be there for him through it all.

"Ludo, I need you over here. He's becoming combative," Nicholas called over his shoulder.

Ludo ignored Jason's growl and went to his mate's side. Murphy had tears streaking down the side of his face as he stared unfocused at the ceiling. "I didn't do this." He swung his arms out wildly, crying as he fought to get everyone's hands off of him.

"Hush, *rebenka*. We'll talk later." Ludo ran his hand through Murphy's soft tendrils, feeling the tears stream down his face at the hopeless look on Murphy's face.

"No, Maribel did this. I didn't do this to myself." Murphy's voice was rising, becoming hysterical as he knocked Ludo's hands away and fought to get off of the exam table. His mate was pale and weak from the blood loss and the lack of oxygen, but he wasn't giving up his fight.

Ludo reached out and snared his mate's hands, running his thumbs across his soft skin as Nicholas injected him with a sedative.

His heart was shredding, and it felt as though his soul was dying as he watched the helpless and lost look in Murphy's eyes.

Ludo cursed fate for giving his mate this illness. Murphy was fun, humorous, and sexy as sin, and they had to go and toss in a mental illness.

He ran his fingers through the softest hair he'd ever felt as Nicholas began to work on his mate. Ludo thought of when they first met.

A henchman.

The chuckle that should have come was lost in the sea of turbulent emotions. He didn't know if he would ever laugh again.

He thought of his mate standing behind that counter with such bravery, asking to be beat down before his soaps. Ludo thought of the way his baby gave himself freely as he made sweet love to him, or the way his eyes sparkled when he smiled up at Ludo.

He lifted his shoulder as he turned his head and wiped the tears away that were free-falling from his eyes.

"I didn't, I didn't, I didn't," Murphy chanted in his loopy state.

"Hush, *rebenka*. I'm here." Ludo soothed his mate and kissed his forehead. How would their lives play out? Would Murphy need constant watch? Ludo knew that whatever it took to see to his mate's health he would make sure it was done.

"He's going to sleep for a while. Why don't you do the same?" Nicholas patted Ludo's shoulder and gave him a sad smile.

"I can't. I just...can't." Ludo stayed with Murphy, watched over him as Nicholas put him back together as best he could. No one would be able to put his mate's mind back together. That was something Ludo was going to have to learn to live with.

"With the proper medication, he can lead a fairly normal life," Nicholas informed him as he continued to work on Murphy.

Fairly normal? Ludo soaked up the words, digested them, and wanted to vomit them back out. It was so damn unfair to Murphy.

"We can talk about it later, doc."

"Sure. I'm going to stay here instead of going to the tunnel in case Murphy needs further care."

In other words, in case his mate flipped out again. Ludo turned his back on the other two in the room. He concentrated on the angelic face with the slightly parted lips, sleeping peacefully.

He gently traced his fingertips along the red and purple bruise circling around Murphy's neck. Would that be a permanent scar? Ludo swallowed a few times around the large lump lodged in his throat. The white bandages covering his mate's shoulder from the wound the vampire had inflicted reminded him of George. Would he have a constant thirst now? Crave his meat bloodier? George was that way now, having been viscerously attacked by those bloodthirsty bastards.

Ludo thanked Nicholas when the doctor scooted a chair over to him. He sat down, watching his *rebenka* finally get some peace.

* * * *

There were nine Timber wolf warriors—including Maverick—that tracked little Melonee to a farmhouse in the surrounding urban area. Each one was weary from the earlier battle, sleep deprived, and ready to take their aggression out on whoever had taken the Den's princess.

Micah had driven the SUV as the others tracked her down. Once they found the farmhouse she was being held in, they shifted back to human form, quickly and quietly grabbing their clothes from the back of the vehicle, dressing in a rush.

Micah had parked the SUV behind a clump of trees, driving the last mile in total darkness to hide the fact that they had arrived.

They crept along in complete silence until they reached the house. Hawk signaled for them to get in place, to form a tight circle around the house, preventing anyone from escaping.

All plans blew to hell when Maverick walked with a predator gait to the front door and tore it from its hinges. He stormed in, attacking with no discrimination. His claws shot out of his fingers as he took down the first fool who charged at him.

The warriors filtered into the house, checking every room as Maverick made an example to anyone else who may think of taking the princess.

