



Hidden Mate

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

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HIDDEN MATE

A SMALL TOWN SHIFTER ROMANCE

MYSTIC RIVER SHIFTERS



DELTA JAMES

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This book, as are all the rest, is dedicated to

My Two Best Friends:

*Renee and Chris, without whom none of
what I do would be possible and to the Girls,
who bring joy to my life every single day.*

*And to my readers who love my
characters and stories almost as much as I do!*

Leave reality behind and

Welcome to My World!

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CHAPTER 1



NORA

*L*undy Island, England
United Kingdom
Somewhere in the Mists of Time

He had been driven from his home in the Valley of the Kings thousands of years ago and was then banished by a sorcerer to a sea cave hidden in the cliffs of this godforsaken island. Located off the coast of Devon where the cold waters of the Atlantic met the Bristol Channel, there was nothing between him and the Americas. This island had once been home to a powerful witch whom he had thought to serve, but she had betrayed him. The great Apophis, the powerful dragon-shifter, was brought down by humans.

He had slept for centuries, only being awakened when the spell had been broken and he had been roused from his slumber. Those who had thought to summon him to their service had died for their efforts and now he walked among both humans and shifters with no one knowing his true name or the great power he wielded.

But all of that would be changing soon. The taste of revenge was one best served cold, and even though he could breathe fire, his heart and soul were as cold as ice.



Twenty Years Ago

Nora stared out of the car window at the grand manor house on windswept Lundy Island. She had no idea what she was doing here. She was no longer of an age when she dreamed of being adopted. Most of those not taken by the age of five would grow up in foster or group homes—not the best places, but for the most part better than the streets. The house before her was large, brick, and reminded her of those in books she had read by Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters.

“Why am I here?” she asked the taciturn social worker whose hand she had refused to hold.

“Abraham Strode is very wealthy. He’s been looking for a girl like you to adopt.”

“Is he a pedophile? A pervert?” Most children her age didn’t know of such things; every child she knew in the foster care system did.

“Good god, no. Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Then what does he want me for? We both know I’m not some precious, darling little girl. I’m a tomboy.”

“He’s been searching for a young, athletic girl who has a bright, inquisitive mind,” said the social worker, who seemed intent on getting this job over so she could go back to her warm little cubicle.

“Is that what you’re calling it now? Last time I heard, I had a devious brain with a mean-spirited soul. What gives?”

The woman turned to her. “If you must know, Mr. Strode has offered to pay us ten times the normal adoption fee...”

“And this didn’t set off any red flags for you?”

“He’s been checked out. He’s a pillar of the community, but he’s very picky. You aren’t the first girl we’ve shown him. Now be quiet.”

As she could think of nothing else to say, Nora chose to keep her own counsel and remained silent for the rest of the drive down the winding path that led to the mansion.

So, what could the old geezer be up to? Nothing good, Nora was sure.

“Don’t mess this up, Nora. The man is incredibly wealthy and well connected. He has assured the agency he has no sexual interest in the child he adopts and has guaranteed you will have the best of educations and will never want for anything. Wouldn’t you rather have a home of your own?”

“But it won’t be mine. Not really. No more than any of those foster families were mine. Do you get a bonus if he takes me?”

The sharp look and flash of guilt told Nora she’d hit the nail on the head. The social worker wanted it to work out because there was something in it for her. Never mind what might happen to Nora.

“There’s nothing wrong or illegal in this. Mr. Strode was insistent that any girls we brought to him have a high IQ, an independent nature, the capacity to learn many things, some different kind of DNA markers, and to be able to physically and mentally endure less than ideal conditions.”

“And again, that doesn’t worry you people? If this is your idea of careful screening, I’m not impressed.”

The social worker stopped the car and turned to her. “Listen to me, you little urchin, you’re lucky to be getting this spot. You’re too old to interest most potential adopters; as you pointed out, you’re not the prettiest little girl, and you have a snarky attitude and a smart mouth. This is kind of your last chance. If you blow it, you’ll be stuck in the country’s care system until you hit eighteen, and then you’ll be homeless.”

Nora turned her head away and went back to staring out the window, trying to blink back the tears. She wouldn’t let them make her cry, much less see her do so. Deep inside her mind she could see the beautiful creature she had identified as a clouded leopard and hear its low, rumbling purr as it sought to soothe her. It hadn’t taken long for Nora to realize she was different, and that not everyone had a beast that lived inside their head. Her clouded leopard had cautioned her to keep her own counsel, and she had done so.

In the distance, the manor house was getting closer. It was surrounded by lush fields with sheep on one side and horses grazing peacefully on the other. All in all, it looked a damn sight better than the tenement house she'd been living in, where she'd been forced to share one small bedroom with three other girls.

They pulled up in front of the house and a man who looked like he'd stepped out of some Edwardian period drama came down the steps to open the car door for the social worker.

"Mr. Strode is waiting for you," the man said in a posh accent as he guided them up the staircase and through the enormous double doors. "If you wouldn't mind taking a seat, Mr. Strode would like to see the young lady alone."

He turned his back and started down a corridor. Nora was intrigued by the confidence he showed—expecting the social worker to take a seat and for Nora just to follow him. Just because she wanted to see if he would notice and what he would do about it, she stopped in the middle of the hall and just stood.

It took him a few steps, but he stopped to turn and look at her. "Come on, girl, Mr. Strode is waiting for you."

"Don't call me 'girl;' I don't like it. It was a long drive out here; the least you could have done was offer both of us refreshments."

"I wouldn't take that tone with Mr. Strode if I were you, girl."

"Well then, I guess it's a good thing that you aren't me, then, isn't it, dude?"

The man's eyes narrowed. She hadn't made any friends with this one, but if she was going to be living here, she might as well set things straight with him.

"You're rather uppity, aren't you? I could tell Mr. Strode you refused to leave your caretaker, so I sent you away."

"You could," said Nora, advancing toward him, "but what would happen if he found out you lied?"

“How would he do that?”

“Simple. I’d tell him.”

The butler/majordomo/chief stooge—whatever he was—paled. So, the officious jerk was afraid of his employer. Interesting.

“What would you prefer being called, miss?”

“Nora will do.”

“Very good, Miss Nora. If you would please follow me, Mr. Strode would very much like to meet you.”

Nora fell in behind the man and was ushered into her idea of heaven—a room with a view of an expansive patio and lawns on one side and three sides of floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with books—none of them paperbacks—and one of those sliding library ladders. There was also a beautiful fireplace with an ornate mantle, an elegant screen, and a crackling fire, whose flames danced behind the ironwork. It was a marvelous, magical room that she could cheerfully spend the rest of her life in.

“Are all these books his?” Nora asked.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. Nora had been so gobsmacked by all of the beautiful leather-bound books, she’d failed to notice the man sitting in the leather wingback chair in front of the fire.

The man stood. He was impressive. Tall, dark and elegant. He was dressed in what she guessed was casual for him: flannel trousers with an elegant white shirt, with the cuffs turned back and loafers with tassels. There was something old-world and sophisticated about him.

Nora knew she should be intimidated by him, by the house, by his manservant and all the rest, but she wasn’t. She was more intrigued than anything else.

“To answer your question, yes, the books are all mine. You must be Nora Blake. I’m Abraham Strode.” The man offered her his hand and she took it, allowing him to shake hers as he

offered her a chair. "I suspect someone of your intelligence and natural curiosity has questions."

"What makes you think I'm curious?"

He smiled benignly. "You have the look of someone who is more curious than frightened."

Nora nodded. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we? Are you some kind of pervert or pedophile? The social worker said you weren't, but..."

"But you don't believe her."

"Let's just say as there is a bonus in it for her, I question her veracity. After all, I'm not anyone she cares about."

"Given what you know of the system and that obviously your social worker has shared some information she probably shouldn't have, I'll level with you. I am neither a pedophile, nor a pervert. I am, however, a man of great wealth with no living relatives. I would like to see someone take my place when I am gone. I think you could be that someone."

"What would I have to do?"

"I like you, Nora Blake. You're mature for your age and speak your mind. I think we would do well together. You have special abilities, which I doubt anyone within the system knows anything about. I could teach you how to use those skills and about the world."

"And what would I have to do?"

"Learn from me. Be my shadow and on occasion run and accomplish errands and small jobs for me. I won't lie to you; the tasks will become more dangerous as you get older, but I will endeavor to keep you safe. After all, the longer we're together, the more time and money I will have invested in you."

"Are any of these tasks illegal?"

"Some," he admitted.

"I won't have anything to do with drugs or being a hooker."

“I would never ask you to do either of those things. I stay away from both.”

“I would have access to this room?”

The man nodded. “You would have access to the entire house. It would be your home. I would expect you to do well in school and follow the rules, but I think you’d find your life here quite comfortable.”

Nora moved around the room, trailing her fingers along leather-bound spines, making her way to the French doors that led outside. She watched as the ocean crashed into the jagged coastline. Abraham Strode didn’t seem like a pedophile or a pervert, and she was fairly sure he’d been honest with her. Nora suspected whatever he had up his sleeve wasn’t usually done by a woman, so she’d be able to more easily slip in and out of wherever it was he wanted her to go.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two of the beautiful horses she’d seen earlier race along the fence line and beyond the breakers, and she was pretty sure she saw dolphins playing in the sea. Compared to any other prospective places to grow up, this one was heaven. She turned her back on the panoramic view.

Offering him her hand, she said, “You have yourself a deal.”

Nora wasn’t sure exactly what she’d just agreed to, but it had to be better than anything else on the horizon, didn’t it?

CHAPTER 2



NORA

*B*oston, Massachusetts *Present Day*

The knock on the door startled Nora. No one ever visited her but Fallon, and she'd been in London consulting in her capacity as a paleozoologist. Fallon Kent was the only true friend Nora had ever had—that was if you could define 'true friend' as not having a clue as to your true profession. Nora attributed her frequent absences to her friend as being a travel writer and blogger, and in fact Nora did have a popular blog about travel to exotic, and some not so exotic places. Checking her phone's doorbell camera app, she saw a young man in a delivery uniform. Nora opened the drawer of the entry table just to the right of her front door, withdrawing the SIG P365 and flicking off the manual safety.

The delivery man handed her the envelope before spinning on his heel and trotting down her front steps. Inside the unexpected envelope had been a picture of a man with '*Boston Commons. Today. After 4.*' Terse and to the point. It was uncommon for her to be given an assignment in the city in which she lived, but not altogether unknown. At least with the timeframe she had time to plan for both the kill and her escape. The good thing about the timing was at this time of year, it was beginning to get dark at four. In addition, Boston's notorious rush hour would have begun, and it would be easy to just disappear into the crowd.

No worrying about a vehicle or mass transit. Boston Commons was inside Beacon Hill, where Nora had a federal-style row house on a cobblestone street lit by antique lanterns. She was also well aware of the locations of the CCTV cameras that kept the city under surveillance. There were also several good locations where she could conceal herself and what she had been tasked to do.

The Master might be a monster—well, technically he was an ancient dragon-shifter, but he had held to his end of the agreement. Nora had been given a lifestyle most would envy. She'd had the finest of upbringings, the best of educations, and had a job that while she might not like, she had convinced herself was necessary and at which she excelled. No one, save the Master, knew who she was. In fact, they knew nothing at all about her, including her gender. Known only as the Ghost, she had been at the Master's right hand, dispensing justice and revenge in equal measure.

At that hour of the day, to get a clean shot, she'd need height. Gaining access to buildings anymore with a rifle, even one broken down into parts, could be tricky. She thought about long-acting poisons, but figured if she was being given little notice, it must mean the Master wanted the target dead immediately. That meant up-close and personal. She scanned the internet for happenings in Boston. Good, there was some kind of gathering or festival today that was to get underway shortly before the designated time.

Nora glanced at her watch. She had plenty of time to grab something to eat, do her job and get back home. Her stiletto would be easy enough to conceal in her everyday, nondescript clothes. All she needed to do was locate the target, get close, do the deed, and walk away.

At first, she had believed the Master's assurances that those who he sent her to kill were either a threat to them or deserved to die. Recently, more often than not, she doubted that still held true. Slowly but surely, the Master had wielded his influence on the Ruling Council and had taken control of those known as the Shadow League. They were supposed to be

the Council's enforcement arm, but these days they did the Master's bidding; only most didn't know that.

She was unsure which had been more of a shock to her: that the Master was an ancient dragon-shifter, once revered by the Egyptians and feared by Merlin or that she herself was a clouded leopard-shifter—a human-creature hybrid that could shift at will. The latter had been a relief, as her clouded leopard had begun to make its presence known within her psyche, making her fear she was crazy. The Master had assured her she was not.

“What kind of creature is it you see in your mind's eye?” he asked one day as they walked the wind-swept cliffs above the beach and jagged rocks below.

The question had caught her completely off guard but had been oddly reassuring.

“A clouded leopard,” she answered without hesitation.

“Ah, a predator. I thought that might be the case, and an interesting one at that. Do you know much about them?”

“Yes; I've made a study of them. They can purr like small, domestic cats, but cannot roar like the largest ones, like lions and tigers. They have ankle joints that allow their hind feet to rotate so they can descend trees headfirst. They are the most arboreal of all cats and can leap fifteen feet or more from branch to branch. They are their own unique genus, forming a bridge between the large predatory cats and the smaller ones.”

“Large enough to be truly lethal without being immediately intimidating. That trait will serve you well.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and your shifted form share all your traits in common...”

“What do you mean ‘shifted form?’”

The Master shook his head. “My dear girl; you have so much to learn.”

He'd been so right. Finding out that human/beast hybrids existed had been fascinating; learning she was one of them had been joyous. The Master had taught her to shift, and Nora had begun a lifelong embracing of her shifted self, trying to find time frequently to shift and run as her clouded leopard. Living in Boston, she had to drive out to one of the parks that surrounded the city after dark, but often her assignments took her to places where shifting was easier.

There was something about being encased by a swirling mist full of color, lightning, and thunder that had the power to stimulate and soothe her senses at the same time. Feeling her body shift into what she believed was her most true self was where she found solace and peace. Bounding over the ground or leaping from branch to branch in a forest filled her with a kind of joy that she had never been able to duplicate.

Getting dressed in clothes designed to go unnoticed and shoes that would allow her to run if necessary, she shoved the small, thin scabbard for her stiletto up the sleeve of her loose-knit sweater. She sheathed the weapon and pulled the sweater's sleeve back into place. Checking her look in the vintage, free-standing floor mirror, she was satisfied that the stiletto was undetectable and that no one would give her a second glance. Pulling her ski cap down on her head, she tucked up the long loose curls so they could not be seen. Smiling at her reflection, she left her row home.

One of the things she liked best about living in Beacon Hill was its proximity to good restaurants. She wandered into one of the more popular casual cafés. It wasn't a place she normally went to and was usually crowded. The perfect place to get something to eat without being noticed. Sitting toward the back in a small, two-person booth, she ordered a lobster roll, fries—even though she preferred onion rings, fries were the common side—and a Diet Coke. She ate slowly, watching the other restaurant patrons, mostly to ensure they weren't watching her.

As the crowd in the restaurant started to thin, she paid her bill and meandered outside, heading toward the commons, checking for tails as she did so. It wasn't that she really

believed she was being followed or that she had been discovered; it was force of habit, and as the Master had once told her, was a habit that could and would keep her alive and free.

She arrived at the Commons and insinuated herself into the milling throng. One of the things she liked about Boston in general and Beacon Hill in particular was that there was something always going on. There were museums, galleries, and events galore, not to mention the pubs, restaurants, and food trucks. It was truly a city that offered something for everyone.

Shortly before the appointed time, Nora began to scan the crowd, looking for the face of the man in the photo—the photo she had memorized, burned, and whose ashes she had then scattered along the street from a pocket in a large coat she'd had designed for that purpose. She could feel her clouded leopard prowling the dark corners of her mind. She, too, was on the hunt.

Nora was convinced it was her predatory instincts that had given her the edge in her profession. Often, it was her shifted self, spotting a target, a threat, a way out, that allowed her to succeed.

There he was wandering through the crowd, listening as the band struck up the music. Nora moved like a wraith through the crowd, releasing the stiletto from its sheath and allowing it to slip down to the edge of her sleeve. She watched as the man began to lose himself to the sound of the instruments being played.

The air around her seemed to crackle with excitement and sound—making everything feel as if it were coming alive. The ground beneath her feet seemed to reverberate every time the big bass drum was struck. The music seemed to be a fusion of rock and jazz. The man closed his eyes for just a moment to nod his head in time to the music, giving Nora the perfect time to strike.

She pushed the knife into his body precisely under his ribs and up into his heart. The man was dead before she'd even

extracted the knife. He gave a small gasp, and his body shuddered as it fought to retain life, but it was too late. The body slumped to the ground and Nora was well away with the stiletto concealed once again in its sheath before anyone noticed the dead man on the ground.

People began to scream and to disperse, trying to get away from the body and from whatever threat might remain. Nora allowed herself to be swept up in the ensuing chaos until she could veer off into an alley and make her way home. Once inside her home, she washed her hands thoroughly, cleaned, bleached, and sterilized the stiletto before putting it back inside the display case, tossed her clothing into the laundry, and then took a shower.

Redressing in jeans, booties, and a heavy sweater, Nora left her home and headed to TD Garden to watch her beloved Bruins play. Nora loved hockey and had since the first time she'd seen a game. In fact, when choosing a place to live and base out of, one of her criteria was a good hockey team.

The Master thought it was the violence that attracted her, but he'd been wrong. It was the power, grace, and speed with which the players skated. She couldn't make it around an ice rink in skates without hanging onto the rail the entire time. To see them fly across the ice, switch directions, send the puck flying, and yes, slam each other into the wall made the game fast paced and mesmerizing.

Before taking her seat, she stopped at the concession stand to grab a hot dog and a beer and then settled in to watch the game. She realized as she got to the bottom of the box in which her hot dog came, there was an envelope. Nora surreptitiously slipped it into her boot on the inside of her calf and cheered the team to an outstanding win of five to four. Both teams had played their hearts out and it was a last-minute score that had kept them from going into a sudden death overtime.

She finished her beer and policed her area before heading out of the stadium and making her way back home. Once inside her row house, she did a walk-through to ensure no one had made it past her security system. She turned on the gas

fireplace and sank into the oversized leather chair, sitting so her back was against one arm and her knees were bent over the other, her legs dangling.

Nora opened the envelope and took out the picture of a handsome man with angular, symmetrical, and dark features. The picture showed him in desert fatigue pants with no shirt. She had to admire the broad shoulders, sculpted pecs, and washboard abs. He had strong, muscular arms and his face seemed to indicate he regarded the world with an open, but beleaguered view. Written on the back was '*Erik Hutchinson, Mystic River, Kodiak Island, Alaska*' and a date approximately three weeks in the future.

She ignored the butterflies that suddenly took flight in her belly and made her clouded leopard purr. It didn't matter. It was just a shame that such a good-looking and well-built guy had to die. Unlike all the times before, she didn't destroy the picture. Instead, she folded it up, tucking it into her weapons bag—the one piece of luggage she never left home without.

CHAPTER 3



HUTCH

*M*ystic River, Alaska United States

God, it was cold. What had possessed him to come from the heat of the Middle East to the freezing temperatures of Alaska? True, he'd wanted a break from all he had seen, but if he wasn't careful, some of his favorite body parts were going to freeze solid and then break off.

As Erik Hutchinson, 'Hutch' to those who knew him at all, trudged down the exterior stairs from over the bakery to the bakery below, he wondered yet again what had possessed Scott Hardaway to build an apartment over his bakery that couldn't be accessed from inside the bakery itself. Dash Samuels, the owner of The Workshop, had shown far more foresight.

What he wouldn't give to be back in the warmth of the sun that beat relentlessly down every day, ensuring you were never cold. The nightmares that haunted him always started the same way, the Humvee rattling along to their next destination. The rough roads through the devastated villages made for a bumpy ride. Members of his unit had been laughing or smoking or writing notes to their sweethearts back home, notes that if the mission went sideways would never be mailed.

The rule was no dog tags, no identifying information on any note or letter, no wallet, no identification. They were a

recon unit heading into enemy territory. They either made it out with the information, or they died nameless and unrecognized, their bodies left to either lie in foreign soil or exposed to the elements to be baked in the sun and made carrion for the animals who lived there.

They were a successful unit—considered to be one of the best and most highly effective. They were upbeat for the most part, never downplaying the danger for which they'd volunteered, but believing their cause to be just. Despite the risk, they were, for the moment, content and happy. This was their last mission before heading out on an extended leave. Safe—until they weren't.

An IED exploded from beneath the Humvee, killing most of those inside instantly. Those who managed to crawl out from under the wreckage were immediately engulfed in close-quarters fighting. Hutch and Smitty had survived the initial attack but had become separated from the rest of the survivors. Hell, at that point, he wasn't sure there were any other survivors.

Hutch was peeking around the corner of a building when an insurgent burst through an open door. Hutch was able to take him down, but not before he'd managed to shoot Smitty. Grabbing Smitty by the collar, he stuffed a dirty rag in his mouth to muffle his screams and half-dragged him into another building down a different alley.

By the time he could stop long enough to look at the wound, he could see Smitty would never make it out alive. The bullet must have nicked a femoral artery and blood was flowing freely.