There were ten men in all, all human, and all trying to hold back the warriors to keep what was not theirs. None of the warriors shifted, they took down the humans as humans, with their bare hands.

Guns fired and warriors fought as they one by one eliminated the enemy.

"Found her!" Evan shouted from a backroom.

Maverick bowled all of them over as he entered the small room and knelt by the bed, pulling little Melonee from Evan's arms and cradling her to his chest. "We need to get her to Nicholas." Maverick said as he looked down at her tiny angelic face.

He knew that being a fey, she was special. The Elvin creatures hadn't been seen for many centuries, and she was very valuable. He

had called his father and asked him for the ancient scrolls, studying them with vehemence when they arrived the following morning.

He hadn't learned much, the feys, or Elvin creatures as they are referred to, stayed to themselves, so not much was recorded. But it did mention that they had some kind of special power. Maverick was willing to bet that whatever it was, that was the reason enemies were being drawn to their small town.

Now the question was, how did she disappear in a house with window sensors and cameras?

Maverick walked back through the house and out onto the front porch. "Burn it to the ground."

The Santiago brothers nodded.

"Who took her?" Storm asked as he opened the back of the SUV for Maverick to climb in.

"I don't know, but as soon as I find out, they'll be breathing through their asshole."

"It might have helped to question them before you killed them." Storm threw his hands up when Maverick glared at him. "I'm just saying."

"They didn't deserve to take another breath." Maverick reached out and pulled the door out of Storm's hand and slammed it closed.

He ran his hands over Melonee's soft tresses as they drove back to the Den.

Once they arrived, Maverick climbed out of the backseat and took Melonee to Nicholas, making sure everything was secure before posting one of the warriors at the exam room door.

Maverick sought out his mate. He found Cecil with the others as they gathered in his office. He walked right over to his mate and pulled Cecil into his arms, just standing there holding him as he thanked whoever would listen that his mate and his princess were safe and back at home where they belonged.

"I'm sorry, but Murphy needed us," Cecil cried.

"I know." How could he punish his mate when he was only helping another out? "Tell me, that's all I ask. Let me know what's going on. You are the beat in my heart, if anything ever happened to you, baby." Maverick pulled him tighter, praying that fate would never be so cruel as to take Cecil from him for his kind heart.

"Come on, we have to see to our princess."

Cecil wiped his eyes. "Is she okay?"

"She's with Nicholas right now." Maverick stood, carrying his baby up the stairs. He walked into the exam room.

"How is she?" Cecil asked.

"No worse for the wear. I didn't find anything." Nicholas pulled Melonee up from the table and handed her over to Cecil.

"Come on, princess, time for a bedtime story." Cecil held her hand as the three walked to her room.

* * * *

Murphy lay in Ludo's arms in his bed. He ran his hand around his neck and growled inwardly when he felt the gauze that was taped over his shoulder. He was warned that he may become thirstier, but so far it hadn't happened.

He traced his fingers over the pain surrounding his neck and wanted to scream at the top of his lungs as he remembered what Maribel had tried to do to him.

Fucking bitch.

If it was the last thing he did, she would pay. It was one thing to hammer him, quite another to hang him and make everyone else think he had done it to himself.

In his backwards way of thinking, he could understand how everyone might think he had done it all on his own. Cindernightmare was good. She had set it all up to look like he had tried to hang his skinny ass from the light fixture in his office.

"Hey, *rebenka*." Ludo opened his eyes and smiled. God, the man could stop Murphy's heart with that smile. He had forgotten that fast what he was thinking about.

"How are you feeling?"

Murphy snuggled closer. "Horny and hungry. With a cock like yours, I can take care of both of them at the same time."

"*Rebenka*." Ludo moaned. "We shouldn't."

"Fine, you talk about whatever, and I'm gonna scoot down and lick the Polish boy sausage between your legs." Murphy pushed away from Ludo, tossing all his worries out of the window as he licked his lips. Damn, what a fine piece of meat his mate had. *We shouldn't*, my ass. Ludo was hard as a rock.

Murphy wasn't going to think about what had happened. He got his wolf back. The last wish he had made was now coming true. He could live in denial of the rest.

He didn't want to think about everything that happened. All Murphy wanted was to lose himself in Ludo.