"I don't want to die here, Hutch. I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die," lied Hutch. There was no reason to tell the kid the truth. Even if a medic or a medivac chopper had been handy, Hutch doubted they could have saved him.

"I can't feel my legs. I thought I got hit in the leg."

"Nah, they barely scratched you. It's just a bit chilly and I probably didn't do you any good, dragging you along. You're a

tough soldier, Smitty. Most guys I know would have been crying their eyes out.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Hutch. I wanted into this unit so bad. You guys...”

“You’re one of us now...”

A brief smile flickered across Smitty’s face. “Us guys never fail.”

“And we’re not going to let that change today, right?”

“Right. Geesh; it is cold. Never known it to be so cold before.”

“You’ve never been in country at this time of year, right?”

“Right. I’m so tired. I don’t remember being tired when the Humvee blew.”

“That was hours and hours ago,” Hutch lied again. “Time gets compressed in a firefight—makes everything seem like it happened just a couple of minutes ago.” The kid was fading fast. “Why don’t you close your eyes and sleep for a while. I’ll keep watch and wake you in a bit. Then you can watch over me.”

“Yeah, I can do that. I can keep watch. Thanks for trusting me.”

“Nobody I trust more,” Hutch said soothingly as Smitty’s eyelids drifted down and he watched the kid descend into sleep and then into death.

Smitty had been one of those writing a note to his sweetheart back home. He fished the letter out of Smitty’s breast pocket and tucked it into his helmet. He might not be able to save Smitty, probably wouldn’t even be able to get his body back home, but Hutch vowed to himself he’d get the letter back to Smitty’s girl.

The sound of roaring and snarling, followed by screams wrenched his focus away from Smitty. He peeked out of the window in the rat-infested hovel in which the kid had died. It was all he could do to keep his clouded leopard in check. Those who had managed to survive were being ripped to

shreds and eaten alive by a pack of hyena-shifters. They'd been attacked by shifters!

One of the larger hyenas shifted back to his human form and picked up a satellite phone. "Tell the Council their money is safe. Those who thought to liberate it have been dealt with. The Shadow League will ensure there is no trace of those they sent."

Hutch counted the bodies that now lay, for the most part, unmoving, except when one of the hyenas tore at them. Including Smitty, the minions of the Shadow League had decimated his unit. He was the only one left to tell the tale—not just to the military, but to the growing number of shifters who it was said were mounting a resistance to the Council, in part, but most definitely against the League.

As he heard the tearing of flesh and gulping sounds of the hyenas devouring their prey, he swore he would get the information to where it would do the most good and then he was done.

He'd done his duty. He'd reported in, filed his reports—alluding only to the fact that hyenas had eaten the corpses and omitting the fact that they were shifters—done the rest of his time and mustered out. He landed in Ottawa in the dead of the night, determined to head out into the vast wilderness. Hutch waited at baggage claim and grabbed his duffle from the carousel and then headed out to catch a shuttle to one of the hotels close by where he could figure out how best to get to his destination.

He was just pushing through the revolving door out to catch a shuttle or a cab when a voice from the back and to the side addressed him. "I wouldn't think running off to lick your wounds when there was a war coming would be your style."

Hutch whirled around to find himself face-to-face with a long, leanly muscled shifter of some sort. "Given that I don't know you, I find it hard to give a damn what you think."

"Colby Reynolds. I'm the alpha at Windsong up on Kodiak Island." His face must have registered recognition. "I see

you've heard of me. I would like to speak with you about a mutual nemesis."

"I know who you are, Reynolds. I'm not interested. I'm heading out into the wilderness. I want no part of you or the fight you and your friends have picked with the Shadow League. You do know it's a little like David and Goliath, right?"

"But do you remember who won that battle? It wasn't Goliath."

"I don't care. I've had my fill of war and of watching young men die. I want to be left alone."

"I would have thought you'd welcome a chance to make those who slaughtered your unit pay for what they did."

Hutch froze. He could feel rage surging through his veins, forcing him back to life when all he wanted was to hide away and forget the pain.

"You don't know me..."

"But I do. It is men like you who will help us defeat the League. Besides, there is safety in numbers. The League knows who you are and more importantly knows that you know who they are. They can't afford to allow you to live. That driver that almost hit you outside the general's office? That was no accident, and he works for them."

"You can't know that..."

"Can't I? I have the best intelligence network in the world. The League is coming for you. If you won't join the resistance in putting a stop to those bastards, then at least don't put yourself at greater risk."

Suspicious, Hutch asked, "Why do you care?"

"Because your friend Smitty was a member of my clowder and that last letter from him meant the world to his fiancée. She will treasure it always. At least come back with me to Mystic River. Let me make my case. If I can't convince you to at least come and stay in Mystic River, I will take you wherever you want to go. I have a helicopter and a hotshot

pilot. She can get you into places so remote not even you will know where you are.”

As Hutch stood there contemplating both the offer and the man, he saw a single red laser light cut through the darkness, first settling on him and then switching to Reynolds. Hutch launched himself at Colby with a predatory grace.

“Shooter,” he yelled, grabbing the lapels of Reynold’s cashmere overcoat and throwing them both to the ground.

He hit Reynolds with his entire body weight, tackling and throwing him to the ground as all around them the night was shattered by the sound of automatic gunfire. Hutch gritted his teeth and snarled as his body hit the concrete sidewalk and rolled himself and Reynolds behind one of the pillars. There were few people milling around at this time of night, but those who were starting to panic.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hutch saw a large SUV barreling toward them. Reynolds grabbed him. “Mine,” he said tersely, jumping to his feet and dragging Hutch into the vehicle with him as someone from the passenger side jumped out, slammed the door, and leapt back inside to the relative safety of the vehicle as it sped off into the night. “Thank you. I was just about to knock you down, until I saw the dot move to me.”

Hutch nodded. “I think I was the target, but when they realized it was you, they decided it was better to take you out.”

Reynolds grinned. “Well, if nothing else, I got you into my SUV and we’re headed to a private airport north of the city. From there, I’d like you to accompany me to Mystic River. I think that little incident should prove to you that you are not yet out of the Shadow League’s crosshairs.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you are free to go. I will be happy to take you wherever it is you want to be. I don’t much like your chances for survival, but if it is death you are seeking, I suppose that is your right to choose.”

‘I don’t want to die.’ It was one of the last things Smitty had said to him. Smitty hadn’t wanted to die, but he joined the

military before the fight broke out with the Shadow League. He'd been clear with Hutch that he would muster out as soon as he could and return home to Windsong to take up arms against the League. *'I don't want to die.'*

"I don't know how much help I can or want to be. To be perfectly honest, I've seen and done too much. I've taken too many lives and seen too much blood."

"I think you have more to offer the resistance than just your physical capabilities. I've heard more than one tale of operations you've planned and pulled off with no casualties on your side."

"I blew that winning streak wide open when Smitty and my whole unit was killed."

"Not just killed—slaughtered. Slaughtered and butchered. You were betrayed. Someone told the Shadow League where you were. Two of the men in your unit had ties to the resistance. The League had to know we would try to enlist you. The attack on your men was specific and targeted. They wanted to murder your people—two of whom were with us—but I also think they were after you. You'd be a huge boon to the resistance. We could use you, if nothing else, as a strategist."

"I don't know," said Hutch, shaking his head.

"I'm not asking you to make a decision. Just come back with me to Mystic River. Give yourself some time and space to think and decide what you want to do. What were you planning to do with the rest of your life?"

Hutch leaned back against the comfortable leather seat and chuckled. "You might find this a bit incongruous, but more than once I've thought about opening a bakery. Not anything fancy, but just an artisan bread bakery, offering cookies, scones, muffins, simple cakes, and pies. I can't decorate to save my life, but I find baking relaxing."

"I may just have the opportunity for you. Mystic River used to have a great bakery like that, only Scott also made wedding cakes and the like. He ran afoul of the Shadow

League early on and before the resistance really came into its own. In order to keep his mate and the town safe, they took off and are on the run. We're hoping we can find them and convince them to come home. But given that Otter Cove has nothing like the Northern Lights Bakery, I'm thinking there's room for both of you."

"Or if he likes to do all the fancy and catering stuff, it might be advantageous for both of us to form a partnership."

Colby grinned. "You might be on to something. So, you'll at least accompany me back to Mystic River and think about it?"

Hutch thought for a moment and then slowly nodded. "That sounds like the right thing to do, but I'm not promising anything to do with the resistance."

"Understood."

Six weeks later, the last of his supplies and equipment had been delivered and the installation and renovations he'd wanted done were almost complete. Scott's brother had a power of attorney in his possession, and Hutch was able to buy the building and the business. Scott had turned the upstairs into a basic apartment, but Hutch realized after being in the military for more than two decades, he wanted something a little more luxurious.

Dash, who owned the town's tavern, and Trudy, who owned the B&B, had both been quick to strike deals with Hutch to supply their establishments with breads, muffins, and scones. He'd also landed contracts with Windsong and several of the other major estates. Now to get the architect's design for an interior stairway.

He was still undecided about whether or not to join the resistance, but as he began to settle into the community and began to care about the people, he felt the call to duty that had drawn him to the military in the first place.

Had there ever really been a choice?

CHAPTER 4



NORA

Getting to Mystic River was a major pain in the ass. She couldn't just hop on a direct flight from Boston. It was almost fifteen hours from Boston to Kodiak with two stops. And once she got to Kodiak, she then had to take either a small, private plane or some kind of boat to get to Mystic River. And it was bloody cold in Alaska. It might not be that much colder than Boston, but she very much doubted Mystic River had the kind of amenities she was used to.

She wondered what the guy had done for the Master to want him dead that badly—it was a large chunk of her time as it wasn't just a simple fly in, acquire the target, put him down, and get out. It required considerably more exposure for her than normal. This was the kind of hit the Master normally assigned to the foot soldier types. The logistics of getting to and from Mystic River with no one realizing she was the assassin made it far more time-consuming.

From what she could see in the file, the guy had little significance. Sure, he was former military, but he didn't strike Nora as much of a threat. He wasn't a major player—more of a footnote. It just didn't add up.

At the layover in Seattle, Nora used one of her aliases to rent one of their private workspace booths—sort of an improvement on the old telephone booth—larger and pretty much soundproof.

Using her virtually untraceable satellite phone, she called the Master.

“Nora,” he said, sounding pleased to hear her. “To what do I owe this treat? Is there something amiss?”

Nora had learned long ago that the Master was only pleased if she was doing exactly what he wanted, had performed her last job perfectly, and when she curbed her natural curiosity and didn't ask questions.

“I don't know, Master. I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing here in Seattle heading to some godforsaken place in Alaska. The guy seems to be beneath my pay grade, and it's going to cost a lot of time and money to take him out. Why not just send two foot soldiers, let one kill him, have the other one kill the shooter and get out?”

“Are you questioning my authority?” he asked. She could hear his annoyance rearing its ugly head. She'd learned early on that she did not want the Master to be annoyed with her. He had some creative and nasty ideas regarding discipline, including putting a bullet in the brain of a subordinate who dared to ask questions he didn't want to answer.

“Not at all. You taught me to look at things from a big picture point of view and that's what I'm doing. This is not the kind of mook you generally ask me to take care of. There doesn't seem to be a real need for finesse. And why wait until he got to Mystic River from the Middle East?”

There was a soft chuckle. “It seems I have taught you well—perhaps too well, but I can see why you would ask. Your assumption that the man is more than he would appear to be on paper is correct. I can assure you he needs to die. Unfortunately, you are right in that normally I wouldn't risk exposing your position for something like this, but the sad truth is I tried sending those with lesser skills to deal with him, and all three failed.”

“Three? You tried more than once?” This was shocking. The Master wasn't big on second chances. “So, three different assassins?”

“Yes. The first was a pack of hyenas that blew the Humvee in which he was traveling, but then instead of ensuring they'd taken out their target, they went savage and ripped apart his

entire unit, save him. Then, when he was back at one of the military bases, I had someone try to do a hit-and-run, only they missed. The last one was when he landed in Ottawa. That fool took it upon himself to change the target.”

“Change the target?” Nora was gobsmacked. She was the Master’s heir apparent, and he’d raised her. She was the closest thing he had to family, and she would never dare to pivot to another target. “Who did he try for?”

“Colby Reynolds.”

Colby Reynolds. She let that sink in. Reynolds had become a major thorn in the Master’s side. She could almost understand why the assassin had tried for him. If he’d managed to take Reynolds out, the resistance would have been dealt an enormous blow, one from which they might not recover.

“I take it Reynolds still lives?” If he didn’t, the Master would have been elated and singing the assassin’s praises.

“He does, and now Hutchinson is with him in Mystic River.”

“Do you think he’ll join them?”

“That is my concern. I don’t want Hutchinson entering the fray.”

“Why not?”

“That is not your concern,” admonished the Master.

“If I’m going to put myself at undue risk to try and remedy what three others have failed in doing, I damn sure want to know why. This guy has got to be on high alert, as does Colby Reynolds, who you say has taken him into the fold, so to speak. I’m not just going to be able to go in there, kill the guy, and get out.”

“Why not?”

“Have you researched Mystic River at all? It’s a close-knit community. Its people look out for one another, and strangers are noticed and challenged. It might be a very polite challenge, but it isn’t like in Seattle where I could go in, take him out,

and fade into the crowd. In case you missed it, there is no crowd.”

“You’ve dealt with targets in remote places before.”

“Not like Mystic River. I had to come up with a cover story to be there so that I could stalk my prey and ensure he died, but now because of someone else’s—and more than one someone else’s—screw-ups, both the target and those protecting him are going to be on the lookout. I don’t think my cover is going to hold up. I’m going to need to do an unplanned layover in Kodiak and come up with a deeper cover that will bear some pretty intense scrutiny. I want triple my normal fee.”

“How dare you...” the Master sputtered.

“How dare I? You’re the one who sent idiots to take out this Hutchinson and put everybody and his brother on alert. I’m also going to expect you to pick up the additional expenses I’m going to have to incur.”

“I could make you my next target,” snarled the Master.

“You could, but you won’t.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You have way too much money invested in me to take me out just for doing what you taught me to do and renegotiating the payment for a deal when the terms have changed. But more importantly, you and I both know that the chances of you finding someone who could actually accomplish killing me are slim to none. And, if I ever believe you have turned on me, I will come for you, and I will not miss. Don’t forget I know who and what you are, and I know how to end you. That’s not to say a part of me wouldn’t miss you, but if the choice is your life or mine? I choose mine.”



Nora spent the next few days in a surprisingly nice hotel in Kodiak. She would have preferred an intimate B&B or a boutique hotel, but as she was on a job, she wanted to ensure

no one would really notice her comings or goings. She spent most of her time in her room, shoring up her cover story of being a romance writer, trying to break her writer's block and find inspiration for her new pen name for a series of romance novels set in the wilds of Alaska. This allowed her to spend inordinate amounts of time alone and to ask all kinds of questions about Alaska in general and Kodiak in particular.

Once she was sure she had all her bases covered and that her story would stand up to the kind of scrutiny Reynolds could bring to bear, she made arrangements to be ferried up by airboat to Mystic River and to stay at the only lodging available year-round, a B&B known as The Refuge.

Ahh, if only that were possible. Lately Nora had begun to think not only about her future, but about her past—the things she had done, the people she had killed. There had been a time she'd been a true believer and felt proud to be the one person the Master trusted with his secrets. She'd thought him a noble and persecuted individual, but as she'd grown up, she'd taken her rose-colored glasses off and seen him for what he truly was—a power-hungry dragon bent on shaping the world to his will and seeking revenge on the descendants who had done him wrong thousands of years ago. It was sad and she had pity for all he had endured, but she had come to believe that it didn't justify all the blood that had been shed.

It didn't surprise her that the sheriff, Jax Miller, offered her his hand and greeted her as she stepped off the boat, any more than his taking her bags for her.

“Ms. Brady?” He addressed her by the name she was using—the one she would discard once she killed the target. “I'm Sheriff Miller. I understand you're going to be spending a few days in Mystic River. Trudy had to stop at the Northern Lights Bakery and will be right along to pick you up and take you to the B&B.”

“Perhaps I should just join her. I'm kind of hungry. Do they have coffee as well?”

Jax Miller laughed, showing even, white teeth. “Ms. Brady, this is Mystic River. I don't think there's any place that

doesn't have coffee. Joey," he said to the man who'd brought her up on the boat, "why don't you take Ms. Brady's bags up to Trudy's?"

"Will they be safe out on the porch?" Nora asked.

Again, the sheriff laughed. "You don't know much about small town Alaska, do you? He won't leave them on the porch. The cold might damage something. He'll put them inside the unlocked front door. Now, come along, and I'll walk you up to the bakery. At least you have sensible footwear. Never ceases to amaze me how many people come up here with shoes that wouldn't last an hour."

She gave her best smile as she took his proffered arm and allowed him to lead her up from the river. "I live in Vermont," Nora said alluding to the cover story she'd put in place. "I've seen more than my fair share of harsh winters, but this," she said, indicating the landscape, "this is gorgeous. I'm so glad I came to see for myself. Pictures really don't do it justice."

"It truly is. Once you leave and come back, you find yourself wondering how you ever thought you wanted to be anywhere else." He lowered his voice. "By the way, you're safe here. Mystic River and our sister town on the mainland, Otter Cove, house shifters of all kinds, shapes and sizes. We live in peace and harmony with each other. I thought you might like to know that in case you wanted to shift and take a run or something."

"Thank you, Sheriff. I had no idea about the makeup of Mystic River and Otter Cove. It must be wonderful to be able to be your truest self without worry."

"It is until it's a couple of young male bears with too much to drink looking to have a go at each other."

Nora laughed—genuinely. She tried to remember the last time she had done so and couldn't. She found herself warming to the sheriff and hoped she wouldn't have to harm him or anyone close to him before this was all over.

"Here you go," he said, leading her up onto the wide front porch of a charming storefront.

“Is it as old as it looks?” she asked. Nora loved old and vintage things. History was a hobby of hers.

“Pretty much everything in Mystic River is older than it looks. This community has always prided itself on preserving the past and improving upon it, not just tearing it down and putting up something shiny and new.”

He opened the door and ushered her in. A small, buxom woman turned and smiled. “You must be Ms. Brady. I’m Trudy Edwards. I own The Refuge. I’m sorry I didn’t meet your boat.”

Nora stood transfixed by the man behind the counter in the white apron. He was gorgeous. His picture did not do him justice. Every synapse in her body went on high alert. Her body was on fire, and her blood was singing through her veins.

“Are you all right, Ms. Brady?” asked Hutchinson, coming around the counter.

No, she mustn’t think of him as Erik Hutchinson. He was the target. Target. Target.

Her system was overwhelmed as arousal and heat flashed through it. All she could think about was what it would be like to feel him pull her beneath him, take her nape in a claiming bite and... then what? The erotic images were replaced by those of his cold, dead corpse lying on a table in the morgue with a bullet hole between his eyes.

One thing was clear as she stood and stared. Erik Hutchinson was her target, but he was also her mate—her fated mate. This could not be happening to her. She didn’t believe in such things. Yet there he stood, and she knew with a certainty she had never known before that her target—her fucking target—was her fated mate.

Now what the fuck was she supposed to do?

CHAPTER 5



HUTCH

*R*epressing the urge to push the sheriff away from her, Hutch put his arm around her, supporting her as her knees began to give way.

“I’ve got you,” he purred. “Let’s get you over here to this chair, and you can have a seat. Have you had anything to eat?”

“That I don’t know, but she asked about coffee,” supplied Jax.

“We should get her up to the B&B and call Doc,” said Trudy.

“No. No, I’ll be fine. Please don’t fuss.”

He wanted to tell her that it was his job as her fated mate to fuss over her, but he had the distinct impression—based on nothing—that she wouldn’t receive that information with a great deal of joy. But he did. Fated mates weren’t common in clouded leopards. More so than any other shifter, their kind did not form strong, familial bonds.

Instead of telling her any of that, he said, “Let me get you some coffee. How do you take it?”

She smiled. “Heavy contrast—I like it strong and dark, but then want to add a good dose of cream and sugar.”

Hutch grinned. “You’re going to fit right in up here in Mystic River. I’m pretty sure most everyone takes it that way.” Hutch turned to get her a mug of the dark magic potion and then added an orange/cranberry scone. She didn’t seem like a

croissant or muffin kind of girl and sweet with a hint of tart seemed right for her. “Here you go. Careful, the coffee is hot.”

He knew he was fawning over her and looked up to see Jax had noticed and was grinning from ear-to-ear. Everyone said the big gruff Kodiak shifter had changed since he’d found his fated mate. He was still fairly intimidating until you saw him deal with his mate, Autumn. Autumn had no fear of him or anyone else. Trudy, thank god, hadn’t noticed.

Holding his breath, Hutch watched her take a bite of the scone, and exhaled as she smiled, and her delicate tongue came out to lick the crumbs from her fingers.

“Oh my god. This is delicious. I don’t think I’ve ever had anything that tasted this good.”

Trudy smiled. “Hutch is a marvel. He supplies all my baked goods at the B&B. I walked down here. I’d planned to have time to go get my SUV...”

“Not to worry, Trudy. You can stay until Ms. Brady is feeling better and I’ll give you both a ride, or you can head back up to the B&B, and I’ll bring Ms. Brady...”