He grabbed the pretty Polish boy sausage and wrapped his lips around it, eliciting a hiss from his mate.

Murphy moaned.

The pre-cum tasted heavenly on his tongue, a taste he was going to thoroughly enjoy. He normally hated giving blow jobs. Whoever his partner was at the time would push his head down toward the cock.

Like he wasn't there already. The dumbasses.

But Ludo?

He caressed Murphy's hair, his moans echoing in the room. Fuck, if that sound wasn't an ego rub.

Murphy circled his tongue around the hot shaft, lapping up any pre-cum that welled up at the tiny slit. He got to his knees, pushing the cock further down his throat. Murphy had to take a moment. He wasn't an expert at this after all. Taking a deep breath through his nose, Murphy took Ludo all the way down his throat.

“*Rebenka*,” Ludo called out as his hips swayed from side to side.

Murphy massaged and rolled Ludo’s balls in his hand, pulling up then sliding the shaft back down his throat. He pulled his cheeks in, trying his best to give his dark and lovely wolf a good head job.

“Come.” Ludo tried to pull Murphy up, but Murphy pulled back, shaking his head. He picked up the pace, bobbing his head up and down as his tongue explored the veins and silky skin in his mouth. He panicked when he felt his canines emerging. Before he could release Ludo’s cock, his canines sank in.

“Fuck!” Ludo shouted as he hitched his hips and came down Murphy’s throat. Ludo planted his hands on Murphy’s head, but it didn’t feel like the other times. Murphy welcomed it.

“Come,” Ludo growled this time.

Murphy licked Ludo clean and crawled up his mate’s body. He lay across Ludo’s chest, resting his chin on his hands. “Hi.”

Ludo chuckled as his fingers brushed back Murphy’s stray locks. “Hello, beautiful.” He ran his hands over Murphy’s hair as he stared into his eyes. Murphy leaned into Ludo’s hand. It felt so right, so why did everything have to be so wrong around him?

“I love you.” Ludo held Murphy’s chin, refusing to allow him the privilege of hiding his face at the declaration. Murphy placed his hand over Ludo’s, smiling up at him.

“Craziness and all?” He was joking, but he could see the sadness enter his mate’s eyes.

“Everything. There is nothing about you that would make me turn away from you.” Ludo smiled weakly at him, rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip. “That was a very good suck-off.”

“Well, geez, I was going for the gold, but I think I only got the silver.”

Ludo chuckled. “You got all three.”

Murphy crawled the rest of the way up, kissing Ludo with all the emotions running heavily through him.

Ludo broke the kiss and nipped his lower lip playfully. "I need to find that homeless guy and get your heart back."

"You already have." Murphy lifted as Ludo tapped at his ass with his cock. Man, he was hard again already? What a stud.

Murphy hissed when Ludo gave him a quick lube, and then he slid down Ludo's length. He hadn't been prepared. The only thing Ludo had done was lube him.

"Too much?"

"Never." Murphy shook his head as he seated himself. Ludo bent his legs and planted his feet, grabbing Murphy's hips and holding him steady as he fucked him. Murphy placed his hands on Ludo's chest, his head falling forward, moaning at the fullness and pleasure.

"*Moe serdtse, moya zhizn, moya dusha,*" Ludo whispered.

"Translate," Murphy begged as he slowly rocked up and down on Ludo's hardened cock.

"My heart, my life, my soul." Ludo ran his hands over Murphy's hips.

Murphy's head spun at the words as he reached down and grabbed his cock, the words wrapping around his heart and warming him. He stroked to Ludo's rhythm.

"So sexy," Ludo panted as he thrust up.

Murphy swiveled his hips, feeling Ludo's hard shaft pulsing in his ass. His own balls rubbed erotically over Ludo's tight abs. His mate lifted his arms up as Murphy placed his hands in them and used them for leverage as he allowed his mind to be drawn in to the beauty of their joined bodies.

He let everything else slip from his mind as Ludo rocked with him.

"I love you, baby," Ludo said as he thrust harder up into Murphy.

He pulled his hand back, grabbing his cock and finishing his masturbation over his mate's body.

Ludo hiked his hips up as his hand joined Murphy's, helping him fall over the edge as hot spurts of cum shot out of his cock, landing on Ludo's arm and chest.