“Naomi. Please call me Naomi. Everyone is being so nice. Calling me by my last name seems out-of-place.”

Hutch nodded. “I’ll bring Naomi up when she’s feeling a little better. You were pretty pale there for a minute, but your color seems to be coming back.”

“I should say it’s the coffee—which by the way is delicious and perfect—but honestly, I think it’s this scone. I can’t remember ever taking a bite of anything that tasted so amazing.”

“Well, then, I’ll skedaddle back up to The Refuge. I’ll take your bags up to your room.”

“Come on, Trudy, I’ll walk you over to the office and take you back. I don’t think Hamish would want you out in the cold.” Jax tipped his baseball cap to Nora. “Naomi. Welcome to Mystic River. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

She gave them all a bright smile. “I think I will.”

After they left, Hutch kneaded the last loaves of bread to put in the proofer, while putting the second to the last batch in to bake.

“We have a window of opportunity,” he said as he turned back to her to find her resting her elbow on the small bistro table. Her chin was atop her fist, and she was blatantly staring at him. Her inscrutable stare seemed to disarm him. “I can either take you up to Trudy’s right now, or it’ll be an hour before I can.”

“I probably should go now. I don’t want to be in the way.”

“You aren’t.” He smiled sheepishly. “Well. That’s not true, you are a most enticing distraction, but I don’t mind.”

“The journey up the river was long and cold...”

“I’ll call Trudy and tell her to start a nice, hot bath for you. By the time we get there, once you get checked in, it’ll probably be ready for you.”

He placed the call and then brought his Jeep around. He helped her down the stairs and into the vehicle, not so much because she needed it, but because it gave him a chance to put his arm around her. Reluctantly he turned her over to Trudy’s care, wondering what excuse he might need to see her again.

“Hutch?” she asked from the porch, standing next to Trudy.

“Yes?”

“I really hate to eat alone. Any chance you’d meet me for dinner?”

“I’d like that a great deal. The best place is The Workshop. Best burgers in the world, but they have other things as well.”

“Burgers are fine. What time?”

“Say five?”

“Hutch turns back into a pumpkin at midnight,” teased Trudy.

“It’s a date,” called Hutch as he walked out the door.

It's a date? God, how lame could he be? Well, it must not have mattered, as she'd said yes.

That she was his fated mate could not be disputed as far as he was concerned. From the moment she'd placed her foot on the first step of his shop, he'd felt her presence. The bonding link was not established, but Hutch was certain it would flow strongly between them.

Despite his certainty of her status as his fated mate, every instinct he had honed on the battlefield was jangling jarringly and loudly. Danger! Danger! Danger! His heart and soul wanted to reject the warning—but his brain and experience told him that doing so would be a far bigger risk than he should take.

Regardless, he found himself whistling as he jogged back up the steps and into the bakery. He found himself looking forward to picking up Naomi.

Naomi. It was a pretty name, but it seemed off somehow. Shoving aside his concerns about her, he finished his baking and work in the bakery itself and took a fair amount of teasing about the pretty newcomer.

Life in a small town. He knew that kind of thing bugged a lot of people, but Hutch had found a certain comfort in it. Closing early, he cursed Scott Hardaway again for not having an interior stairway from the bakery to the apartment upstairs. However, once he was inside, he had to smile. The place was really coming together. He'd been lucky in that the basic layout and the finishes Scott had utilized were close to his own aesthetic, but he'd been bringing in his own pieces and had upgraded and enhanced the main bath and bedroom and added a powder room for visiting guests.

Once he was showered, he pulled on a pair of black Levi's, a deep aubergine sweater, and a pair of cowboy boots. He knew they weren't as practical as snow or hiking boots, but he loved them. He jogged back down the stairs, fired up the Jeep, and went to pick up Naomi.

She came out the front door as soon as he pulled up. To say she took his breath away would be an understatement. He

literally had to remind himself to breathe. She had on a long, charcoal gray, full knit skirt, with a black V-neck sweater belted in with a black belt with a silver buckle. Her black boots were not unlike his riding boots—but for English not Western.

Hutch got out of the Jeep and met her halfway down the steps. He was smitten. He had no doubt about it. But still the alarms inside his head blared their warning. He chose to ignore them as he helped her into the Jeep and had to keep himself from allowing his hand to drift down and cup the curve of her ass as he did so.

“You look beautiful,” he said, getting in on the other side.

“Thank you. So do you.”

“I should warn you; Mystic River is a small town and a close-knit community. We may have to endure some teasing.”

She laid her hand on his as it rested on the gear shift. “I’m willing to risk it if you are.”

Was she kidding? He was willing to risk life and limb just to see her smile. Enduring whatever taunts his friends wanted to throw his way was a small price to pay for the pleasure of her company. The catcalls were immediate as they entered The Workshop, but they were also brief, kind, and funny. He was glad to see that they didn’t rattle Naomi in the least.

They ate burgers and drank beer, sharing what had brought each of them to Mystic River.

“I’d just seen too much bloodshed and no longer believed in the cause. It’s two steps forward and one step back over there, and honestly, I think the majority of the people don’t want us there.” He shook his head. “Sorry. My last mission was a disaster. But let’s not talk about that. What about you?”

“I studied history in school and considered becoming a teacher, but student teaching taught me I didn’t want that.” They both laughed. “So, I started working in an art museum and writing romance novels on the side. Oddly though, they weren’t from the period of history in which I’d specialized—the Roman invasion and occupation of Great Britain.”

“What then, Tudor history?”

“Not even close,” she laughed. “Vikings.”

“Wow. So, what brings you up to Alaska?”

“I started a new pen name. I want to write contemporary romance and I want to set a whole series up here in Alaska with bush pilots as the main characters. A family of brothers.”

“No paranormal?” he teased.

“Hell, no. Too close to home. I think I wanted to come up here because I’d heard about this place and Otter Cove. I wondered what it would be like to live among other shifters and be able to be open about who you are.”

Hutch nodded. “I completely understand. There’s a freedom and peace that comes with being transparent about who you are. If someone sees you in your shifted form, it’s not a big deal. You want to go for a run as a wolf, nobody cares. I came originally planning just to spend a week or two. Then I bought the bakery, so now I’m tied here.”

“That’s the nice thing about writing,” she said. “As long as I have internet, I can do it from practically anywhere.”

They finished their food and drink and left The Workshop. Hutch escorted her to the Jeep, and then joined her inside. The trip back to The Refuge was far too short in Hutch’s opinion. Back at Trudy’s, Hutch made it around to open her door before she could get out.

He walked her to the door. “Why is it I feel like a high schooler bringing the prettiest girl at school home from the dance? I almost expect your father to come out with a shotgun and drive me off.”

“Never happen. My parents died when I was young, and the man who raised me had some strange ideas about my social life as a kid. But I can’t complain. I grew up in a beautiful mansion and was given a first-class education.”

“Good, then there won’t be anybody to object to this.”

He brought his head down, pressing his lips to hers and tracing the seam of her mouth with his tongue. The kiss was

long, slow, and luxurious. His cock was straining against his fly. It wasn't that the warning bells had quieted; they hadn't, he just didn't care. And his dick could damn well wait. Naomi was special, and he was going to treat her that way.

Their tongues tangled and danced as heat and arousal surged through his system. He dragged his mouth from hers and nuzzled her neck, whispering kisses along her jawline before nibbling her throat. Naomi sighed, and he felt the tension flow out of her body as it melted into his.

CHAPTER 6



NORA

Nora felt oddly detached as his hands came up to frame her face and he lowered his head to kiss her. She'd been kissed before, although she didn't much care for it. It often felt awkward and pointless but not this one. From the moment his lips met hers, her entire body lit up with arousal—not like fireworks, but more like an ember catching in a pyre of logs and gaining in intensity and passion. It wasn't some out-of-control wildfire but the kind of fire that warms your soul.

She never should have agreed to have dinner with him. Never. She should have followed her plan, remained aloof and in her room, carefully stalked him and then when no one could attribute his death to her, performed her job and killed him. But from the moment she entered his bakery, all her plans had gone awry.

As he kissed her, her hands drifted up to his shoulders to steady herself. For some reason, the man made her go weak in the knees. Literally. She told herself the only reason she wasn't trying to maneuver her body so that she could get to her stiletto and do her job was that they were standing on the porch of The Refuge—too exposed, too many witnesses, no way to get away cleanly. But as it was, she knew none of that was the reason she didn't end his life.

The simple truth was she didn't want to. He made her inner clouded leopard purr in a way it never had before. Instead of wanting to be free and run in the wilderness, she wanted to find a warm, cozy fire and just curl up and rest.

Never before had she allowed herself the luxury of even *wanting* to rest, much less to actually do so.

Hutch pulled them back into the shadows, deepening the kiss and making her yearn for more. Not more in just terms of the kiss, but more in terms of so much else. It was as if the kiss opened up a portal that allowed her a glimpse into what could be—into a life she'd never dreamed she could have.

They were hidden now. She could easily slip the stiletto from its holder up her sleeve and dispatch him. Follow orders, or the Master would be displeased.

Displeased? Internally, she snorted. Displeased wouldn't begin to cover it. Nora knew she needed to end this here; now. The target was going to die. If she didn't do it, the Master would send someone else to kill them both. Was she willing to die in order to protect Hutch? More importantly, was she willing to kill the Master to do so? Nora was certain the only way to put an end to the threat on Hutch's life was to kill the man who had ordered his death—the man who had given her everything.

It would be easy now to complete her mission. It would be an easy, clean death for him. He would know little to no pain and might not even realize he was dying, or more importantly, that she had killed him. That would be a good way to go, wouldn't it?

Hutch lifted his head, sliding his hands down from her face, along the tops of her shoulders, sweeping down to her upper arms, where his fingers wrapped around them.

“Where did you go?” he asked softly, his eyes searching her face. “You were right there with me, and then I felt you pull away.”

“I don't...” Instead of finishing, she shook her head, turned, and walked away.

There was no way for him to know the emotional toll that simple kiss had taken on her. No way for him to know the churning mass of heretofore unknown emotions now roiling in her gut. She was not supposed to feel this way. She was the

Ghost—she was given a target, she executed them, and then she faded away until her skills were needed again.

Nora had needed to get away from Hutch. She couldn't risk being alone with him, although she wasn't sure what she was risking. She wanted to stroll along Main Street, looking at the quaint storefronts and imagining the lives of those who owned them and worked there—but that couldn't be, could it? What she wanted was to rush back to Hutch's arms and tell him everything, but that would most likely end up with him rejecting her, and she wasn't sure she could survive that.

Remembering what the sheriff had said about a park with a gazebo with a place to store your clothes, Nora made her way to the park that ran alongside the river. The town was small and easy to navigate. What wasn't inside the town proper had signs pointing to things someone might want to explore. One of those signs pointed her to 'Riverside Park.' Turning on one of the large space heaters that had a timer that would turn off automatically, she undressed, folded her clothing and put it in one of the storage containers.

Calling forth her clouded leopard, she embraced the swirling maelstrom of color, thunder, and lightning. As the chaotic mists settled, her clouded leopard was revealed. She stretched her front paws out in front of her in a kind of 'downward dog' position before pulling up to stretch her back and hind legs. Giving herself a good shake, Nora bounded out of the pavilion onto the frosted landscape. It wasn't that there was heavy snow on the ground; it looked as if someone had sprinkled a heavy dose of powdered sugar everywhere.

Nora galloped along the riverside, enjoying the freedom she felt when she was in her shifted form. There were times she thought of shifting, disappearing into the wilderness, and never coming out again. What prevented her from doing that was the certain knowledge that the Master would hunt her down and kill her.

She and her mentor had an odd relationship. There was an affection there, but one which dictated mutual destruction if they turned on or abandoned one another. Nora knew if she were ever to be free, the Master would have to die and most

likely at her instigation. She wasn't ready yet to have his blood on her hands.

Spotting a copse of trees, Nora charged up a tree until she was hidden by its boughs. Her shifted self was delighted, leaping between the branches of different trees. She knew she needed to get back to The Refuge. The people of Mystic River might know she was a shifter, but they didn't know what kind and she meant to keep it that way. Repositioning herself, she ran headfirst down the tree, the clouded leopard's ability to rotate its hind feet allowing her to do so.

Nora neared the bottom of the tree and then launched herself to the ground, making her way across the icy ground back to the pavilion, where she made short work of shifting and getting back into her clothes. Trudy's B&B wasn't far, and she made it there in good time, letting herself in and heading to her room. Once there, she undressed, took a quick shower, and crawled into bed. The run had done her some good physically, but her mind and emotions were still in turmoil.

What the hell was she going to do about the target? The more she thought about it, the more it turned her stomach, but did she have a choice? Had she ever had one?



The following morning, she was awakened by her cell phone ringing. The caller on the other end did not register on her caller ID and did not wait for the customary pleasantries, but then, those in the Shadow League rarely did.

“Is it done?” the male voice asked.

“Not yet.”

“Why not? You were ordered to kill him.”

If the shifter world was primarily male dominant, the Shadow League was even worse. As far as she knew, not one woman played a significant role in their ranks. She rather imagined they didn't like that she was female, but they didn't have a choice.

“I know my assignment. I would point out if you and your brethren hadn’t fucked it up three times, my skills wouldn’t have been necessary. As it is, the target and his friends are on high alert. If I am to survive to be of further service to the Master, I will need time to prepare and execute the kill. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you take it up with the Master.”

There was silence on the other end.

“That’s what I thought. Do not bother me again,” she said in an imperious voice and ended the call.

The League might not like her, but they were afraid of the man they called their ‘Master.’

The run had done her good last night. She got up, got dressed, put on makeup, and pulled her hair up into a messy bun. She trotted down the stairs ready to head out.

“Good; you’re up. I can start breakfast,” said Trudy, coming out of the kitchen and wiping her hands on her apron.

A large man followed her, his hand slipping from her waist to her ass, as he tipped her head back and kissed her. It wasn’t a big ‘Hollywood-style’ kiss, but the passion and feeling were there, nonetheless.

“I’ll be up at Windsong if you need me, lass,” said the burly man in a heavy Scottish accent.

He acknowledged Nora’s presence. “Good morning, Nora.”

For some reason, witnessing the easy intimacy between them made her smile and yet clutched at her heart. She knew she would never have anything like that.

‘Not unless you have the courage to follow your heart,’ whispered her inner voice—an inner voice she had long ago learned to ignore.

Nora nodded toward the man who obviously shared Trudy’s life and bed and watched him leave. “No need. I’m not much of a breakfast person. I probably should have told you that.”

“Not to worry. I want you to be comfortable while you’re here.”

“I thought I’d go for a walk, maybe take some pictures, and then come back and write for a bit.”

“I should be around all day. Just let me know if you need anything.”

Nora headed outside and felt drawn to the bakery. She told herself it was to observe the target before scouting the town for the best way to complete her assignment and get away. Normally, she performed her assigned task with little thought to anything other than finishing the job and getting back home with no one knowing she was responsible. But this time was different.

She walked along Main Street, doing a bit of window shopping here and there and acknowledging greetings. She stopped to chat with a few people and wondered how they knew her name. What she realized was Mystic River was a small town and little went on that wasn’t known by everyone.

As a woman approached the door of the bakery loaded down with pastries and loaves of bread, Nora held the door open for her.

“Thank you,” said the woman. “You must be Nora. Welcome to Mystic River.” She turned to look at Hutch. “Thanks, again, Hutch.”

Nora slipped in and took a seat at one of the tables, watching the predatory grace with which he moved behind the counter. As he waited on the few customers, it was all she could do not to drool. He really was the tastiest treat in his bakery.

She looked out the window and watched Mystic River come to life as people headed into their jobs, opening their stores and offices and the like. Nora rather imagined there was a sameness and a rhythm that she would find comforting.

She was so absorbed in her musings that she failed to notice Hutch’s approach. She’d intended to order a coffee and one of those amazing scones from the day before and was

happily surprised to find he had both in his hands. He set them down on the table before taking the seat opposite her. He stared at her, his expression moody.

There was no one else in the bakery, giving an odd intimacy to the situation. Odd in that they were sitting in front of the main window where anyone could see them, and yet it felt as if they were the only two people in the world. Nora ate her scone and sipped her coffee, finding it hard to meet his eyes, but feeling the intensity of his stare as he watched her.

With as little warning as he'd given before joining her, he left the table, went to the door, locked it, and turned the sign from open to closed. He came back to the table, scooted her chair back, leaned down and scooped her up in one strong move. Walking her to the counter, he set her up on it so that her feet were dangling down, her knees parted slightly.

Hutch moved between her legs, as if that place belonged to him and him alone—and always had. He put a hand on either side of her and leaned against the counter. He sighed and hesitated before seeming to make up his mind about something. He regarded her intently, making it hard for her to breathe. Speaking or challenging him in any way was completely out of the question.

His right hand came up to cup the nape of her neck, while the other came up to brush the hair out of her face. Lowering his head, his mouth captured hers and arousal flashed through her system like a wildfire. The kiss wasn't aggressive in the least. It was seductive, persuasive, engaging, and almost playful, and Nora couldn't find it within herself to resist.

The tawdry romances she liked to read, telling herself it was part of her cover—described kisses as intoxicating. That was rubbish. Good scotch was intoxicating; good bourbon in a pinch, but not kisses. Kisses were—well, whatever they had once been, they were intoxicating now. She felt drugged and out of control.

Her lips parted of their own accord and his tongue surged in, taking command of her mouth, sliding over and around as his hand moved from her neck to tangle in her hair, angling

her head to just where he wanted. There was no doubt as to who was in control, and it wasn't her. She moaned and melted into him, her arms coming out to hold him close. How had she lived without his kisses? What would she do in the future without them?

She had no time for her little voice to break her reverie. Hutch lifted her up, carried her to the door, set her down, unlocked and opened the door, and then smacked her on the ass with enough sting so that she felt it and all but stumbled out the door.

“We're having dinner at The Workshop at seven.” She started to protest, and he put a finger to her lips, silencing her. “Be there.”

He closed the door behind her and left her reeling on the sidewalk. Not knowing what else to do, Nora headed back to The Refuge. This had become a major clusterfuck. What the hell was she going to do?

CHAPTER 7



HUTCH

Closing the door, he flipped the sign back to open and retreated behind his counter. When he looked up, she was gone. What had possessed him to do that? He actually knew the answer. She was his fated mate, and he didn't have time or patience for a long courtship. He needed to move things along.

Things with the resistance were moving forward and picking up speed. He needed Nora here, safe with him in Mystic River. He needed and wanted her at his side. He knew she was a novelist, but everything about Nora screamed warrior. He had no doubt she would join them in taking on the Shadow League. But did he want that? Was he willing to risk her life?

The rest of the day seemed to drag by at a snail's pace. He wanted to see her again, kiss her again, and feel her respond to him. She was his fated mate and Hutch was pretty damn sure she knew it. So why was it she seemed to want to pull back? He fought back every instinct not to simply throw her down and claim her each time he saw her, but maybe a show of dominance was just what she needed. He wanted her marked, and if she wasn't a clouded leopard, he wanted her transitioned. No, what he wanted was Nora. He wanted her every way a man could have a woman, and he meant to have her.

Finally, he was able to close the bakery and get the prep work done for the next morning. He ran upstairs to the apartment, grabbed a quick shower, and dressed. Dressing for

a date in Alaska was different than most of the lower forty-eight—you had to be prepared for snow and ice. Hutch did the best he could, pressing a pair of clean, relatively new jeans, and pairing them with a soft, cashmere, V-neck sweater. That was about as good as it got.

He headed up to The Workshop, found a relatively quiet booth, and waited for Nora. Waited being the operative word. She was late, which seemed incongruous with her nature. She didn't impress him as a woman who wasn't aware of time passing. Maybe she'd gotten into a groove and the time had gotten away from her.

Hutch was just about to call Trudy, as he realized they had yet to exchange numbers, when he looked toward the door in response to feeling her enter the tavern. He stood up and waved, calling to her. He was glad to see the smile that crossed her face but had the distinct feeling she would have found him quickly. The Workshop might be crowded, but he was certain that little escaped Nora's notice.

Catching her hand, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. "You're late. I was just about to call Trudy. I realized I didn't have your number, and you didn't have mine."

"I'm sorry about that. I got caught up in writing."

She sat down but didn't offer to give him the number to her cell. Curious. It was starting to feel like two steps forward, one step back. But, he supposed, that was still a net gain of one step forward.

"I'm inclined to have another burger. That was so good," Nora said.

"In all honesty, Dash does a great job with the food. I don't think I've ever had anything I didn't love. Last night you got a regular burger, but if you're going to go with a burger, get a 'Dash Special.' You can have the burger made of any kind of meat. I recommend the moose. The Dash Special involves smothering it with your favorite cheese—gorgonzola is always good—French fries, and coleslaw."

Nora laughed. "That sounds disgusting."

“I know, doesn’t it?” he chuckled. “But once you’ve had one, you’ll never go back.”

The waitress came over. Nora took a deep breath. “Hutch recommends the moose burger with the Dash Special.”

“Good choice,” said the girl. “I know it sounds gross, but they are so good. Do you want rings, tots, or more fries on the side?”

Nora looked at Hutch. “Tots for Nora, and I’ll have the same except with onion rings. Nora, what do you want to drink?”

She nodded to his tall glass. “That looks good.”

“It’s a local IPA.”

“Gotcha,” said the waitress, hurrying to take their order back to the kitchen.

“I ordered tots for you and rings for me so you could try both. We can share or if you like one and not the other, you can have whichever you like.”

She smiled. She had a glorious smile. He was fairly sure it could rival the aurora borealis in both beauty and magic.

“And they say chivalry is dead,” she teased.

“Not in Mystic River, Alaska, it isn’t. It’s a strange little town.”

“How so?”

“In most places where you have single and mated guys, the mated guys are happy, but kind of look at the single guys with a little longing. Here in Mystic River, the single guys look at the men with mates covetously—not of that woman, per se, just wishing they had found their own.”

“And what about those who have?”

“They regard us with a look of pity and say ‘chump.’”

Nora brought her hand up to cover her laugh. “That’s terrible.”

“Terrible but true. We have all these predatory alpha males walking around, and the lot of them are bossed around by their beautiful, curvy mates, although said mates work really hard to keep the men from knowing.”

The waitress set their food down and Nora filched an onion ring, biting into it with a kind of childish glee at having gotten away with something. His mate was an enigma. She had an old soul; he could feel it. Yet, at times, there seemed to be a childish side that longed to run free.

“How’d you end up in Mystic River?” she asked.

“I was a soldier and deployed to the Middle East. My last op was all fucked up, and I saw my unit torn apart by a pack of hyena-shifters. Then someone tried to kill me. I’d had enough. Seen way too much. When I landed in Ottawa, Colby Reynolds was there. I’m not sure how or how much he knew about what happened, but he offered me a soft place to land, and I just stayed.”

“How does a warrior go from that to baker?”

“He sees too much and has fought for a cause he no longer believes in. Coupled with that, I used to plan my leave time in cities where there was some kind of baking school and found that I liked it. There is a comfort in knowing that if you add the same ingredients, in a precise way, you’ll get the same result every time. The guy who started the bakery had left town, so Colby arranged for me to buy it.”

“Could you ever see yourself leaving?”

Hutch thought about it. “Maybe someday, but for now I need to stay. What about you? Could you ever see yourself leaving New Hampshire?”

“Vermont,” she corrected. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think I’d like to run away and hide in the wilderness. Other times, I feel trapped in a life I chose a long time ago.”

“Funny you should say hiding in the wilderness. That was my plan when I got to Ottawa. I planned to get to the Canadian Rockies, shift, and disappear into the wild forever.” He

reached across the table to take her hand. “Instead, I listened to Colby, came here, bought a bakery, and found a home.”

Recognition dawned in her eyes. “You’re a cloudie, aren’t you? We’re such loners in our shifted forms. I think, sometimes, it makes us long for friends, companions, a family, and home. Even more so than other species.”

He nodded. “I think you could be right. I take it, then, that you too are a cloudie.” She nodded. “Look, I know we haven’t known each other very long, and finding another cloudie is difficult, but I’m about 99.9 percent sure you are my fated mate.”

She looked up at him, tears forming in her eyes. “I know,” she whispered.

He was taken aback, not only by her confession, but by the sadness in her tone.

“Why does that make you sad? Is there another who seeks to claim you? I’ll challenge him for that right.”

She laughed quietly. “Typical male. It must be some other man, and you’ll just fight him for me. Hot news flash, I’m the one who decides where and with whom I want to be, but no, there is no one else.”

“Then why were there tears in your eyes?”

“It is not as simple as you believe it to be. My life is... complicated... for lack of a better word. I don’t even know what I want or feel. My plan was so simple—come to Alaska and do a little research, make notes for my book, and then go home and write it. But then you came along,” she said, turning her palm up so she could hold his hand. “I wasn’t expecting you. It is rare for me to be surprised by anything. And yet, here you are. Giving in to this feeling has ramifications you can’t possibly imagine.”

“Then explain them to me. We can work it out. I know we can.”

“There are things about me you don’t know—”

“And vice versa. But we have time to share all those together. We are meant to be together; you know that.”

“I’m so confused that I don’t even know what I know anymore. I need time, Hutch.”

“Time you will spend here in Mystic River, right?”

Nora shook her head. “I’m not sure that’s the best idea, but at the moment it’s the only one I can think of.”

“Promise me you won’t leave without telling me. I can give you all the time you need, but I can’t do that if I don’t know you’re someplace I can keep you safe. I’m going to be honest with you, Naomi, I won’t press you, but I do intend to pursue you. I will court you to within an inch of your life. You’re mine. We both know it.”

The look on her face was pained and defeated. “The only thing I can promise you is that whatever I do, I will do with your best interest forefront in my mind. I never expected to find you. I never allowed myself to even believe I had a fated mate—” She chuckled softly. “—and I sure as hell didn’t expect to find him in Mystic River, Alaska.”

“Since you’re being honest with me, I will do the same. If you leave, I will follow. I was in reconnaissance when I was in the military. There’s nowhere you can go that I won’t find you.”

The light in her eyes flickered back on. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but that’s not courting, that’s stalking.”

He laughed, and they finished their dinner, sticking to safer topics like politics and religion. Once outside, he pulled her in, waiting as her arms went around his neck to lower his mouth to hers and kiss her with a languorous, sensual intensity. Heat and arousal fired his system, and he knew as long as he held Nora, he would never be cold or alone again. She was his soul’s perfect mate.

Hutch let her come up for air—that was his first mistake. Nora pushed against his chest, shaking her head.

“I need to get back to Trudy’s.”

“No, you don’t. You need to be with me.”

“Not tonight. Please, Hutch, you’ve thrown my whole nice, tidy, little existence into a complete uproar.”

Her eyes locked with his, beseeching him. He nodded. “All right, but I won’t always be so understanding.”

Hutch walked her to the B&B and kissed her again before letting her leave him on the porch. His mate was a study in conflicting contrasts. She made no sense. There were so many red flags. In the military he’d learned that red flags meant danger.

His skills in special ops and reconnaissance had been second to none. He had the ability to find a place in which to hide in plain sight, blending into his surroundings until he was unnoticed. Then, if need be, he could attack with stealth and lethal force before the enemy was even aware they were being observed. That skill had served him well in the military. It occurred to him that he might be able to put it to use in order to observe Naomi. He didn’t mean to attack Naomi—except in a fun and erotic way—but he did mean to solve the riddle she presented to him.

She made no sense. He couldn’t reconcile what he knew about her with what he didn’t. One minute he felt as if he’d known her all her life, and the next she was a complete and total mystery. Hutch didn’t care much for mysteries, and the unanswered questions that shrouded Nora in mystery were no exception. This was a mystery he meant to solve.

CHAPTER 8



NORA

Nora walked into the B&B. Walking away from Hutch had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. Did she really think she could walk away for good? Much less kill him? But if she didn't, the Master would only send another, and that assassin's orders would be to kill Hutch and her. There had to be a way out. She needed to stall the Shadow League until she could figure it out. But how?

As she headed for the stairs, she could see Hamish and Trudy sitting on the couch in front of the fire. Trudy's head was on Hamish's shoulder, and it was obvious she was asleep. Hamish gave her a little wave, before bringing his finger to his lips to indicate silence was requested. Nora smiled and waved back. When was the last time she'd smiled and waved at someone? She was so used to fading into the shadows or blending in with the scenery, but that didn't seem to be possible here in Mystic River.

She trotted up the stairs, her phone vibrating in her pocket just as she entered her room. Pulling her phone out, she glanced at the caller ID and groaned when it showed as 'Unknown.' She had long ago learned the best defense was a good offense.

"What?"

"Is it done yet?" The voice on the other end was unexpected—it was the Master.

"Not yet. You did not set me with the easiest task."

“You are my best assassin; I assign the easier tasks to lesser mortals.”

“Yes, but he is aware, as are his friends, that attempts have been made on his life. This is a small town where everyone knows everything about everybody. I’m a stranger. I stick out like a sore thumb.”

“And why is that?” asked the Master. “Why did you let it be known that you were even there? I expected you to get in and get out without anyone ever knowing you’d been there. You could have waited for him...”

“If you think you could have done it better, then perhaps you should have done it yourself.”

The challenge hung in the air between them. Never had Nora directly confronted her mentor.

“Perhaps I should,” the Master said quietly.

“If you want me to leave...”

“What I want is for you to complete your assignment. Then perhaps you should spend some time on the island. I’m beginning to wonder if allowing you so much freedom has been detrimental to your commitment to the cause.”

The call ended without another word between them.

He’d never threatened her before—not even vaguely. And while this was subtle, they both knew that the only reason the Master would call her home was to dispose of her. Nora was taken aback by both the realization and how much it hurt to know he could so casually threaten to kill her. Knowing he would kill her without so much as blinking an eye if she failed to kill Hutch had the opposite effect she was sure the Master had intended, though.

Yes, he’d given her a home. Yes, he’d ensured she had a good education and a taste for the finer things. But she’d killed for him time and time again. Nora didn’t like to think about the amount of blood she had on her hands. She never tried to blame him for that, but at some point, any debt she owed him had to have been paid in full.

Nora knew there were times in a person's life when not only were they standing at a crossroads, but they were aware of that. She could see no way to go back, so the only way to proceed was to move forward. One fork in the road was to continue on the only path she'd ever seen before her. The other fork offered another route, another way. If she followed that path, she would make a break with all that had gone before. She would take the road less traveled, and it would, as Robert Frost had once observed, make all the difference.

Could she choose a new way and keep both herself and Hutch safe? Could he forgive the sins of her past and choose to make a new life for them here in Mystic River? Was it the resistance that held him here? Could she become a part of that new way? Had the Master always been so wrong?

Questions vexed her, and she knew they would allow her no sleep. One of the more pressing questions was whether the Master already had someone in place. Was Hutch in danger even as she pondered their future?

She walked by the window in her room. With the light on, her silhouette would be clearly seen by anyone watching. She made a big show of moving back and forth before turning out the light, changing into all black clothing and waiting. When the time was right, she would venture out into the night, and watch over Hutch.

After enough time had elapsed that she felt she could exit the B&B without being observed, she opened the door to her room and slipped into the hallway. She knew Trudy and Hamish's suite of rooms was on the first floor. Trying to go down the steps quietly enough that she could exit the building through the kitchen door would be difficult at best. No, the best way out was to go through the window on the side of the house, move across the slippery roof, and slide down the backside of the building.

She opened the window and carefully climbed out, ensuring she had stable footing as she stealthily moved along the roof to a point she could dangle over the side and drop down. Once she was in a crouching position, she stayed in position until she was sure she had left the building without

anyone being the wiser. Once she assured herself of that, she began to move away from the B&B to make her way back to Hutch's bakery.

It was at times like this she earned her nickname of the Ghost. She moved like a wraith among the shadows of the small town, certain of her ability to remain hidden. She circled the bakery, staying out of the light and detecting no signs of life. Where was he?

Moments later, Nora more sensed a presence behind her than she actually heard or saw anything. She moved deeper into the gloom to ensure she remained hidden. There—at the corner of the building; someone was moving. The phantom moved deeper into shadows where Nora could no longer detect movement.

Creeping around the end of the building, Nora moved swiftly along the back, around the side and then across the front, trying to flank whoever it was that was hiding. When she moved into position to confront the person, he or she was gone. Damn!

Up ahead she could sense movement—that was the thing, she couldn't really see who it was, but it could very well be that the Master had already sent someone to kill both her and Hutch. Up ahead, a shadow moved around the end of the building, seeming to follow where she had gone. Clinging to the side of the building, she moved to follow.

At the corner of the building, she peeked around the edge. There almost at the other corner, someone moved—a big someone. From the shape and the size, it had to be a man. Who could it be? The shape disappeared around to the other side. Circling around and around the building wasn't going to do either of them any good. If the person was trying to catch her unaware, Nora was about to turn the tables on him.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of the buzzing that took up residence in her brain whenever Hutch was near. She had heard the phenomenon described by others when they spoke of their fated mates, but never having believed she would have one of her own, she hadn't paid much attention.

She was sure, however, that no one had ever described how annoying it was. She shook her head, but it didn't clear the sound, only abated it to a dull kind of humming. Better but still annoying, nonetheless.

Nora turned back and moved soundlessly back down the side of the building. If whoever it was who was following her held to his pattern, he should round the corner back into the alley just moments before she was able to move into place to take him down. Swiftly and silently, she moved into place and waited.

As the man tailing her came cautiously around the corner, Nora rushed out, swinging with her right, and damning the fact that she hadn't brought her trusty stiletto with her. In hindsight, it seemed like a bad idea to leave it, but she hadn't wanted to be caught with a concealed deadly weapon up her sleeve. The man's left arm came up, blocking her blow and throwing a powerful punch of his own. Nora fainted and ducked, so that the blow missed her altogether. Her opponent might have power on his side, but she had speed. Curiously, they seemed to be equally matched for technique.

She threw a left jab, connecting with his mouth. He spat blood and cursed, staggering back a step. Nora didn't hesitate and moved forward, throwing another punch and missing him altogether as he whirled around, bringing his foot up and kicking her in the gut. She'd left herself wide open. She hadn't done that since she was a teen. The wind was knocked out of her, and she was propelled backward, slamming into the wall of the bakery.

Her midsection roaring with pain and her head buzzing like an angry swarm of hornets, Nora lashed out, swinging blindly in an attempt to keep her opponent at bay. She was faster, but her opponent was so much bigger. They grappled together, nip and tuck, dog eat dog as they battled for supremacy.

She shifted her attack, throwing punch after punch in an attempt to gain the upper hand. When she missed, the phantom leaned forward, pinning her with his forearm across her throat.

She tried to bring her knee up into his groin, but he was able to block that with a muscular thigh.

“Naomi!”

The name didn’t register.

“Naomi!” it called again.

As the man leaned into her, cutting off a bit of her air and using his sheer size to impose his will, the red haze of anger and fear—something she hadn’t felt in a long while—began to clear. The voice was familiar.

“Naomi,” he said in a strangled cry. “It’s me, baby. Did I hurt you?”

“Hutch?” she said, not quite believing her eyes.

“Yeah. It’s me. You’re safe.”

“Hutch, what are you doing here?” she asked angrily, trying to push him away.

“Apparently, I was watching you watching me,” he answered, ensuring he still had her pinned to the wall. “Your turn. Why were you watching me?”

“Because...” She could think of no reasonable explanation other than the truth.

“Talk to me, Naomi...”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“Naomi? Why not?” he asked, confused.

“Because it’s not my name,” she confessed, knowing there was no easy way to do this and that she had no choice but to tell him the truth.

“What do you mean it’s not your name?” The look of suspicion on his face indicated he already had a pretty good idea.

“My name is not Naomi Brady. And I’m not a mystery novelist.”

He pressed a little harder against her throat, not quite choking her, but close. “Then who are you, and what are you

doing in Mystic River?”

“My name is Nora Blake. I don’t live in Vermont.” She sighed. “Would you please quit leaning on me?” Hutch relieved some of the pressure. “God, I need a drink. Let’s go back to The Workshop.”

This was going to be a lot longer explanation than just her real name and where she lived. Her real occupation might well be a stumbling block, but if she was going to make him understand the real danger he was in, there could be no holding back.

There was no way she could or would kill him. The battle lines had been drawn. She and the Master were now on opposing sides.

CHAPTER 9



HUTCH

“*I*’m open to that, but just one thing first,” he said.

He leaned her back against the wall and looked down at her. He had height and muscle on her, but he could tell Nora wasn’t the least bit intimidated. In fact, she looked exhausted. Not just physically but weary in her soul. He studied her face—it was a lovely face, but when he looked closely, he could see the secrets, the regrets and the fear. He didn’t know what had put that haunted look in her eyes, but he meant to see it eradicated.

Ever so gently, he moved his hands down to the front of her jacket, grasping it and pulling her close. He could feel a shiver of desire as it passed between them. It occurred to him that at the right angle, they might be seen, and he didn’t much care. Lifting her face to his, his lips hovered over hers before he leaned down and brushed her lips before letting his mouth settle on hers.

He traced the seam of her lips with his tongue before sliding it inside her mouth to tangle and dance with hers. Nora moaned and grabbed his jacket in the same way he had hers. She pulled herself closer, allowing him to feel her need as it arced between them. His tongue slid along hers, plunging deep and making her moan. She rubbed her lower body against his throbbing dick.

Hutch was lost in her kisses, drugged by her essence. He could see why those who were lucky enough to be gifted a fated mate were possessive and protective. He didn’t care what her story was; he didn’t care why she was really in Mystic

River, although he had his suspicions. None of it mattered. All that mattered was she was here now with him, and she would remain at his side.

He couldn't seem to get enough of her. Hutch felt like a starving man at a banquet. Again and again, he kissed her, encouraging the burgeoning intimacy between them. He wedged his hard thigh between hers and let her rub herself along the top of his leg, moaning at the friction and pleasure she created. Nora relaxed and held his shoulders, letting him lead her to a rhythm that seemed to build heat and arousal in her body. He thought about taking her to the edge and leaving her there until she came clean, but he wanted to watch her come. Wanted to see her give herself to him.

Nora flung her head back as her orgasm seemed to reach its crescendo. "Look at me," he growled.

Her head came forward and she looked deep into his eyes until hers rolled back in her head, and she buried her face in his jacket, muffling her cries as she called his name. Here in the alley, under the outside stairwell that led to his place above the bakery, Hutch experienced the most intimate interlude of his life. It would be so easy to take her up those stairs and lose himself in her. He wanted answers, and he knew if he took her upstairs, it would be entirely too easy to lose focus on what he needed—what they both needed: transparency and trust.

"That's what I wanted. You're beautiful Nora, and make no mistake—Naomi or Nora, you're mine."

She nodded, relaxing against the wall, her breathing coming back to normal. Keeping a wary eye on him, she took his hand and began to lead him upstairs. He stopped her progress and shook his head when she looked at him. Taking command of the situation, he guided her back to The Workshop. Once inside, they sat down at the table in the back—the one which offered them the most privacy.

"All right, Nora, not from Vermont. Talk."

She smiled, with a little less sorrow than he'd seen earlier. "I live in Boston. I have a really nice townhouse in Beacon Hill, and I'm an assassin. I was sent here to kill you."

“Because the other two attempts failed?”

“Not two, three. The first was in the desert when they blew up your Humvee. The second was when you were back at your base, and they tried a hit and run. The last time was in Ottawa.”

“That last one wasn’t me. The shooter was aiming for Colby.”

“The shooter changed the intended victim, which was you. He thought Reynolds was a higher value target, but he botched it.”

“I’ll bet he regretted that.”

Nora shrugged. “I doubt he had time for regrets. The Master does not forgive failure.”

“So, this ‘Master’ sent you to do what others had not been able to?”

“Yes. I’m his top assassin; he raised me to be the best at what I do.”

Hutch leaned back. “He raised you to be a killer?”

“Yes. He adopted me from the foster care system in England, raised me, gave me the finest education, and taught me to kill those who opposed him.”

“You sound pretty dispassionate about it. Like you don’t care.”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Hutch, not anymore. I won’t sit here and tell you I felt threatened or that I didn’t know what I was doing was wrong. I did tell myself, at least at first, that the people I killed were as bad or worse than the Master. After a while, there was so much blood on my hands, I just didn’t care anymore.”

“What will he do to you when you refuse to kill me? You are refusing to kill me, right?” he asked with a flicker of a smile.

Nora smiled back. “I think from the first moment I saw you, I knew I couldn’t do it.”

“What will he do?” Hutch pressed.

“He’ll kill me; then send someone here to kill you and anyone else who gets in his way.”

“That may be his plan, but I’m here to tell you, the only death he’ll find in Mystic River is his own.”

“You need to let me go. If I move quickly, I may be able to get to him before he gets to you.”

Hutch shook his head. “Not happening. It seems your Master left out a critical piece of your education. Fated mates are bound together through eternity. We are stronger together than we are apart. We will figure it out and be together. If need be, we will have the community of Mystic River behind us.”

“If I don’t kill him, he’ll kill us both—first me and then you. If he realizes we’re fated mates, he’ll kill you first and make me watch. But either way, we’re both dead.”

“I will protect you. I will keep you safe.”

“You don’t understand...” she said, heartbreak evident in her voice.

“But I do. This Master of yours took a vulnerable child, took all of her choices, and trained her to be his weapon. I think you’ve always been afraid of him; it’s just been so long that you’re used to the feeling. Is he in Boston?”

She shook her head slowly. “No. Lundy Island off the coast of Devon in England. He has an impregnable fortress.”

Hutch grinned slowly. “No such thing. Do you know much about his dealings within the shifter community?”

“More than I want to. I know he’s the puppet master behind the Shadow League.”

“We—”

“We?”

“The resistance and Colby’s intelligence network. No one believed it was the Ruling Council. Who is he?” He held up his hand and waved it back and forth. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll talk with Colby in the morning. I’m going to call Hamish to let

him know you'll be with me and that we can go up to Windsong together."

"What makes you think I'll just sit back and let you run my life?" she asked with a smirk.

"Because I'm your fated mate and that's the way it works." He glared at her, daring her to challenge him on the issue. "And in case you missed it, I'm the one that had you pinned to the wall in the alley."