Ludo grabbed Murphy's sides, slamming his ass down on his cock as he stiffened and cried out.

Murphy collapsed onto Ludo's chest. "I love you, too."

Ludo pulled Murphy close, holding him as their hearts slowly calmed. "I'll love you forever."

Chapter Seven

“Hey, Murph.” Oliver plopped down on the couch next to Murphy.

He really liked the guy. Oliver was always pleasant, humorous at times when he came into his store. He pulled his collar higher on his neck, embarrassed that everyone thought he had done this to himself.

“No need to hide it. I know you didn’t do that.” Oliver turned sideways on the couch to face him. “Drew, Cecil, and I came to your store that night to prove you really do have a stalker. Although we didn’t see her when we got there, we believe you.”

Murphy didn’t know what to say. The mates believed him? Why couldn’t he get that kind of conviction from his own mate? It was bothering him that Ludo had tried and convicted him without a jury. He was wrongly accused by everyone, including his own mate. It angered him, but Murphy was trying to keep the peace so they didn’t try to lock him away for a hanging he didn’t even commit.

Murphy cleared his throat, his fingers fidgeting around his collar. “Thanks, that means a lot to me.” And it did. He had thought they *all* asserted him crazy and were ready to wash their hands of him. It’s a pretty lonely feeling when you think you’re standing on your own.

“We’ll catch her. Then we’ll make her pay.” Oliver cracked his knuckles.

Murphy chuckled. “A hit man at such a young age. How cute.”

“Nah, I’m nonviolent, but for another mate, I’d kill a rock.”

“Thanks goodness I have no rocks out to destroy me, but I’ll let you know if the pebbles form an uprising.”

Oliver held his side as he laughed. “I like you.”

“Sorry, Ludo had first dibs.” Murphy chuckled. He was feeling better now.

“*Rebenka*, come.”

Murphy leaned over to Oliver. “I swear I’m going to buy a dog collar if he keeps that up.”

Oliver grinned widely. “I have one upstairs.”

“I just bet you do.” Murphy winked at the pierced young man before rising.

“Woof, woof.” Murphy walked out of the den and followed Ludo into the demon’s office.

“Please, have a seat.” Maverick splayed his hand over toward the leather couch.

“I think I’d rather stand when I go in front of a firing squad.” Murphy said flippantly. He was getting really tired of all the hubbub.

Ludo shook his head as he kept a few feet away. “No one is here to judge you. Nicholas thinks it best that you see a psychologist and maybe get some medicine to help you.”

Murphy took a step back, his eyes darting from Ludo to Maverick. Were they fucking serious?

“It’s going to be okay, *rebenka*.”

Murphy shook his head as he ran his hands over his hair nervously. “But I’m not crazy.” He bit his bottom lip as he lowered his eyes.

Maribel *was* real.

He wasn’t the one who had tried to maim or hang himself. Had he? Murphy looked up into his mate’s sad eyes. Ludo doubted him, doubted his sanity. It was there in his fucking eyes.

“Ludo won’t abandon you, Murphy.” Maverick tried to reassure a man that couldn’t be comforted right now.

Murphy looked over at the biker Alpha then back down at his shoes. There was no way he made all of this up. His fingers flexed at the memory of her accuracy as she swung the damn hammer. He still felt the burn around his neck.

He hadn't done that. *She had.*

Murphy glanced back up at Ludo, sweet and loving Ludo. The man that swore to love him was now trying to medicate him. Murphy's face pulled back in rage. "I'm not crazy. You saw her yourself. You saw the damn note."

Ludo shook his head slowly. "The only thing I saw was a woman coming into your store and asking for you, *rebenka*. And you told me that the note was just a reminder."

Murphy looked back down. He *did* have a stalker. Not that he wanted one, but he did have one. Had he made her up? Was Ludo even real? Maverick?

Murphy looked around the office confused. Was any of this real? Maybe he was locked up somewhere in a padded room and hallucinating all of this. He looked back down at his shoes again.

"Please don't lock me up," he whispered.

"Never, I would never leave your side or send you away. There are places that can help you, mate." Ludo spoke to him as if he were a small, lost child.

Murphy bit his bottom lip again. Had he swung the hammer that hurt his own wrist, or tied the noose around his neck that he swung from?