"Yes, but I'm the one who jumped you and initiated the fight," she returned.

Hutch nodded. "True enough, but on the battlefield, it doesn't matter who started the fight; it only matters who comes out on top. Just ask Richard III—he made the first charge at Bosworth Field, but it was Henry Tudor who triumphed to become Henry VII."

"Nice historical context. Do you know I majored in art history and the history of the War of the Roses?"

"I majored in history and political science, specializing in strategic warfare and intelligence."

They finished their drinks and Hutch led Nora back to the bakery and up the stairs to the apartment.

"It's a work in progress. I was putting money back into the bakery itself and I want an inside set of stairs."

He wondered now what he had to offer a woman who could afford a home in Beacon Hill.

She nodded. "That makes sense. I can see that you'd want to focus on making Northern Lights a success, and I'd put in an inside staircase, as well. Why would you want to go outside when it's freezing? Cloudies are much more suited to warm weather."

Hutch moved to the fireplace and lit the fire he had laid before leaving this morning. He was a creature of habit, and even though he had a complete HVAC system, he liked to use the wood-burning fireplace as much as possible.

He didn't want to pressure her, but he knew how much he desperately wanted Nora Blake to be sharing his bed. This fated mate thing had smacked both of them in the face. He should take his time, let her get used to the idea, let her understand her past did not define her. She needed to understand she would be accepted in Mystic River. He turned to tell her all of that and his voice caught in his throat.

Without a word from him or a sound from her, Nora had managed to render herself completely naked. Clothed only in the light of the fire, she stood before him.

"You don't have to do that. My protection is not contingent on my making love to you," he managed to say without sounding like a complete idiot.

Nora shrugged. "Maybe not, but my getting another orgasm or two does."

The movement she made had caused her breasts to move ever so slightly. Their dusky areolas with their pebbled tips called to him and made it difficult to keep from drooling. They were gorgeous, as was the rest of her body. Her torso narrowed to a curved waist which flowed back out to generous hips a man could hold onto to keep her steady while he took his pleasure from her, ensuring she got her own, as well.

He scented the air and grinned. He could smell the wood fire burning, but more than that, he could smell her growing arousal.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said.

"You don't get out much, do you?" she teased.

"We're going to have to work on your pillow talk. When your mate tells you you're beautiful, you say thank you. There's nothing about you I would change."

"Not even my past?" she asked, the haunted look returning.

"Not even that. It made you who you are. It doesn't frighten me in the least and does nothing to take away from your gorgeous breasts, waist, hips, and pussy."

“You haven’t seen my pussy,” she teased.

“No, but I can tell even from here it’s soft, wet, ripe, and welcoming. But more important than all of that, my fated mate is intelligent, courageous, tough, and dangerous. All in all, she’s the most gorgeous, sexy thing walking this earth.”

“You have no idea how much I want to believe you.”

“I know it’s a leap of faith, Nora, but take it. Believe.”

She did the one thing he needed her to do—she held out her hand in invitation. Hutch kicked off his clothes before taking it and letting her draw him to her. He lowered his head, capturing her velvety-soft lips, letting his tongue probe for an opening, and once found, diving in, deepening the kiss. She clung to him as he wrapped one arm around her waist, his hand draping down to cover one of the cheeks of her ass. The other tangled in her hair, tilting her head back as he dragged his tongue along her lower lip as she trembled in his arms.

He allowed his one hand to roam her body—her spine, her shoulder blades, the small of her back and that perfect ass. Her body was toned and well-muscled, but she had dangerous curves in all the right places, and she moaned in need, supplication, and acknowledgement of their destiny. He trailed his mouth down to her jaw and then to her neck.

Bringing his hands up to cup her breasts, he strummed her nipples with his thumbs before sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to his bed. He laid her down and then crawled up onto the bed, spreading her thighs by kneeling between them before making a space for himself, lifting each of her legs over his shoulders on either side of his head. Lowering his mouth, he covered her sex and began to feast on her. She tasted like wild honey, vanilla, and just a hint of lavender.

God, she tasted sweet, and it didn’t take much to make her shiver in response. She was close, but so was he, and he had no intention of coming the first time anywhere other than buried deep in her pussy. Her hands gripped the bedclothes before coming up to tangle in his hair. He used his tongue on her clit as he eased a finger inside her, fucking her with it in rhythm to his tongue. Curling his finger up inside her, she

cried out as her entire body stiffened and she climaxed. That was the second time he'd made her come. This time they would come together.

Looking down at her, he said, "I'm clean, and we're mates..."

She chuckled. "And I have an implant and a clean bill of health."

He covered her with his body, pausing his cock just at her entrance before he began to slowly and steadily push himself inside her inch-by-inch. Her pussy clamped down and spasmed all along his length. She took his breath away, but not his focus on her. He pulled back and thrust in again. Over and over, he retreated before surging forward. She was tight, but her pussy welcomed him as if they had made love a hundred times.

When Hutch sensed another orgasm was beginning to build within her, he began fucking her harder and faster, pounding into her and watching her face as pleasure and arousal began to claim her once more. Her hands came up to stroke his back and then to rake her nails down it. He wanted to be able to make love to her forever, to spend the rest of their lives thinking of nothing more than pleasing one another.

Nora tightened around him again, her pussy milking his cock as pleasure swamped her senses and she came, calling out his name. He didn't want it to end; he wanted to keep fucking her, but his body heeded her siren's call, and he came harder and longer than he had with anyone ever before. He ground into her, holding her tight as his cock began to pump his cum into her.

Hutch collapsed on top of her, giving her all his weight for a moment before rolling off her and onto his back, pulling her close to him so that she was cuddled against his side, her hand and head resting on his chest.

"Abraham," she said without warning. "That's the Master's name—Abraham Strode. He wants Reynolds dead more than anyone else. He believes without Reynolds' money,

contacts, and intelligence network the resistance won't amount to much."

He chuckled. "We have got to work on your pillow talk. We just shared something amazing, and you want to talk about the guy who's pulling the strings of the Shadow League. Okay, I'll play. What does the Master want? What's his end game?"

Nora chuckled. "What does any psychopathic megalomaniac want? To rule the world."

CHAPTER 10



THE MASTER

*L*undy Island, England
United Kingdom

“What do you mean she spent the night in his bed?” roared the Master.

“I don’t know what to tell you other than what our contact in Mystic River reported. They had a cozy dinner, shared kisses on the sidewalk, and then parted ways. The next thing I knew, she had changed to all black, and Hutchinson was leading her back to the table where they had drinks. They left and headed back to his place. I left shortly before dawn when I realized Hutchinson was coming down to open the bakery. I could see movement behind the curtains.”

“Damn it,” growled the dragon-shifter.

“What do you want to do?”

“I want you to keep an eye on things for me. Do not reach out to her. I need her to report back. I need to know how deep she’s in. We may have to cut our losses—both in terms of the Ghost and her target. That last attempt in Ottawa may have been the final straw. I need to think. Keep an eye on them, but do not do anything to alert anyone that you are in the area.”

The Master ended the call and looked at his cell phone in disgust. “Damn it,” he said again as he threw the cell phone across the room, breaking the window with the phone so it landed outside.

How could she betray him? He had given her everything. Well, he had given her everything, and he could take it away as well. The assassin known as the Ghost was about to become a real spirit.



NORA

Mystic River, Alaska

United States

In all her life, Nora had never shared a bed for the whole night with another person. She hadn't intended to spend the night with Hutch, but then she hadn't planned to have sex with him, either. This assignment had not gone the way she had planned, but had it gone the way it was supposed to?

All along, in the back of her mind, she'd had reservations about this assignment, this target, and about the Master and what he was planning. She'd never really thought to ask about why he wanted her to do the things he'd had her do. She'd only asked him once in the very beginning and he hadn't reacted well, so she never asked again. Time and time again, she'd told herself whoever the Master sent her to kill needed to die.

When she'd begun to question that, she'd found solace in learning that all of them deserved to die but began to wonder about those the Master sent other assassins to kill. Had they too deserved to die? Did Hutch? What was it—other than not being killed by the others the Master had sent—that Hutch had done? Had he actually done or seen something, or was it more a strategic move to keep Hutch from adding his considerable skills to the resistance?

All of those thoughts swirling in her mind did little to help her sleep. When she tried to slip quietly from his bed, Hutch's arm tightened around her like a vise.

“Stay,” he growled.

Nora waited to feel angry or to fight. She did neither. Instead, she made a contented purring sound and settled back against him. That seemed to mollify him and after nuzzling her neck, he was once again fast asleep. Lying in the dark next to him gave her a chance to examine her feelings—all of them.

She had accepted that she and Hutch were fated mates, which seemed unbelievable to her, but she no longer questioned it. She was fairly sure that leaving him wouldn't work, as he'd just come after her. No, it was better to stay in Mystic River and hope that the stories about the resistance were true.

That led her to her feelings about the Master. In the beginning she had been leery of the man but had learned to trust that as long as she did what he asked, he would provide her with the kind of life a young, orphaned clouded leopard-shifter could only dream about. What she had begun to question was whether she had sold her soul for the proverbial thirty pieces of silver. She was no longer his main assassin—he had many minions to take care of the lesser hits. Instead, he had allowed her to move away and create a hidden life for herself. He only used the Ghost to hunt and kill major targets.

The alarm rang before the sun even began to peek over the eastern horizon. Hutch groaned. Giving her a hard, passionate kiss, he slid from the bed and trotted into the bathroom and took a shower. Coming out, he grabbed his clothing, sat on the edge of the bed, and interspersed kisses with getting dressed.

“I've got to go open the bakery and get to work. Help yourself to whatever is in the pantry. I'll set the coffeemaker up so all you have to do is hit the button. If there's nothing up here or in the bakery you want to eat, call The Workshop and have them bring you something. When you're ready, come join me. Feel free, however, to go back to sleep.”

She laughed at him. “What will you do for breakfast?”

“I'll make something downstairs, and you are, of course, welcome to join me, but I'm going to have customers yelling

at me if I don't get a move on. You're gorgeous. You're my fated mate, and I love you."

He dashed out the door before she could respond. She flipped over on her back, waiting for panic to set in. It didn't. Instead, his words had started a warm glow that seemed to center in her belly and radiate outward until she felt as though it was sunshine in her veins and not blood.

Deciding anything Hutch made would be better than anything she could cook, she followed suit and darted into the bath, taking a shower before getting dressed. The jeans and boots she'd had on the night before were fine, but all black seemed a bit much for morning. Nora rifled through Hutch's dresser and found a gorgeous, oatmeal colored silk sweater. It had long sleeves and a deep V-neck. She pulled her hair back, using a black scrunchy she always kept on hand.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she couldn't help but notice that she looked different. Sure, the sweater was too big, but she often wore baggy sweaters. Nora often went without makeup and usually had her hair pulled back. Nothing unusual, so what was different? She'd been trained from an early age to notice even the smallest variations. As she gazed at herself, she spotted it—the corners of her lips were lifted in a smile.

Nora was smiling. She was happy. She tried to remember the last time she was truly happy and could not recall a time like that from her past. She wasn't some sad sack that moped around. She had all the money and material things she could ask for, but she realized she'd settled for just existing.

Hutch was her fated mate, and he loved her. That was what made her happy. She didn't even question it. She'd known from the moment she was in his presence that they were mates, but she'd never dared to dream she would find her mate, and he would love her.

Happy—deliriously happy—she ran out the door and down to the bakery, slipping behind the counter and pulling on an apron.

"You go ahead and bake. I'll handle the customers."

He grinned at her, pulled her close for a kiss which she returned enthusiastically to the well wishes being called to them from customers. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I know,” he grinned.

Nora rolled her eyes and batted at him. “Go bake, we have hungry customers.”

He nodded. “I will, but you grab one of the ham and cheddar croissants or the bacon, scallion and onion scones.”

For the next several hours, she waited on customers. Those with bigger orders just nodded as they went behind the counter and into the kitchen to grab their orders. Others waited patiently in line as she figured out how to use the cash register, and the customers made their own coffee. Everyone was patient and welcoming.

One of the customers with a large order was Trudy. Shaking her head and smiling, she said, “Hamish said he was pretty sure you two were fated mates. Should I send your things?”

“Yes,” called Hutch from the back.

“I guess so,” laughed Nora, “but I’ll pay you for the rest of the week.”

“You’ll do no such thing. I was trying to figure out where I was going to put a group of guests we have coming in. You being with Hutch makes it easy.” She laid her hand on Nora’s arm. “He’s a good man. You can trust him, and most everyone else here in town.”

“That may take some getting used to,” Nora admitted, “but I’m going to try my best.”

“Good. I’ll see you a little later on.”

“Thanks, Trudy.”

“Don’t give it a second thought, and don’t worry about how fast it happened between you two. That seems to be the norm here in Mystic River. I’m beginning to think there must be something in the water.”

Trudy left with her baked goods, and Nora turned back to the bakery's customers. The smells wafting out from the back were nothing short of divine. She ended up having both the croissant and the scone. They were heaven.

Several hours later, the morning rush had died down, and Hutch came out and directed her to one of the tables, sitting her down and getting her a cup of coffee. He went to get himself one and brought back several different pastries for her to try. She noticed Hutch made the usual things, but some of his flavor combinations seemed bizarre until you bit into them. He was a master at flavor profiles.

When the shop had emptied and he didn't need to be back watching the ovens, he kissed her hand and smiled. "Thanks. It's usually busy in the morning, but today was nuts."

"My guess is you are usually down here a lot earlier than you were this morning. I borrowed one of your sweaters."

"It looks good on you. Feel free to take or borrow anything you need. At some point you can figure out what you want to do with your Beacon Hill place..."

"Sell it."

"Just like that?" he laughed.

"Just like that. I'll get a realtor who can pack what I want and ship it here, use the rest to stage the place, and offer it to a buyer at a good price. The rest can go to charity. Of course, I'm assuming you're going to let me move in with you."

"If you're even questioning that, you and I are going to have a long talk, which we need to do anyway, but not about us or living arrangements for the moment."

"The Master knows where I live, so the sooner it's out of my name, the better."

"He probably knows where you are..."

"I have little doubt about that, and he's smart enough to know that if I'm staying, I'm staying here with you or someone else in the resistance."

"The resistance is one of the things we need to discuss..."

“No need. I’m all in. I have no other choice. I suspect you’re in it up to your neck. The Shadow League wants you dead. My new job is making sure that doesn’t happen. I also have a lot to offer the resistance.”

“I think we’re a lot further along than the League thinks we are, but I think it’s best we talk to Colby up at Windsong.”

“He’s the head of the resistance, right?”

Hutch grinned. “Not really. There’s a command structure in place, and Colby’s the head of the intelligence divisions. The overall guy is a cave lion-shifter named Deke Campbell...”

“The Finder? Interesting. I don’t think the Master saw that one coming.”

Hutch chuckled. “I think that was part of the idea.”

The door opened, and Colby Reynolds walked in.

“Speak of the devil,” said Hutch.

“The devil, am I?” the lynx-shifter teased. “Word has it I’m looking at Mystic River’s newest pair of fated mates. I take it, then, the Ghost here has decided not to kill you.”

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I didn’t. At least not until this morning. Hamish reported the two of you had become an item after trying to kill each other. Coupled with the rumors Deke had been picking up, it seemed the logical thing to assume. If even half the things whispered about you throughout the intelligence networks of the world are true, combined with the skills Hutch brings to the table, the League has got to be worried.”

Hutch nodded. “And Nora brings more to the table than just her lethal skill set. She has vital information.”

“Then why don’t the two of you plan to have supper and stay up at Windsong. I’ll send an SUV with a driver. We’ll figure out a way to keep the two of you safe. I don’t think that’ll mean you should be staying upstairs.” Colby waited and let Nora and Hutch look at one another as if confirming something. “Then we’re agreed. I think I’ll leave my driver

here in town with you and either get Jax to give me a lift or have someone from Windsong come into town.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting just a bit?” asked Hutch.

“Well, Nora—it is Nora, right?” She nodded, surprised at how much he knew. “Do you think I’m overreacting?”

She shook her head. “Not one damn bit. I don’t know if the Master has someone in town, in Otter Cove, or just camping out, but I suspect there’s someone here in town already.”

“As do I,” said Colby.

“I don’t think he’s someone who could move against me and think to win. The Master plays a long game. He isn’t ready to sacrifice that pawn yet just to take me out. But once it’s clear I’ve switched sides, he’ll have no choice.”

“We’ll be ready for them,” Colby assured her.

And somehow, she knew they would be. The future wasn’t strewn with rose petals and fairy dust; there would be plenty of blood, but she was beginning to understand why it was that the Master feared this group and Reynolds in particular.

“You two take care of each other,” Colby said. “We’ll see you at dinner.”

He left the bakery almost as quickly and quietly as he had appeared, and she watched him walk away. “Fascinating,” she said. “I don’t think the League or the Master have a clue as to what they’re up against.”

“We’ll get through this, and we will prevail. I promise,” Hutch said, and she believed him.

In that moment, Nora committed herself to the resistance and to keeping Hutch alive. But more than that, she vowed to end the Master—because as long as he breathed, she and Hutch would never be truly safe.

CHAPTER 11



HUTCH

The rest of the day flew by, and with Nora working the front of the bakery, Hutch was able to get a lot more prep work done much earlier in the day. At lunch, he called up to The Workshop and ordered a patty melt and grilled meatloaf sandwich to be delivered after the rush died down. He figured Nora would like one of them. If she liked both, they'd split them.

Several times throughout the day, Hutch spotted Colby's driver making his way around the town. Colby must have alerted Sheriff Miller and his deputy, Derek Grayson, that there was trouble coming. No one seemed obvious unless you knew the players involved. Hutch had to admit, he felt better about having Nora up front knowing there were others helping to watch over her.

At closing time, they walked out just as the SUV pulled up and the driver got out, opening the door so Hutch could help Nora into the vehicle and slide onto the seat next to her. The drive up to Windsong was peaceful and gorgeous, and Nora seemed to be taking it all in.

He shook his head and chuckled. "You're not looking at the magnificent view, are you?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I'm calculating ingress and egress, evacuation routes, and possible siege strategies. I'm also looking at how I might have approached Windsong in order to get to Colby."

"You won't find any of those," said the driver, confidently.

“Oh, you’d be surprised. I’ve already got a couple of ideas for him about making Windsong a more difficult target.”

The driver was shocked—his raised eyebrows in the rearview mirror giving him away. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I figured at some point the Master would send me to kill him. I knew it would be a difficult assignment, so I’d already started my prep work.”

The driver shook his head. “I think I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“Me too,” said Hutch putting his arm around her and trying out the link for the first time with a soft and seductive purr.

Nora flexed her fingers on the top of his thigh, letting him know she’d heard him. The massive gates at the entrance to Windsong opened to allow them to enter. It was only once you drove through them that you noticed the armed guard stations on either side.

As the SUV pulled up to the foot of the wide front stairs, the front door opened, and Colby came out to greet them.

“Welcome. We’ve been waiting dinner on you. I’ll have your things put upstairs. Nora, you didn’t seem to have much with you, so if you’ll make a list of things you’d like, I’ll see that they get purchased and brought to you.”

“How did you get our things?” asked Nora, suspiciously.

“I had the driver collect your things from Trudy and then he grabbed some things for Hutch. You should know he now has handgun envy. A Sig P-220-S with a weight compensator, target sights and a custom-molded grip to your hand.”

Hutch whistled appreciatively. “That’s a serious gun.”

“I’m a serious shooter,” she retorted. “Where is it?”

“In your bag where you left it, as is the stiletto that looks like it’s from the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It’s a beautiful piece of work.”

“It was a gift from the Master. It is rumored to have belonged to one of the Borgias—Lucrezia, to be exact.” Nora

smiled, as if remembering a pleasant memory. “The Master had it on display in his library. When I first went to his mansion, I didn’t know what to expect so I stole it in order to protect myself. He found it humorous that I thought I could do so and took it away. On my birthday that year, he gave it to me. I was an apt pupil.”

Hutch shook his head. “He started training you as a child?”

“He did, although that isn’t as bad as it sounds. I’d already been put through the mill in the foster care system, and it’s not like he made me a child soldier. My life was pretty easy. It wasn’t until I graduated college that I went to work.”

“Let’s go into dinner, shall we?” said Colby, sweeping his arm toward an enormous dining room. Colby stopped them just inside the entryway. “Most of you know Hutch, as he owns the Northern Lights Bakery. He and his lovely fated mate, Nora, will be staying with us for a while.”

Several people acknowledged the introduction and welcomed them with a smile, a handshake, a pat on the shoulder. Those who lived at Windsong followed their alpha’s lead—if Colby accepted and wanted you there, everyone else was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.

Hutch was amazed at how comfortable Nora seemed to be. “You’re all right with this?” he whispered as he helped her with her chair.

“I’m fine. I grew up in this kind of setting. I knew when I chose to be with you, I was, in effect, joining the resistance.”

“I don’t want you to feel pressured,” said Hutch. “Being with me is not contingent on you becoming part of the resistance.”

“Maybe not technically, but even if I wasn’t with you, the Master would see my refusal to kill you as not only a failure but an act of betrayal—something he would never allow. So regardless of my feelings for you, I would be joining the resistance. It’s the only way I’ll survive.”