Was he schizophrenic? Was this even the real reality? Wait, he'd asked that already. Murphy glanced once more at the most handsome man to ever walk into his life. Too bad his mate didn't love him enough to believe him.

Murphy slid his hands into his front pockets. "I need to think."

Ludo nodded in what he probably thought was understanding. How could his mate understand the betrayal he was showing by not standing by his side and believing him? "Of course, *rebenka*."

Murphy pushed past the two men. His heart was no longer beating to his mate's smile.

It was dying.

He looked up to see the other mates playing their video games in the den. Were they real? Murphy needed air. His lungs were heavy, his breathing unsteady.

He passed through the kitchen and out of the back door. The garden would be a good place to think. Murphy really needed to get his head together. He had to figure out what was a hallucinatory reality and what was actually real.

He knelt by the garden, tears flowing freely as he bit back a sob. If he had imagined Maribel, then he quite possibly imagined that Ludo was his mate, his to have for only himself. His heart took its final beat at the knowledge that Ludo wasn't really his.

Murphy smashed his eyes closed as he wept for what he no longer had. The feeling of loss was so great that if he hadn't already gone mad, he was sure to now.

"*Rebenka*," Ludo pleaded his name. "Come to me."

Murphy shook his head. He wasn't going to turn around to that seductive and imaginary voice. The man he conjured up wasn't really behind him. None of his surroundings really surrounded him.

Murphy leaned forward and plucked a pretty purple flower from the flowerbed. He inhaled its wondrous fragrance. If he were going to wake up soon, wake up to a reality worse than hell, he wanted to enjoy his last few moments in peace.

"Go away, you aren't real." The sob finally broke. His Ludo, his love, his life, wasn't real.

"*Rebenka*, come to me." The voice that had brought him joy once begged.

Murphy stood and twisted around in anger. "Stop torturing me, go away!"

He felt the heat in his back, the searing pain that ripped through him as he stared into Ludo's beautiful black eyes. They were filled with horror as Murphy smiled sadly at him. "I love you, even if you aren't real." The words were spoken softly as he crumpled to the ground.

* * * *

Ludo was witnessing everything in slow motion. The sound of gunfire, his mate smiling at him before closing his eyes, and then the satanic sound breaking through the backyard.

He soon realized that the satanic sound was coming from him. Ludo ran the twenty feet to his mate, dropped down, and turned Murphy over.

“She’s real,” Ludo cried out in a nightmarish realization.

“Find her!” Ludo screamed at the mass of warriors piling out of the kitchen. He picked Murphy up, racing up the steps and into the operating room.

“Nicholas!” he shouted at the top of his lungs as he shot down the hallway. The mate came running, directing Ludo to lay Murphy down and to scrub up. Ludo’s heart was beating out of his chest.

The bitch was real.

Holy hell, he may as well have handed Murphy over as a gift from the way he had been acting about the whole damn situation.

Ludo hadn’t believed a word his mate said, and now he was fighting for his life. Ludo would never forgive himself for this. Hell, he’d be lucky if Murphy even wanted to breathe the same air as him.

He scrubbed to his elbows then ran into the operating room, terrified as hell. This was his mate laid out bleeding on a fucking operating table. What if he did something wrong?

“Breathe and do exactly as I tell you,” Dr. Nicholas Sheehan instructed him.

Ludo nodded numbly. “He isn’t crazy. He was telling the truth.”

“Later, we have to save him first so he can hand you your ass on a gold platter. Silver isn’t good enough.”

“Nothing will ever be good enough.”

* * * *

Oliver took off down the hallway as fast as he could.

Murphy had been shot.

They were just sitting in the den laughing. This didn't feel real. He wasn't going to lose his friend. Not after fighting so hard to save him. Oliver skidded to a halt as he entered the kitchen.

Maverick came through the kitchen door with a woman struggling in his hands. The Alpha had her hands pinned behind her back with just one of his.

Oliver felt like a tsunami of hatred had invaded his body. Seeing the one who had tried to take an innocent man's life, his friend's life, made him act on primal and raw instinct.

He shot across the kitchen, cocked his arm back, and flew into her with the hardest punch he had ever landed in his life. His entire body slammed into her as he unleashed such fury that Satan would cower at his feet.