“She’s right, you know,” said Colby. “Let’s try, however, to keep talk of the resistance to a minimum at the dinner table.”

We try to keep mealtime conversations to lighter fare.”

Dinner was superb. It always was at Windsong. He had one of the best chefs in the region, and the man believed in providing the best for his people. It was said that although he was alpha, his entire clowder considered him to be one of them and that he put the clowder’s needs before his own.

After dinner, Colby suggested coffee and dessert in his study. Oftentimes when Hutch heard the term ‘study,’ he thought it was pretentious. Not in this case. The room was more library than office, although there was a massive desk as well as a comfortable seating area. Nora walked around the bookcases, trailing her finger across the leatherbound spines of Colby’s collection of first editions.

“This rivals, and even surpasses, the Master’s library. You have some intriguing titles I’ve only read about but never seen.”

Colby sat behind his desk, bringing his forefingers together to form a pyramid in front of his lips. “You are welcome to peruse any you like. I would ask, however, that the ones in the glass cases be handled with gloves. They are very old, and some of them are fragile. I think you might particularly like the illuminated manuscripts.”

“I didn’t know you liked old books,” said Hutch, realizing how little he actually did know about her.

“She also likes knowing if there are any hidden exits and how they might be accessed,” said Colby with a grin.

“I’m out of practice. I thought I was more subtle than that.”

“You are, but I would imagine as the Ghost you had to develop exceptional skills over and above the ones you actually needed to work as the Master’s best assassin.”

“I still find it hard to believe that you were the Ghost,” said Hutch.

“I still am,” she said, softly. “Is that going to be an issue for you?”

Hutch shook his head, “Only in that he manipulated and used you from the time you were a child. You deserved a better childhood. You may have had all the material things money could buy, but you deserved to be a child and to be surrounded by people who loved you.”

She smiled, rising up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek before they each took a seat opposite Colby. “And I love that you would have liked that for me. But there are a lot of children who don’t have it anywhere close to as nice as I did. So yes, he’s a sick bastard for taking a child and molding her into a killing machine, but somewhere along the line, he also helped me become the woman I am—the one who could walk away and get on the right side of this battle that’s coming.”

“Let me assure you that you are safe at Windsong and that no one here would ever betray you...”

“I think you have a mole in Mystic River. The Master knows far too much about what’s going on,” said Nora.

“Which leads me to my first question. Who is the Master?” asked Colby.

“He lives on Lundy Island off the coast of Devon; his name is Abraham Strode...”

“Strode? Damn, that was Deke’s pick for the puppet master. I’m going to have to pony up a thousand dollars as I couldn’t believe it would be Strode. Do you know Deke?”

Nora nodded. “The Finder. He is one of the pieces of the resistance that give the Master and the Shadow League the most concern. You are one of the others, as is Hutch. But mostly he fears what he thinks is a growing and organized resistance movement.”

“As he should. We have formed a quinumvirate we have named the Fire Star Alliance, with Deke at the head. The intelligence group will answer to me; Carson Payne is heading up our research group; his mate Amelia oversees air support; and Mark Hadley is running ground support. Hutch will work directly with Deke but have a dual role coordinating everyone’s efforts—especially in covert ops—as well as

supervising the recon group. He has more experience in reconnaissance than the rest of us put together.”

“So that’s why the Master wanted Hutch eliminated. He’s an integral part of the resistance.”

“He is. His value to us as a former military operative is enormous. I think their plan when he was in the Middle East was to try and capture and turn him.”

Nora nodded. “The hyenas he sent went rogue.” She reached across and took Hutch’s hand, squeezing it and purring gently down the link to him. “For what it’s worth, none of them are still alive.”

“I figured as much. It’s one of the few things that lets me sleep at night.”

“When they couldn’t turn Hutch,” continued Colby, “they tried to assassinate him. Two clumsy attempts, and then they sent in the big gun—no pun intended.”

Nora smiled. “None taken.”

She was amazing. He could still feel that part of her that was all fated mate and focused on him, and yet she could participate in a discussion about killing and taking down the Shadow League. No doubt about it, his mate was a badass.

“I do wonder why I’ve been accepted so readily into the resistance,” she said.

“We’ve been watching you—not you as Nora, but whoever the Ghost was. From the beginning, Deke identified the Ghost as a valuable asset. Not unlike Hutch, we thought if we could turn you, it would give us a step up on the League.”

“If you know that, then so does the Master, which makes Nora his number one target.”

Colby nodded. “Agreed, which is why I believe the two of you should take up residence here at Windsong regardless of whether or not Nora is inclined to join us.”

“Trust me, I’m all in. I realized when I admitted Hutch was my fated mate that I was turning my back on the Master—something for which he will never forgive me.”

“Then until we have destroyed the League and exposed them for who and what they are, Nora does not leave Windsong without an escort.”

“Agreed,” said Colby.

“I don’t know how to break it to you big strong alpha males, but I am probably more skilled in taking care of myself than either of you will ever be.”

“That may be true,” said Hutch, “but it changes nothing.”

“God save me,” Nora groaned, provoking him and Colby to chuckle. “I do understand what you’re saying, but at this point, the Master doesn’t know I’ve turned. Wouldn’t it be more advantageous for him to think I haven’t?”

“A double agent?” asked Colby.

Nora nodded.

“Absolutely not,” snarled Hutch. “The instant that bastard even thinks she’s turned, he’ll kill her.”

Colby sat back. Apparently, the wily lynx-shifter had surmised that this argument was best decided between Hutch and Nora.

“But only if he finds out. The opportunity for me to gather information is too good to pass up. The Master has been wanting me to come home for a couple of years. I think he wants to reassure himself that I’m still a good little soldier. If I can get inside his office and the safe he keeps there, who knows what I might find.”

“It’s too dangerous—”

“Is it any more dangerous than what I was doing? Trust me, going to Lundy Island was never a relaxing kind of thing. I was more on alert there than anywhere. More than any of you, I know what the Master is capable of. If I can identify some of his assets, some of their holdings, and where some of the money is hidden, we can cripple him.”

“She has a point,” said Colby.

Hutch looked at Colby. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m not trying to. I think you know me well enough to know that if you nix this idea, I’ll back you, and we’ll do what’s necessary to keep Nora safe...”

“What makes either of you think you can stop me?” she asked.

“As I was going to say,” Colby continued, “putting together a plan where she has backup is far better than Nora deciding to go off on her own. Think about it, Hutch, your lady is good at subterfuge. She gets in, reassures the Master of her loyalty, and gets us information we probably wouldn’t get a chance at any other way and then gets out.”

“If it was your mate?” Hutch challenged.

Colby laughed. “I would feel the exact same way and be facing the same issue. I’m not sure mine could be stopped either.”

“I hate this plan,” grumbled Hutch.

Nora grinned. “You’re going to like it even less.”

“Why?”

“The first thing we have to do is kill you and make sure it’s very public.”

Hutch groaned. “I knew I hated this plan.”

CHAPTER 12



NORA

“*Y*ou’re certain we have a mole?” Colby asked.

“I am. The Master knows far too much about what’s going on. I don’t doubt he knows Hutch and I slept together and...” She was interrupted by her phone vibrating.

“You’re at Windsong,” the Master stated—not a question but a statement of fact.

“I had dinner with Colby Reynolds and the target.”

“Are you sure he’s still your target?”

“I’m a little tired of your insinuations. Of course, he’s still my target. What the hell else would he be?”

“There seems to be a question of your loyalty as well as where you spent the night and with whom,” the Master said, sounding a little like an old-fashioned headmaster.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Instead of prioritizing this jerk and letting me deal with him when he was in the Middle East, you make three botched attempts and put him on high alert—not a great idea for a guy who isn’t a civilian. I had to get close to him to find the best way to accomplish this. Do you know anything at all about Mystic River?”

“I know it’s a community of shifters in a remote area of Alaska.”

“It’s on an island, Master—a fucking island. And remote doesn’t even begin to cover it. It makes Northumberland look like a destination hot spot.”

“I want him dead.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Now, Nora. I want him dead by sundown tomorrow. Do you understand me?”

“That may not be possible without being detected.”

“I don’t care about that. In fact, that might be advantageous.”

“How so?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“It’s time Reynolds learned they are not safe on their snug little island. Killing him on Reynolds’ doorstep will rattle them.”

“And I’ll be in jail until I’m a very old woman. I thought I was more valuable to you than that.”

“Have you no faith in me, Nora? I have big plans for you. I’ll have one of our assets let you out. You’re to come straight to Lundy Island, understood?”

“Only if you’re going to send me on holiday somewhere sunny after that.”

The Master chuckled. “You cats do like your time lounging in the sun.”

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I do. So, tomorrow?”

“That will suffice, and Nora,” the Master said solemnly, “I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I know what I owe you. Without you, who knows if I would even have lived to adulthood, but don’t question my loyalty again.”

“With Hutch’s blood on your hands and Reynolds putting a target on your back, you would have no place to go but to come home. Perhaps it’s time for you to leave Boston.”

“You may have a point; someplace warm where I can come and go as I please.”

“That sounds good.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Master. One last thing...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever put me in a position where I have to sleep with a target again. I told you the day we met I would never be your whore.”

“I remember, and I won’t.”

Nora ended the call. “Tomorrow’s the day, and I confirmed you have a mole—someone who will get me out of jail. You don’t think it’s the sheriff, do you?”

Both Colby and Hutch started to laugh.

“Let me ask you this, sweetheart, what was your first impression of Jax?”

She thought for a moment, “An Eagle Scout with all the merit badges.”

“Precisely,” said Colby. “Not exactly spy material.”

“Do you have someone you suspect?” asked Nora.

Colby looked to Hutch, who nodded. “I think I have it narrowed down to one of three possibles: Morty, the moose-shifter. He delivers supplies all over Kodiak and doesn’t seem to call any place home. Will—”

“The bartender at The Workshop?” asked Colby.

“Yeah, he’s a weasel-shifter...”

“Technically a marten-shifter...”

“Not enough difference between them, and I’ve never known any weasel-shifter I could trust. And the last one is kind of a reach.”

“Who’d you have in mind?” asked Colby.

“Ellis Wells.”

Colby sat back. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Who is Ellis Wells?” asked Nora.

“He’s the father of Asher Wells, the head of the park rangers here in Alaska,” said Colby. “And if you think Sheriff Jax Miller is a straight arrow, you don’t know the meaning of

that term until you've met Ash. I'm no fan of Ellis, but I can't see him as being the mole."

"Maybe because you're too close to him. Remember when you wanted me to start looking for the mole, you admitted that my not having lived here my whole life gave me the advantage of distance."

"He's right," said Nora. "Besides, if this Ellis is the mole, it doesn't mean your friend Ash knows."

"Besides, Wolf Run has a lot of advantages as a base, and he has wolves at his command. I'll grant you most of the ones I've met strike me as honorable, but not all of them."

"Balder," said Colby. "Why not him instead of Ellis?"

"Balder is a thug. He's a soldier. He doesn't have the brains to be a mole, but he could certainly be duped into doing whatever Ellis wants or needs him to do."

Colby nodded and smiled sadly at Hutch. "I picked the right man for the job."

"Once I'm dead..." started Hutch.

"We'll keep you hidden up here at Windsong. I can set up whatever electronics you need to keep tabs on Nora as well as continue to try and figure out who the mole is."

"Keep in mind there may be more than one, and Trudy said she had a large group coming in for a week or so. You'll want to look at them, as well. One of them could be a courier."

"Point taken," said Colby. "I'll tell Hamish to stay in town and keep an eye on them. Once Hutch has been killed, he'll have the perfect excuse to be paranoid. It'll make sense that he wants to stay close to her and with guests there's no way she'd come out here."

"Until we know who's who," said Hutch, "we need to keep the circle small on this—me, Nora, Doc, Jax, Hamish, and you."

"Why Hamish? I mean, he seems like a nice enough guy..." started Nora.

“He is. He is also my second-in-command.”

Nora nodded. She knew there was a kind of sacred trust that went with that position.

“Oh, before I forget, are you aware that the League has dragons?”

Her statement seemed to set both Colby and Hutch back on their heels. “Are you certain?” asked Hutch.

“Yes, only a small flight—perhaps three or four—but the Master has been talking about recruiting others. He seems to think the Phantom Fire...”

“No way,” said Hutch, “way too much honor, and besides, the League tortured one of their own.”

“We’re hoping,” said Colby, “that will be enough to make them leave their neutral high horse and join us. I know several of the Fire are inclined to join us, but others—including their leader, Falkor—want to cleave to their old ways of remaining neutral.”

“The Master is thinking he has enough gold to persuade them to join him.”

“Why would he think they’d join him over us?” asked Hutch.

Nora smirked. “Because the Master is a very old, very powerful dragon-shifter.”

“Holy shit,” said Hutch.

“And then some,” said Colby, “but it makes some sense, especially if he wants to flip everything on its head. Well, that gets my mind reeling: Will, Morty, and Ellis could all be our mole, and the puppet master behind the Shadow League is an ancient dragon. We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“Indeed, we do. I think Nora and I will head up to bed.”

“That’s probably best. Nora, anything you need?”

“A retractable knife and a small baggie of blood or a reasonable facsimile.”

“I’ll see that you have it in the morning. Your room is up the stairs and to the right. End of the hall, double doors. I had them put you in one of the suites. You are welcome here for as long as you like.”

“What about your people? After I kill him?” asked Nora.

“I would trust any of my people with his life; he’ll be safe with us here at Windsong. But until you get back, we want to make sure no one knows he’s alive.”

She and Hutch made their way up the stairs and into their room. The room was enormous and had a commanding view of the ocean. Nora walked straight through the room and opened the set of French doors; then stepped out onto the balcony, inhaling deeply as the wind off the ocean whipped her hair around.

“This is the one thing I miss about living in Boston.”

“Then when this is over, we’ll find some place overlooking the sea.”

She shook her head, turned to face him, and leaned back against the wall. “No. It is far more convenient for us to live over the bakery.”

“It is, but we’ll figure out something. I do want to upgrade the apartment and put in some inside stairs.”

She nodded and turned back to the sea. “I’ll be fine, you know.”

“I know, but that knowledge brings little comfort,” he said, moving behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

Nora leaned back. “Until the Master and the League are stopped, not one of us will be safe. If I can hasten the Master’s fall, then we’ll all be safer sooner.”

Hutch took a deep breath. “I have to know Nora, if it comes to it...”

“If it comes to it, I’ll kill him. I don’t care if he’s a dragon. I’ve done a lot of research about that. I think some part of me always knew it would come down to this, and I’m ready. I’ve

always been ready. If the choice is him or us, I choose us with no regrets.”

“Us. No regrets. I love you. Come to bed,” he said, taking her hand and leading her back inside.

She leaned against him as he pulled her into his arms. “I love you, too. No matter what happens, we will get through it, and we will have our destiny together.”

Slowly, almost reverently, they undressed each other until finally they were naked in one another’s arms. Tilting her head back, he looked down at her before lowering his head and taking her mouth with his. His lips teased hers as his tongue slipped inside. The cool evening breeze played against her skin, cooling it as his lips blazed a fiery trail down her throat and across her shoulders. Her nipples puckered and he brought his hands up to palm and cup her breasts before strumming their taut peaks.

Hutch trailed kisses along her shoulders—licking and nipping as he did so, dropping to his knees. He tongued and sucked her nipples, making them draw tighter and fanning the flames of her desire. Her head fell back, thrusting her chest at his mouth as he continued to lave affection on them. His hands moved down her spine until he had the cheeks of her ass in his hands, squeezing them gently.

“You’re mine,” he whispered as his teeth closed around one nipple and he bit down gently.

“And you’re mine,” she hissed, liking the little nip of pain.

She realized she’d always been his, even before she knew he existed and long before she believed in fated mates. She didn’t really believe she deserved him, but he did and that was all that mattered. He latched on and suckled deeply, making her weak in the knees. He moved to the other nipple and gave it the same treatment.

Arousal flooded her system, and she ran her fingers through his hair, drawing him up her body. He swept her off her feet and laid her on the bed, looming over her—his eyes as warm and sensual a caress as his hands and lips had been.

“Spread your legs, Nora,” he commanded.

She knew that the next few weeks or months would be difficult. They might be physically apart, but they would be together mentally and emotionally—now and always. For right now, nothing mattered but the two of them. The whole world fell away, and all that existed was them.

Her eyes locked with his, Nora obeyed his command. Hutch’s hand moved from the hollow of her throat to her belly button and down below, barely skimming over her sensitized and swollen flesh until he splayed her lower lips and tickled the entrance to her core.

Everything inside her was alive in a way it had never been before. Even the night before didn’t compare. Need and desire hummed through her—desire not just of the flesh and for the pleasure he could provide her, but for the life they would make together. It was the fulfillment of a dream she’d never allowed herself to imagine. Nora realized she’d been dreaming of him all of her life but had been too afraid to admit it.

His finger penetrated her opening, making her moan. He stroked deep inside, slowly and surely building her response so she couldn’t hold back. Erik Hutchinson knew just how to make his mate squirm. She could see him standing above her and see the barbs along his cock beginning to make their appearance. She’d never been with a male cat-shifter before but knew that like their purebred brethren those nubs would increase her pleasure as he surged in and then score her inner walls as he drew back. When he came, they would dig in, locking her to him so that his seed could be well sown.

Grinning a feral smile, he crawled onto the bed, covering her body with his. “I can’t wait, Nora. I need you.”

“You have me, Hutch, and you’ll have me until the end of time.”

The head of his cock was poised at her entrance. “Not long enough,” he said as he surged forward, joining them together.

The nubs were definitely a new experience and she arched into his body, her pussy pulling him in as deep as it could. She

brought her arms up around him and intertwined her legs with his. His hands slipped under her body, holding her ass to keep her in place as he gave her his weight, pressing her into the mattress. As he drew out the barbs extended and stiffened, dragging small furrows into her most sensitive flesh.

She hissed from the exquisite pain and was pinned beneath him. Nora had never felt more vulnerable, safe, or powerful in her life. She clung to him as he kissed her breathless, his cock never stopping and establishing a rhythm her body seemed to have known her whole life.

He couldn't seem to get enough, and neither could she. He stroked into her again and again, twisting his hips to ensure he hit her clit with each thrust forward. Nora cried out, and he increased his efforts. Over and over, he pounded into her with a relentless rhythm until her body felt like a mass of electrical circuits, firing all at once.

With a final, deep stroke, Nora cried out, clinging to him as her orgasm swamped her senses and she felt him press deep, grinding against her as he began to fill her with his seed. Once he was done, his body relaxed and he rolled from her, dragging her with him.

“I may be the only man who was ever grateful to another man for trying to kill him.”

“He can't have you, Hutch. Not now, not ever. I may have owed him for pulling me from a life of squalor, but he owes me you, and I will collect,” she vowed.

CHAPTER 13



HUTCH

Just before it started to get light, Nora woke him. “You probably should be seen coming into town alone and being pissed that I’m not with you. We need to sell this idea that I’m going to do my job so that the mole can report that back to the Master.”

“I don’t want you out there alone.”

“I understand that, but keep in mind I’m the best he has. I’m going to get the retractable knife and put it and some clothing in a duffle. I need you to place the baggie with whatever we’re using for blood on your lower right side. When you see me come in, touch the spot briefly so I know where it is. Then we can have a nice, juicy fight, and I can make it look like I stabbed and killed you.”

He nodded. “Doc will be there and will try to save me. He and Hamish will carry me out while the Sheriff arrests you and hauls you off to jail or some variation thereof.”

“If the Master’s man doesn’t come for me, the sheriff will get me to the mainland, and we’ll figure out a new plan. Just believe I know what I’m doing, and that you need to remain dead. If the Master realizes what we’re up to, he’s going to come at me with everything he has. Do what you can to help Colby get the Phantom Fire to commit to us.”

“We’ve got this. I doubt this is going to be over fast. We may be able to cut the head off the serpent so to speak, but I doubt that’ll be the end of it. But whatever happens, we will be together.”

She leaned down, kissing him with a depth of love and passion she hadn't known she was capable of. "Now and forever."

She slipped out the door and headed down the stairs. He knew she was right; knew this was the way it had to be for now, but that didn't mean he had to like it, and he didn't. He lay back in bed and tried to force himself to sleep. It was one of the valuable lessons he'd learned in the military. Being able to get some shut eye no matter what was happening was a useful skill.

His internal alarm, however, meant the sleep was more of a nap. He grabbed a shower and headed down to see if he could get a cup of coffee to go and if anyone was around with his blood packet. He meant to affix it to his body once he got to the bakery and had the remaining part of his prep work done.

"Good morning," said Colby.

Hutch was beginning to wonder if the man ever slept.

"Morning. Nora's gone. I mean, she's not gone, she left. Shit, that isn't what I meant, either."

"Not to worry. I know what you mean. Do you need any help with the blood packet? I put together a little kit with the packet and some good adhesive. This will work and will give us a real leg up on the League."

"I'm good. I thought I'd put it on once I got to the bakery. There are places in the back of the kitchen where I can't be seen." Colby nodded and handed the small leather pouch to Hutch. Hutch started to leave and then stopped. "She means to kill him, doesn't she?"

"I think so. Wouldn't you? It will throw the League into a tizzy, and both of you will be safer if he's dead. Does it bother you?"

"What? That she's killed? No. She did what she had to do to survive, and from what little time we've had to talk, it sounds like she never killed anyone who didn't deserve to die or who wasn't trying to kill her. The Master is a sick bastard, and the world will be a better place without him."

“Agreed. I just wanted to make sure you’re all right with this. It isn’t an easy thing to send your mate into danger.”

“You sound like a man who knows what he’s talking about firsthand.”

Colby nodded. “I do. So never doubt that I don’t know what we’re asking of you—both of you. If I thought there was another way, even if I didn’t think it was a better way...”

“I know, but we both know there isn’t. This is the best shot we have at taking out the Master.”

“For what it’s worth, the legends say that there are few ways to kill a dragon. One is to lop off its head, which isn’t practical. The other two ways involve weapons made of obsidian. One is to pierce the heart or brain. Or alternatively, you can open them up with a weapon made of obsidian—what they once called dragon glass. I had two knives fashioned out of the stuff—a smaller one that will do the cutting and a stiletto that would do the stabbing. I made sure she had them and the retractable knife she requested.”

“Thank you, Colby, for everything. I doubt at this stage many people know how involved you are or the debt we all owe you, but one day they will.”

Colby smiled. “Even if they don’t, it will be worth whatever the cost. The threat of the Shadow League has loomed over all of us for too long. It should have been dealt with long ago. They will not prevail. It will take us time and blood, but in the end, good will conquer evil.”

“Spoken like a true believer.”

Hutch turned and headed out the door, not really surprised that his SUV was waiting for him. Nor was he surprised when he realized one of Colby’s men was lying down in the back. It seemed that the lynx-shifter meant to keep him safe. If only he could do the same for Nora.



There was something about kneading bread that seemed to soothe the soul—it wasn't something you could do mindlessly lest you over-develop the gluten, resulting in bread that was tough and chewy. But when done correctly, you developed a rhythm that allowed your mind to rest.

Just before opening the store, he stepped into the back where no one could see him even if they were peering into the bakery, and he attached the baggie filled with a red substance he hadn't really wanted to question.

The morning seemed to fly by, and he answered seemingly endless questions about the lack of Nora's presence. It allowed him to build the scenario of the jilted lover who wasn't handling her defection well. Not knowing how she would play it, he left doubt about who was actually at fault.

As the morning rush built to its crescendo, he could feel her presence as she neared the bakery. She maneuvered her way through the crowd. He could feel the people moving out of her way and could feel the fear and tension in her, running down the link. Masking his face into a hard line, he purred to her down the link. He trusted her to know what she was doing. She need have no fear. The strain and worry seemed to abate somewhat as she moved in for the 'kill.'

"Bastard," she snarled as she pounced.

No need for dialogue. Short, sweet, and to the point. She rammed the knife forward into the blood baggie with enough force that it made him gasp. People were screaming and trying to come at her as the blood began to flow from beneath his sweater.

"You stabbed me, you bitch," he snarled as he dropped to his knees and placed his hand over the 'wound.'

"I've done more than that, Hutchinson; I've killed you."

Hutch pitched himself forward, resisting the impulse to break his fall with his hands. The last thing he saw before closing his eyes was Jax Miller wrapping his arms around her and wrestling the knife from her grasp.

"Doc?" Jax growled.

“Right here. I need room. Derek, get everyone out of here and keep them out.”

“Derek, cuff her and take her down to the jail. Put her in a cell and keep her there. One of you go with him. I don’t need her getting to anyone else today. I’ll bring the knife with me when I come.”

“What the hell is going on?” growled Colby from the street as he made his way inside.

“Colby,” said Jax, “keep these people under control and out of here. Derek, get that woman into a cell, now! Then send someone with a stretcher and a body bag.”

There wasn’t a person in town who didn’t know Jax was a Kodiak grizzly shifter. It was one of the reasons he and Derek could so easily keep the peace. Derek and some of the other townsfolk helped Derek wrestle Nora down the street while Colby pushed everyone outside and closed the door behind them.

“Don’t move, Hutch; people can still see you, but not your face. Blink your eyes twice if you’re all right,” said Doc.

Hutch did as he was told. “He won’t hurt her, right?” whispered Hutch.

“No; that was a quick and effective show. I wasn’t quite sure that we hadn’t all been played somehow until you blinked.”

There was a hard rap on the door before it opened. “Morty’s here with the stretcher and body bag,” said Colby.

Morty moved past Colby and set the stretcher down along with the body bag. “Is he dead, Doc?”

“I don’t usually call for a body bag for the live ones,” Doc answered.

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t think that through. Damn, who’s going to run the bakery now?”

“We have bigger concerns right now than that, Morty. For instance, why did a woman who is virtually a stranger kill our baker?” asked Jax.

“And she had skill, too,” said Doc. “That was no random stab; the girl knew what she was doing.”

Once Morty had left and Colby had closed the door, Doc and Jax moved him into the body bag. He followed their instructions to just remain inert and limp. They zipped up the bag, which was an eerie feeling but gave him plenty of room to breathe.

“Good thing he isn’t claustrophobic,” said Doc. “I don’t know that I could do that.”

Jax chuckled. “Get Colby, Doc. He and I will carry the body; we’ll follow you to the clinic.”

Doc went and got Colby and then held the door as Colby and Jax lifted him. They moved through the door.

“Smart thinking, Betty,” Doc said.

“Derek called me and said there was a body. I thought having the van would keep you from having to carry him. Is it really Hutch? Is he really dead? That’s stupid. Of course, he’s dead, and I’m sure you know who you have in there.”

“That’s all right, Betty,” said Doc soothingly. “It’s been quite a shock for all of us.”



THE MOLE

The mole watched from the shadows of the alley. She’d done it. She’d managed to get the threat to their great endeavor, as the Master called it, eliminated. No doubt she would be told to kill herself.

The phone in his pocket vibrated. He fished it out and brought it to his ear.

“Is it done?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, there was blood everywhere. They put him in a body bag and are taking him to the morgue. They also took her away. Are you sending someone to kill her?”

“Why on earth would I do that? She has proven her loyalty and devotion to me and the cause. She will be rewarded upon her return to Lundy Island. But she’s going to need help getting out of that jail. Didn’t you tell me they just lock it up and leave it at night?”

“Normally, yeah, but I can’t see them doing that with having a killer locked up. But they’ll probably have to leave her alone from time-to-time.”

“Good. I need to get her some clothes, footwear, and a weapon. I’ll have all of them delivered to your truck just after dark. Wait until the coast is clear and then slip into the jail and leave the package with her. My good girl will know how to get out.”

“Yes, Master.”

All day he felt fidgety. On the one hand, the Master was finally trusting him with something. On the other hand, getting caught trying to help her could get him arrested or dead. If the Master trusted him, he would trust the Master and do his bidding.

After nightfall, he found the package in his truck and then went to the sheriff’s office. Most townspeople knew where they hid the extra key to the front door. When Derek had gone out on patrol, he snuck into the office and then into the back where the cells were located.

“Who are you?” she asked as he approached.

He shook his head, ensuring the dark hoodie obscured his face. Saying nothing, he set the package containing clothes, footwear, and god knew what else down on the floor. He scurried away so as not to be seen or caught. Reaching his truck, he got inside the cab and breathed heavily. He’d done it. He’d done the Master’s bidding. The rest was up to Nora.

CHAPTER 14



NORA

She watched the dark figure as he approached, leery that the Master had sent someone to kill her. She readied the knife up her sleeve in case she needed it. Without a word, the person put down the bundle and left. All she could tell was that it seemed male, but nothing more. He'd been hunched over and dressed in baggy clothes, making telling his height and even his basic body shape difficult to discern.

Quickly she unwrapped the package, revealing a note:

Change of plans. Lundy Island is too dangerous.

Stay close to Mystic River but stay in hiding.

Let no one see you. We are moving to

strike at the resistance, including Reynolds.

Clothes, weapons, food, and a map are in the package.

Await my orders.

No signature, but the tone made it clear the note was from the Master. She couldn't just disobey him. If she had returned to her former obedient self, she would never have done so. She'd make her way back to Windsong and Hutch. That wasn't the worst thing to happen. They could reconvene come morning.

Silently she picked the cell door lock with the lock pick that had been taped to the handle of the Glock that had been included. It wasn't her customized SIG, but it was a good weapon, nonetheless. She peeked into the sheriff's office. All

was clear. She crept out of the side door into the alley and made her way to the forest beyond. Once she was sure she could not be seen, she called forth her clouded leopard, allowing the swirling mist to make her feel revitalized and alive once more. Picking up the bundle of clothing she had set aside, she began to make her way to Windsong.

It had been an emotionally exhausting day. Having to even fake kill Hutch had taken a toll on her. She knew she'd executed the faux stabbing flawlessly, but still she would breathe easier, and her nerves would be less jangled when she was able to see him again.

She made her way over the hills and streams that wound through the countryside, keeping to the shadows where she wouldn't be spotted. The cold beneath her feet was unpleasant. Unlike the big cats that had adapted to snow and icy climates, clouded leopards had not. Their pureblooded brethren inhabited dense forests from the foothills of the Himalayas through India, Bhutan, Southeast Asia, and southern China. They might occasionally encounter cold climates and snow, but nothing compared to a harsh Alaskan winter.

Jumping to the top of the wall surrounding Windsong gave her the most elated feeling. She was going home. Home had ceased to be a place. Home was her mate, and she would be with him shortly.

She galloped over the land that encompassed Colby's estate. The place was enormous, and while it was well-protected, she could see lots of places where an intruder could make his or her way to the mansion without being easily spotted. She wove around the grassy knolls so that she could approach their room at the back of the house. Gathering speed, she charged toward the balcony, jumping up as hard as she could, but failing to meet her goal. The balcony was just outside her leaping ability. Knowing she would fail, she landed, absorbing the hit with her body, rolling away from the house. Retreating to a spot behind a large boulder, she bade her clouded leopard to retreat.

Once again in human form, she noted again how cold and harsh the Alaskan climate was. She ran to a place below the

balcony where she would be difficult to spot and heaved the package up and over the railing, landing it on the other side. She made her way to the vine-covered trellis and began to climb. Hand-over-hand, followed by foot-after-foot, she made her way to the side of the balcony and stepped over the railing to land lightly on the balcony floor.



HUTCH

Hutch slept soundly as it had been an exhausting day—not so much physically as mentally and emotionally. Even though he’d only felt it for the briefest piece of time, he missed being able to reach out to her along the link. He came awake quite suddenly and would have been concerned about what could wake him from a dead sleep when he felt the link flowing from her. Nora was here.

Rolling over, he saw her standing naked on the balcony, her nude body clothed in nothing other than the soft moonlight. She looked to him to be some ancient warrior goddess come to take her prize. That he was her prize was just fine with him. She wasn’t supposed to be here, but he trusted if she was, something unexpected had happened, and she had come home. He recognized the use of that term was flowing down the link. He was her home. He was her safe harbor, the one place to which she’d always return.

He rolled off the bed and wordlessly held his arms out to her. She moved as if she were walking on the very air itself. She made no sound, but came to him, wrapping her arms around him and rubbing her cheek against his bare chest.

“I received a note from the Master. He wants me to stay in place. He says they mean to strike at the heart of the resistance. He told me to wait for his instructions. We should wake—”

“Shhh,” he soothed her. He could hear the jangled nerves in her voice. “If he told you to wait, it wouldn’t be tonight. How’d you get the note?”

“Someone—a figure in a dark hoodie—brought me a bundle of clothing and other items. The note was on top. The person, whoever it was, never said a word. Didn’t even make a sound. It was kind of spooky.”

“It will wait for morning. If they meant to strike tonight, either you’d still be in jail or he wouldn’t have told you to wait for orders. Where does he want you to go?”

“He included a map.”

“It could be a trap.”

“It could be,” she said, acknowledging his concern. “But I don’t think it is. Besides, it’s been a long time since I entered any room or building without checking it out first. It must be some kind of safehouse. The Master has them all over the world. I can go looking for it, but I figured I could come here and let you and Colby know what had happened.”

Hutch nodded. “Good thinking. We can give you a tracking and/or communication device.”

“I don’t care what tomorrow brings. I need to be with you tonight.”

He drew her into bed and made love to her with a quiet intensity that seemed to reach down to the bottoms of their souls with its power.

Nora was asleep before he’d rolled from her. His ‘death’ had taken a far greater toll on her than it had on him. Even in her slumber, he could feel the restlessness within her. Worried she would slip away without confiding her fear and worry to him, he propped himself up on his elbow and watched her sleep, stroking her body and purring to her until she settled and slept.

She rolled towards him and opened her eyes, reaching up to touch his face. “You’re here. You’re alive.”

“I am. I’m fine, Nora. The worst part of the whole thing was that damn body bag.”

“I hated doing that to you. I am never doing it again. I mean I knew it was fake, but still, seeing all that blood and

you collapsing like that... it was every worst nightmare I never knew I had.”

“It’s all right, baby. You’re here and you’re safe. I knew it would probably rattle you, and I couldn’t reach down the link to you. I wanted you to know.”

“I had to shut the link down in order to be able to do it.” She shuddered. “Never again.”

“Look, if the Master wants you to wait, maybe he’s coming out of his den.”

She seemed to think about that. “Maybe,” she agreed.

“We’ll get to Colby before the house awakes and figure out a new plan. If you’re not going to go to Lundy Island, which I have to tell you I’m relieved about, maybe we can figure out who the mole is and use them to feed bad information to the League.”

“I should probably leave. The Master may have the place being watched and if I don’t show up under cover of darkness it might tip him off.”

“You stay here, and I’ll go roust Colby. I don’t want you leaving without a way for us to track you or you to contact us.”

There was a soft knock on the door. Hutch directed her to the ensuite bath, pulled on some sweatpants, and answered the door. Colby slid inside.

“We don’t know where Nora is,” Colby said.

Hutch grinned at him. If Nora had managed to get inside Windsong with no one seeing her, she was better than they thought, or Windsong’s defenses weren’t as impregnable as Colby believed.

“Maybe you don’t, but I do. Put something on and come on out babe, it’s just Colby.”

“First, no need to get clothed on my account,” said Colby, provoking a growl from Hutch. Colby flashed him a grin. “You are so easy to bait. And second, I’ve never been ‘just’ anything.”

“Yeah, you can see what that particular bait will get you when I punch you in the face.”

Nora came out of the bath dressed in a sweater Hutch had worn earlier in the day. “He had someone deliver me a bundle of clothing and gear and told me to wait. I have a map as to where I’m to go, but I can’t tell you jack about the person who delivered it. Whoever it was made sure to dress and move so it would be hard to identify them again.”

“I hoped you might show up or at least contact Hutch. I brought up a tracking chip we can put under your skin as well as a communication device that you should be able to hide, but you can use to get to us. If there’s an emergency, tap the spot where we insert the chip. That’ll activate an emergency homing beacon.”

“How about under your hair at the base of your skull?”

“Will it leave a visible scar? I wear my hair up a lot.”

“It’ll be a bit red for several hours after it’s inserted, but it’s smaller than a grain of rice.”

Nora nodded. “I can work with that.”

Colby handed her a communication device that was like a tiny ear plug, which would be difficult to spot even if someone was standing next to her. He used a hypodermic to insert the chip. Hutch didn’t like the way she flinched when it was injected under her skin.

“I think you and I eat different kinds of rice,” she quipped.

“I apologize for any discomfort, but I feel better knowing we have a way to track you and you have a way to communicate with us,” said Colby.

“Don’t be shy about using the emergency beacon,” said Hutch. “I don’t want to lose you.”

She smiled. “Martyr has never been my style.”

“I hate to break this up, but Nora, you need to get on your way. I trust everyone here, but I don’t want you spotted.”

“I’ll go out the way I came in and shift back. I’ve memorized the map, and I’ll leave it with Hutch, just in case you need it.”

“Good thinking, sweetheart.” Hutch pulled her in for a kiss. “I love you, but Colby’s right, you need to be on your way.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I arrive.”



NORA

Nora tossed the package over the railing and onto the lawn and then climbed down the trellis until she reached the ground. Moving back behind the boulder, she shifted, picked up the bundle and galloped in the direction of the safe house. The map led her up above Mystic River and then south along Kodiak Island’s western coastline.

Just before sunrise, she came upon a rustic shack. Calling it that was being kind. It looked as if it had been there for a very long time. She moved around the perimeter of the shack’s clearing, checking for any signs of entrapment. Finding none, she approached from the rear of the cabin, shifted, and managed to get the door open just enough to get through. Once inside, she saw why the windows were mostly boarded up.

It might be lacking in natural light, but that was about all it lacked. The safe house was well furnished, almost luxuriously. There was a generator with a push-button start that gave her heat and electricity. She was certain the fireplace worked, but it would give off smoke, which would give the location away, thereby defeating the purpose of a secret safe house.

There was a working stove and fridge. It was mainly just one big room but had an enormous bed in one corner. The only room that wasn’t fully open to the rest of the place was the spa-like bath. Whoever had decked this out had wanted guests staying here to be comfortable. Opening the fridge, Nora found it to be stocked and ready to go. She tried the taps and

found running water. A tankless water heater was tucked inside a well-stocked pantry.

There was a communications center with a computer, dual monitors, and a desk. She wasn't sure how, but when she fired the computer up, she could see she had access to the internet.

She moved toward the bed, tossing down the bundle and putting things away. She turned back the bedcovers to find soft, flannel sheets in soothing colors. Someone had paid close attention to the comfort of anyone staying in the safe house.

Feeling the hair stand up on the back of her neck, she turned to see the front door being unlocked and someone pushing his way in. Only the hand that wrapped around the door wasn't male. It was most definitely female, and Nora recognized the nail color. Everything fell into place, and she knew that both Hutch and Colby had been wrong about the mole.

Nora checked the Glock. It was loaded. She brought it up to bear and it was the first thing the mole saw as she stepped inside.

CHAPTER 15



NORA

“*I*t’s you,” said Nora in a shocked voice.

The last person she ever would have suspected stared back at her. Nora thought that Hutch’s assessment of those most likely to be the mole for the League had been on point. Will was a marten, and like Hutch, she didn’t trust weasels. Additionally, he was the bartender at The Workshop, which put him in a good position to overhear and pass information along. Morty, the moose-shifter, seemed dull, but that could be a feint. He traveled extensively in and around Kodiak Island with no one really knowing where he was or what he was doing. Ellis Wells had seemed like the long shot in the group. Nora might have been surprised had it been the alpha to the pack at Wolf Run, but not nearly as shocked as she was to see Trudy Edwards staring back at her.

“Your grasp of the obvious is second to none,” said Trudy. “It’s a good thing you finally decided to do your job. I was worried about what might happen if you didn’t. The Master was none too pleased with you.”

“He’ll get over it. Why? I have to tell you that you might be the last person I suspected. I’d have been quicker to believe it was Hamish.”

A look of pain crossed her face. “Hamish,” she said with a sigh. “Dear, sweet Hamish. How could you ever suspect Hamish of anything untoward or disloyal? He’d sooner fall on his sword than betray those he cares about.”

“But why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.” Nora realized if she was going to pull off this double agent stunt, she needed Trudy to believe. “How am I supposed to trust you if I don’t understand why you would work against those you seem to care about?”

“Sometimes you have to make difficult choices—whether to remain loyal to those of your blood or those who you have made your family. You, more than anyone, should understand that.”

“I do understand that, but I don’t understand you.”

Trudy shook her head. “Like you, I didn’t have a choice.”

“I was a child, an orphan, and my social worker basically sold me to the Master. What’s your excuse?”

“At least I never killed anyone,” Trudy said defensively.

“No,” said Nora with a smile, “you just set them up to be killed or delivered the orders for their deaths. You didn’t have the courage to pull the trigger yourself.”

If Trudy thought she was going to make Nora feel bad, she needed to think again. For a moment, Trudy looked as though Nora had struck her in the face, but she seemed to shake it off.

“That’s neither here nor there. He has another assignment for you,” Trudy said, thrusting a small envelope at her.

Nora took the envelope and Trudy spun on her heel, sweeping out of the room and through the front door, which she tried to slam. The only problem was, the door had been designed to look old, but had soft-close capability. With a disgruntled look at her inability to make a grand exit, Trudy departed.

Grabbing a small knife, Nora slit open the envelope, gasping as a small photograph slid from the interior.

Her mark was Colby Reynolds.



HUTCH

Hutch spent his morning going through further background information on his three suspects. As it was, Morty seemed to have the best regular job to move around without arousing suspicion. While the bumbling moose thing could be an act, it didn't strike Hutch as that. Will was the most obvious suspect. He was a weasel, and they were not known for their loyalty. The problem with Will was just that—he was entirely too easy to believe. Ellis Wells could be working with the Shadow League, but he couldn't see the alpha doing any kind of menial work. He might be an arrogant bastard, but in many ways that tended to eliminate him as a suspect.

He got up and moved around the room. Nora had yet to check in. Surely, she'd reached the Shadow League's safehouse by now. He was feeling antsy and didn't seem to be getting anywhere. He moved to the window and looked out over the expansive lawn toward the beach and the sea that lay beyond. He wanted all of whatever was coming to be over. He wanted to be able to focus on himself and Nora and the life they would create.