"No." Micah grabbed him around the waist and pulled him back.

Oliver kicked, wiggled around, squirmed, and fought to free himself. He didn't care at this particular moment that it was his mate holding him. He wanted her dead.

Micah pulled at him, and Oliver used his mate's body as leverage as he swung his entire right leg up, landing the steel-toe edge right under her chin. Her body snapped back at the impact. Oliver fought to free himself so he could give to her everything she had given to Murphy. "You fucking bitch, he didn't do anything to you!"

"Get him out of here." Maverick shouted the command at Micah.

"You!" Oliver pushed his mate off of him and pointed up at Maverick with such untapped fury that he felt his entire body heat with rage. "You didn't even believe him. He tried to tell you guys, but you were more interested in locking his crazy ass away!"

"Oliver!" Micah yelled at him.

"No, mate. Hell fucking no." Oliver spun around as his finger pointed to every man in the room. "No one believed him. Not one of

you had a shadow of a doubt that maybe he was telling the truth. Well, I did!" Oliver shouted as his body shook with rage. "Murphy had no one backing him on this. Do you have any idea how that feels? Well, I do! Fuck *all* of you." Oliver yanked his arm away from Micah and ran from the kitchen. He knew exactly what it was like to give your trust to someone and then they betray you. He was living, breathing proof that the most sacred trust could be broken.

Oliver raced up the stairs and slammed the exam room doors open, he scrubbed vigorously until his skin felt as though it was going to peel away from his body.

He grabbed a gown and mask and quickly adorned them. He held his hands up in front of him as he pushed his back into the door and entered the operating room.

"What do you want me to do?"

* * * *

Murphy groaned as he slowly came back to life. His entire body felt as though he was drug over hot coals and then was spit out of an elephant's ass. What the hell happened to him? Did a shelf of books fall over onto him? It sure as shit felt like it.

"He's waking up." A voice from far, far away spoke as Murphy tried harder to clear the fog in his mind.

Murphy turned his head, only to have the pain rip through him. He cried out as his hand went to his neck. He could feel the gauze covering it. He blinked a few times until the room came into focus, and that's when everything came crashing back to his mind.

"Maribel," he sobbed.

"Hush, *rebenka*. She's been taken care of." Murphy turned to that smooth-as-whiskey voice. A voice that once held his hopes and dreams of finally having a happy life.

"You believe me?"

Ludo hung his head as his shoulders sagged. He gave a slight nod at the question. "I'm so sorry, love."

"Not as sorry as my body. It feels like the ambulance ran me over before they put me on a stretcher." He tried to laugh, but it hurt too damn bad.

"We'll leave you two alone."

Murphy looked across the room to see Oliver and Nicholas stand.

"Hey, come." He smiled at Oliver.

"I can go get that collar," the mate teased, but his eyes told Murphy that he had been crying.

Murphy held his hand out, Oliver reaching out and grabbing it. "Thank you for believing me when no one else would."

Oliver blushed and then shrugged. "We mates have to stick together against these thick-headed warriors." Oliver leaned down and whispered close to his ear, "Don't be too hard on him. She made it look so damn convincing."

Murphy squeezed his hand then released it. He didn't care how convincing Maribel made it look. A mate believed him. Why couldn't his own damn wolf have his back?

"We'll shoot some pool when you're feeling up to it," Oliver said as he walked back over to Nicholas.

"You're on." He winked at the mate who he would be forever indebted to.

Murphy stared at the door long after the two had left. He could feel Ludo staring at him, but he couldn't look into those beautiful black eyes, the gorgeous face, or hear that voice that had broken his heart.

Ludo had been convinced he was crazy without even giving him a chance. His own damn mate had been ready to drug him and send him to shock therapy. How can someone get over that?

"If it takes me the next seven hundred years, I will make this up to you." His mate spoke from somewhere beside him.

Murphy closed his eyes, swallowing a few times as he felt all the pain and anger slowly burning inside of him. "I doubt you can." Murphy wiped away the tears that started to trickle down the side of his face.

* * * *

Four months later...

Murphy laughed as he batted Oliver's hands away. "If you don't back away and stop mothering me, I'm going to get up and kick your ass, fart brain."

"Don't get snippy with me." Oliver pouted and then smiled at him. "I'll pierce your damn lip while you're asleep if you keep it up."

"Then stop being a mother hen," Murphy teased his best friend as he quickly wheeled away from Oliver before he tried to grab the handles again.

Murphy situated the chair onto the lift Maverick had installed. He sat there looking over the foyer as the lift glided up the wall, stopping at the top of the steps.

He wheeled his way to his bedroom, seeking out his dark and lovely wolf.

"Hey, *rebenka*." Ludo kissed his temple then stepped aside as Murphy maneuvered his chair into the bathroom.

"I'm ready for my bath." Murphy wiggled his eyebrows.

"Horn dog." Ludo chuckled as he set the brakes on Murphy's chair and helped him up.

"You just wait until my legs are stronger. I'll show you what a real horn dog is really like."

Ludo grinned from ear to ear. "That's my *rebenka*. The doc says you'll be walking in no time."

“And when I do, I’m chasing your henchman ass down for making me miss two months of soaps.” Murphy pulled his shirt over his head. “I told you Derek would forgive her dumb ass.”

Ludo chuckled. “Marla is such a slut.”

“And you know it.” Murphy waited as Ludo stripped him the rest of the way down. He had forgiven his mate. But it had been a long and hard road to get to the point where he let Ludo back into his heart.

His mate had fallen into a deep depression that was slowly killing him. Ludo wouldn’t eat, sleep, or patrol with the guilt that ate away at him.

The only time he did get out of bed was whenever Murphy needed help. Ludo was at his side in seconds, doing everything in his power to help Murphy.

He had been bitter toward his mate for the first two months, lashing out at him at every turn. Nobody blamed him, and Murphy didn’t give a rat’s ass if they did.

The forgiveness came when he watched a once strong and vibrant man dwindle down to a skeleton right before his eyes.

Ludo had given up and was allowing himself to slowly die.

Murphy had finally reached out to him one night, and Ludo curled up into his arms and cried the entire night. Murphy held him close and knew that he couldn’t live without his dark and lovely wolf.

He had a choice to make. He could either be bitter and resentful for the rest of his life, or find it in his heart to forgive him and finally find the happiness they both so desperately wanted.

Murphy chose to set the bitterness aside and enjoy the second chance he had been given with his mate at his side.

Murphy had realized something that night. Even if Ludo did believe him, who could have guessed Maribel was in a damn tree with a sniper rifle? And if Ludo had believed him, Murphy had no doubt that she still would have found a way to try and kill him.

The bullet had done some damage, but with the wolf DNA from Ludo coursing through him, he would be walking again soon according to the wolf physician and Nicholas.

He knew it was true. His legs were already regaining their strength. He used the chair when he wanted to wander around. They weren't quite strong enough yet to carry him through the Den.

They still hadn't figured out how someone kidnapped Melonee from under their noses and who had taken her. This untied thread had Maverick always running to check on her.

And little miss Cindernightmare? Murphy was still ticked that they hadn't killed her crazy ass. He wasn't one to promote violence, but the bitch needed to be put down. Maverick refused to tell him where she was. The Alpha said she was being taken care of. Murphy let it go. He had the love of his life to keep him smiling. He wasn't going to waste another thought on her psychotic ass.

"Come." Ludo held his hand out to Murphy.

"Smart-ass." Murphy batted his hand away. "Come." He chuckled as he grabbed his erect cock. "Because lord knows I want to."

Ludo chuckled as he ran his knuckles over Murphy's weeping cock. "Are you always this horny?"

Murphy grinned. "Nope, I have Sundays off."

* * * *

Maribel pulled at the cuffs she was shackled to. With the minuscule amount of silver laced through it, there was no way she could shift.

Murphy had ruined everything. Ruined all of her best laid plans, but she wasn't angry about that. No, she knew she would escape, gain her freedom, and make Murphy pay for being such an idiot and living.

Maribel pulled at the shackles that chained her to the wall in the catacombs of tunnels Maverick had dragged her to.

She would escape. It was only a matter of time.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Hagen loves writing about the somewhat flawed, but lovable. She also loves a hero who can see past all the rough edges to find the shining diamond of a beautiful heart.

You can find her on any given day curled up with her laptop and a cup of hot java, letting the next set of characters tell their story.

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