As he paced the floor, the signal came through that Nora had arrived safe and sound at the safehouse.

Bored out of his mind, Hutch decided to go do what he always did when he was bored—make croissants. Making croissants was not only difficult, but it was also incredibly time consuming and took liberal amounts of patience and concentration. Getting the laminated dough just right had been the bane of many a baker. Once you got the recipe and the technique down pat, though, croissants were hard to beat and provided the baker with a variety of options. He headed down to the kitchen and sought out Maya, Colby's housekeeper.

“For a dead man, you're looking pretty chipper this morning,” Maya said by way of greeting. “Was there something I could get for you?”

“No. Just the opposite. If I could take over some counter space and commandeer one of the ovens, I'd like to make croissants for everyone.”

Maya shook her head. “I’ve never been able to develop the knack for that laminated dough.”

“It’s not difficult—” Maya gave him her best side-eye. “—it truly isn’t. It does take a little time and patience, though.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Yours are certainly distinctive. We’d be glad to have them. We have a kind of butler’s pantry off the main kitchen that at one time was used by a pastry chef. We can clear that space out for you. You can make whatever you like and if there’s something you need, just let one of us know.”

“Thank you, Maya. I’ll try to stay out of everyone’s way.”

Hutch spent the next several hours creating both savory and sweet croissants. People wandered in and out picking up the pastries and enjoying them. It was the thing he liked best about baking—you worked hard and got to feed people something they really enjoyed. Even better, the kitchen and the whole of the downstairs was filled with the delectable scent of the croissants.

“As far as I’m concerned, you and Nora can just move in here permanently,” said Maya.

Hutch chuckled. “Well, while I’m here I can make up your usual order of bread and rolls.”

“That would be wonderful. Everyone has gotten used to eating baked goods from you. I know we’re not set up for you ideally, but I’ve got one or two people who would love to give you a hand and might be able to make it a little easier.”

“That would be great. I’ve been thinking about expanding what we offer and having someone come in a day or two a week might be really helpful.”

Maya smiled. “I think we can arrange that.”

He and Maya packed a basket full of filled croissants to take to some of Colby’s people down to Windsong’s onsite medical facility. Colby had a nurse practitioner and three nurses to provide healthcare. For more serious cases, Doc Hadley was called in or those in need were taken to Doc’s clinic in town.

He looked up to see Hamish entering the kitchen.

“I’ll be damned. Hutch, it’s good to see you,” the big Scotsman said, extending his hand.

“Hamish.” Hutch wasn’t sure what else to say. There had been a discussion as to whether or not Hamish, as Colby’s second, should be told, but they felt it might put him in a difficult position as he was Trudy’s mate.

“Hamish,” said Colby as he entered the kitchen. “We need to talk.”

Hamish looked at the lynx-shifter sheepishly. “Let me guess, I am to tell no one. Are you setting Naomi up? Something about that girl doesn’t strike me as quite right.”

“Hutch? Hamish? With me,” ordered Colby as he picked up one of the plates with croissants and headed out of the kitchen and down the hall to his study.

“So, what’s going on, Colby?” asked Hamish.

“Naomi is not Naomi. Her real name is Nora Blake, but she is more widely known as the Ghost.”

Hamish blanched. “Holy shit. What’s she doing—wait; you faked Hutch’s death? Was she supposed to kill him? Does she know he isn’t dead?”

“She knows, and in fact, was in on the staging of Hutch’s death,” said Colby. “The resistance just gained a valuable asset. She was the Master’s top assassin. He sent her here to kill him. I don’t think anyone was planning on her being Hutch’s fated mate.”

“If he thinks I’m dead, we were hoping she could return and act as a double agent until we got the information we needed,” said Hutch. “You can imagine how much I disliked that idea. Then she got orders to stay. We figure either he’s either coming after her or he’s got another assignment for her here in Mystic River.”

Hamish shook his head. “You alphas and your complicated mates. I much prefer my Trudy—no cloak and dagger, no lethal skills, no reason to put herself in danger.”

“Which is why you cannot tell anyone, even Trudy, that Hutch is alive,” said Colby levelly.

“I’ll not lie to my mate, Colby,” growled Hamish.

“And normally, I wouldn’t ask you to. But in this case, the less she knows, the safer she is. The Master is likely to kill anyone he even thinks knows something.”

Hamish seemed to be thinking. “I suppose I can see where that might be true, but how long are we talking about?”

“Hopefully no more than a week or two, a month at the most.”

“But everyone at Windsong knows,” said Hamish.

“Because there was really no way for them not to if we wanted to keep him safe. The League wants Hutch dead because they know his skill set. He is a master at reconnaissance. We need him. This is when the real work starts. It’s fine to form the resistance and do training, but both sides are preparing for battle, and there will be blood. When it comes down to it, Trudy is going to need to shut down the B&B and come up here.” Colby raised his hand to keep Hamish from arguing with him. “I’ll cover all her expenses and lost revenue. In all honesty, the resistance may well need to rent her rooms for our own and visiting people. Can I count on your discretion?”

“For a while, but I don’t like it. I will tell you before I say anything to Trudy. That’s the best I can offer.”

“That’s more than enough, Hamish,” said Hutch.

There was a knock on the door, and one of Colby’s security people stuck his head in. “Trudy’s at the main gate. She says she needs to speak to Colby.”

“Did she say about what?” Hamish asked.

“No, sir.”

“Tell them to let her in. Hamish, go warn everyone that Trudy is here but is not in on our deception. Hutch, I need you to disappear upstairs.”

Hutch headed up the staircase and into his room as Hamish disappeared down the hall.



COLBY

Trudy's appearance at Windsong seemed curious and coincidental. Colby didn't like coincidences but stood as she was shown into his office.

"Trudy, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" said Colby as he came around from behind his desk.

"I heard that the woman who was staying with me is some kind of assassin. I have her things that she left in the room. I wasn't sure what to do with them. I'm expecting all of those people from Otter Cove, Seattle and other places. I'm not sure I have enough rooms. At one point you said you might have room for them here at Windsong."

Plausible, and he had offered to help with rooms. But with a dead man hiding out, that might prove problematic. Trudy took the chair he offered and sat down, delicately sniffing the air and spotting the croissants.

"May I offer you one? There are some filled with chocolate and some with ham and cheese."

"Thank you. I was so rattled by what happened yesterday that I forgot to eat. I made sure Hamish had his breakfast, but then I got busy."

She took one of the ham and cheese croissants, biting into it and moaning. "These are so good. They taste just like the ones Hutch used to make in the shop. He told me once that he used to bake the hams himself instead of using deli meat. It always tasted to me like there was some honey Dijon mustard in them."

Colby's focus sharpened, and he regarded the woman sitting before him. What did they really know about her? "It might sound a bit maudlin, but we had some of his croissants and other pastries in the freezer. We were all very fond of

Hutch. It seemed fitting to thaw some out and serve them at breakfast—kind of an homage to him.”

Trudy regarded him coolly. “I guess I can see that. He did enjoy feeding people.”

“Yes, he did. The whole thing is so unfortunate for the community. I know you and several other businesses and estates used his bread and rolls exclusively. Would you like me to find Hamish for you?”

“Oh, heaven’s no. He doesn’t need to worry about me. Just let me know what you think I should do with her things. I really don’t like having them at The Refuge.”

“Why don’t you get them packed, and Hamish can bring them up tomorrow?”

She stood up. “I suppose that would be fine. Thank you, Colby, and thank you for the croissant.”

“Why don’t you take one of the chocolate ones for the road?”

“I probably shouldn’t, but I don’t mind if I do.”

She wrapped the treat up in a napkin and slipped it into her purse. Colby walked outside with her to her vehicle, helped her in, and waved as she drove away. He smiled, waving as she made her way down the driveway. She’d said nothing specific that had set his alarm bells off, but they were ringing anyway. His hackles raised, Colby headed back into the house and up the stairs. He wanted Hutch to start digging into Trudy’s life.

CHAPTER 16



NORA

Nora knew she needed to get word to Colby, and they needed to come up with a new plan. Not only was the Master wanting to kill Colby, Trudy was the mole—or at least one of them. That was part of the problem. She had no idea if there were others. Given the Master's normal level of paranoia, she doubted very much Trudy was the only one.

And what had been behind the flash of pain Nora had seen in Trudy's eyes?

If somebody was watching, she needed to make it appear as though she was still inside. She thought about using the communication device, but worried about it being out-of-range or intercepted in some way. Nora had never been overly fond of or trusted electronic communications. Besides this was a conversation best had in person. She would be able to move more quickly and safely if she shifted and ran cross country to Windsong. She didn't see a need to take clothes with her, as there should be something she could borrow from someone up at Windsong.

She called forth her clouded leopard and slipped out of the cabin through the same small door she'd used to enter it. As she galloped through the woodland, she realized how nice it would be to live somewhere she didn't have to drive out of town, find a remote, unpopulated spot and go for a run. Mystic River offered her not only her fated mate, but a home where she could be herself and shift anytime she wanted.

Nora ran at her full capacity, circling back every so often to ensure that no one was following her. As far as she could

tell, she had eluded anyone who might have been watching. She approached Windsong from the far side and leaped up onto and then down from the wall that surrounded it.

She kept to the shadows and shrubbery until she spotted the balcony to the room she shared with Hutch. Gathering her strength, she rushed across the open ground and leapt up, only barely managing to catch the flooring of the deck.

“Nora? What the hell?” She heard Hutch rushing to her. He just managed to catch her before she fell. He hauled her over the balustrade by wrapping his arms under her front legs and falling backwards so that he cradled her fall with his body.

Nora scrambled off of him and bounded into the room. She bade her clouded leopard to relinquish control and was immediately enveloped in the swirling mist of color, light, and sound. As it dissipated, Hutch reached her, scooping her off of the floor and moving to a large wingback chair in front of the fire. Once he was seated with Nora in his lap, he wrapped a soft blanket around her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I am. We need to find me some clothes, and we need to speak to Colby. Now, Hutch, it’s urgent.”

“All right. Hang on. I think there are some things in the closet that will work.”

He came back out with a pair of leggings and one of his sweaters. She pulled both on quickly, took him by the hand and led him out into the hall, down the stairs and to Colby’s office. She didn’t bother to knock as she opened the door, pulling Hutch in behind her.

“Nora,” Colby said standing.

She eyed Hamish who also got to his feet and Nora said pointedly. “I need the room—just Colby, Hutch and I.”

“Hamish is my second-in-command...”

“Fine, but it changes nothing. I need to speak with you and Hutch alone.”

“Is it about Trudy?” asked Colby from behind her.

Nora spun around. “You knew?”

“Not until earlier today. She showed up here ostensibly about what to do with your things and perhaps needing rooms here at Windsong for some of those traveling to Mystic River. There was something off and I had Hutch start running down her background. I was just about to discuss it with Hamish.”

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing checking out my mate?” growled Hamish.

“There was something in the way she acted that caused my hackles to rise. I realized that while Trudy has been here a couple of years, I didn’t know that much about her. Hutch found there wasn’t much to know. It seems her whole history is a fabrication.”

“I don’t believe that,” spat Hamish. “I won’t hear you sully my mate’s good name.”

“No one is doing that, Hamish,” said Colby, pushing a file across the desk to him. “See for yourself. It’s as if Trudy Edwards didn’t exist until about five years ago...”

“And I’m not sure of the information I found,” said Hutch. “But it seems clear to me that Trudy is not the woman everyone led us to believe.”

“My Trudy is a good and honorable lass...” started Hamish.

“Your Trudy works for the Master—the man behind the Shadow League. She’s the mole—at least one of them.”

Hamish stood up slamming his fist down on the desk. “I will not let you talk about her that way.”

Nora stepped forward, and Hamish snarled, with Hutch answering with a growl of his own.

“Can we dial back the testosterone?” asked Nora in as reasonable a voice as she could. “I understand your not wanting to believe, Hamish. I’ve only known her for a day or two and I don’t want to believe it. I couldn’t tell you who broke me out of jail, but I can tell you who came through the front door of the League’s safehouse up above the town.”

“No. I won’t believe it. You’re a murderer—an assassin. Why should any of us believe you?”

“That’s a fair question, and were I in your shoes, I don’t think I would, but I am telling the truth. You’re right. I was a killer, the Master’s best assassin—until I wasn’t. Until I met the guy growling at you, and then I couldn’t do it anymore. Trudy was sent to me to deliver another assignment.” Nora flipped the envelope to Colby. “When she was there, I sensed something and I’m almost sure I saw a glint of pain flash through her eyes. No one in this room—maybe even in this world—knows the Master the way I do. I know what he’s capable of. Trudy is working for him, but I’m not sure she is doing it free of coercion.”

“What do you mean?” asked Colby as he took the photograph from the envelope. His face showed little surprise. He looked up to meet her stare. “After Hutch, I am the most logical target. The only other viable target is Mark Hadley, but I think the Master would see me as a greater threat. I don’t know that he knows about the Fire Star Alliance, but we should let the others know just in case.”

“You’re probably right...”

“Then Trudy can’t be the mole, she knows who the players are,” said Hamish, defending his mate.

“Like I said, I don’t think she’s doing it out of conviction or her own self-interest. There’s more at play than this. I also think there’s a second mole and one who isn’t privy to the inner workings of the Alliance.” She walked over to Hamish, laying her hand on his forearm. “I think the Master either has something on her or is holding something over her head. I think she has stayed silent. It’s obvious the Master doesn’t trust her completely as there is another mole, and she didn’t know who I was when we met.”

Hamish paled as he sat back down. “She can’t be involved; she can’t. She’s a good and sweet lass, and I love her.”

“Nora said she doesn’t believe she wants to be doing this, right?”

Nora nodded. “Right. Can you think of anything that would make her go against everything else she believed in?”

Hamish hung his head and started to shake it and then stopped, looking up at Nora. “DFTD. Devil Facial Tumor Disorder. It’s all but wiped out their purebloods and now Tasmanian devil-shifters are being infected. It’s almost always fatal. It’s the reason she doesn’t want to be claimed.”

“She’d become a snow leopard like you,” said Colby. “That would keep her safe but do nothing for her people.”

“Isn’t Carson Payne in charge of genetic research and trying to figure out what the League is doing up in Reykjavik?” asked Hutch. Colby nodded. “My guess is the Master promised that they’d find a cure. She’s trying to save her species. Hamish is right. She’s a brave and good woman.”

“We can’t let her report to the Master, and we have to keep her safe,” said Hutch.

“Hutch, you and Nora go get Trudy. Bring her back to Windsong and don’t be seen. We’ll get to the bottom of this. If she is guilty of working for the League and we can convince her that her people have a better chance of survival with us than they do trusting the League, she may be able to help us with the identification of the other mole.”

“I’ll go fetch her,” said Hamish.

“No. I need you here at Windsong. Nora, I need you to take one of my men, go into Mystic River and kidnap Trudy, and bring her here.”

“If Nora is going, I’m going,” snarled Hutch.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” argued Colby.

“Maybe. But it already sounds like she knows I’m not. Maybe seeing me with Nora will give her second thoughts about what she’s been doing.”

“I don’t like it,” said Colby, “but you might be right. Hamish, I’m sorry, but I want her rattled. I don’t think your Trudy is cut out for the spy game. I don’t think it’ll take much to break her. And the easiest way I can think of doing so is if

she's frightened and then sees you. I think she probably has wanted to tell you for the longest time. I've seen the way she looks at you. The woman is in love with you."

"Then why not ask me for help?"

"Because you thick-headed Scot, you'd have run off to challenge the Master to some kind of chivalrous duel."

"Does Hamish know the Master is a dragon?" asked Nora. "My guess is Trudy doesn't. Most don't."

"He's a dragon?" asked Hamish.

"Yes, and we think he may be trying to recruit others, including the Phantom Fire," said Colby. "I don't think he can get them. For him, the best he can hope for is that they remain neutral."

"Damn that bastard to hell," snarled Hamish.

"I'm pretty sure he was one of the architects," quipped Nora. All three men stared at her. "Sorry. Gallows humor. But if Hutch and I are going to snatch her, we need to go now. If she even suspects Hutch is alive..." She let the sentence trail off. She didn't need to spell it out for any of them.

"You'll not hurt her," said Hamish.

"Not unless we absolutely have to and then only as much as we need to subdue her. She'll be fine, Hamish. I give you my word," said Hutch.

Maya was able to round up better clothing and footwear for Nora. They bundled it up in a packet Hutch would carry. Colby would send a driver into town to pick up something. He would then rendezvous with Hutch and Nora and bring Trudy back to Windsong. The plan was to try and bring her back to Windsong unobserved, but if someone saw her, she would appear to have been forced.

Nora and Hutch shifted in their room. Hutch picked up the packet with their clothes, and they used the cover of the encroaching darkness to make their way from Windsong to the far side of town where The Refuge was located. They kept their distance from the B&B until they were sure Trudy was in

for the night. Then they shifted and quietly made their way inside.

“I knew it,” Trudy hissed. “I knew you weren’t dead.” She focused her attention on Nora. “He’ll kill you. He’ll kill him. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

Nora nodded coldly. “Far better than you,” she said. Without further warning, she punched Trudy in the chin, causing the Tasmanian devil-shifter to go out like a light. Nora caught her and eased her to the floor.

“I thought we weren’t going to hurt her,” scolded Hutch.

“What’s a little love tap among friends? Besides, she’s been spying on all of you for years. And as much as she might have been doing so under duress, I have no doubt she would have told the Master if she hasn’t already.”

“Is it a bad thing that I find you incredibly sexy at the moment?”

Nora stared at him and then began to laugh. “You’re a sick bastard.”

He laughed. “But I’m your sick bastard, and you love me.”

She smiled. She wondered if he really knew just how much. “I do, indeed. Now let’s get her back to Windsong.”

Hutch picked Trudy up off the floor and cradled her to his chest, he and Nora skulked out the back way and located Colby’s driver and car, who had them on the way back to Windsong in short order.

None of them knew about the figure in the hoodie that watched them speed away before initiating a cell phone call.

CHAPTER 17



HUTCH

They made their way back to Windsong, where Hamish met them at the foot of the back stairs that led up to the house and into the kitchen.

“Why isn’t she moving?” asked Hamish, clearly concerned.

Before Hutch could stop her from responding to Hamish’s question, Nora said, “I bopped her on the chin. Oh, don’t scowl. I’m a professional. I know what I’m doing.”

For some reason that struck Hamish as funny and he chuckled, lifting Trudy out of the SUV and saying to Hutch. “Like I said, you, Sean and Colby can keep the warrior princesses. That one’s going to give you hell for the rest of your life.”

“Good thing I like it warm,” quipped Hutch, following Nora’s sweet ass as it bounced its way up the stairs in front of him.

Hamish set Trudy in one of the chairs in Colby’s office and then bound her with a length of silken cord. “Devils don’t like to be bound. It really sets them off.” He looked at Colby. “I still don’t like this.”

“It’s the best way, and you know it. She’ll be back in your arms in no time at all. Why don’t you give us a moment.”

Hamish nodded and retreated from the room. With the use of smelling salts, Trudy came awake, and as Hamish had

predicted fought against her bonds with a fury Hutch never would have guessed she possessed.

“He’ll kill you—us, all of us. You don’t know what he’s capable of,” said Trudy, on the verge of tears.

“Oh, but I do,” said Nora. “Shall I tell you about the little girl he adopted into his opulent world, giving her the best of everything, except when she didn’t do as she was told, or wasn’t the best, or worst of all, openly defied him? Do you know how he responded? Was there a gentle expression of disappointment? Only if you call backhanding said little girl across the room or maybe locking her in the family mausoleum or in a cave with rising water and no way out, gentle. Don’t tell me I don’t know what he’s capable of. I assure you; I do.”

Trudy gaped at her—at a complete loss for words. “He’s a monster,” she whispered finally.

Nora kneeled in front of her. “Yes, he is. And it’s up to us—all of us—to stop him. What does he know?”

“He knows Hutch is alive. I didn’t tell him. I called to tell him, but he was already in a rage. He knew.”

“There’s another mole, isn’t there?” asked Colby.

Trudy nodded. “Hamish will never forgive me. I’ve betrayed you all. And now the Master...”

“Whatever he promised you,” said Colby, “he was never going to deliver on.”

“It’s the Tasmanian Devil cancer, isn’t it?” asked Nora gently.

“He said that he had researchers in Iceland...”

“And he does. And if they’re researching DFTD it’s only because the League is going to try and weaponize it.” Nora reached up and untied Trudy’s bonds. “How contagious is it, and does it cross species?”

Trudy took a deep breath. “It’s very contagious among Tasmanian devils—purebred and shifters. It can infect other species. Its greatest strength as a weapon is that there is no

known cure, and it is almost always fatal.” She brought her hands up to her face. “What have I done? Some of my people must have guessed and pulled their support, but I was so sure he could and would find a cure. How could I be so stupid?”

“Because one of the Master’s greatest skills is to find someone’s most vulnerable spot and turn it against them.”

“My whole family was wiped out by the disease. It’s a horrific way to die. Many of those affected go mad from the pain. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I told myself it was for the greater good.”

“You have no idea how many times I told myself that,” said Nora. “Do you know who the other mole is?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never seen his face and I think he uses some kind of device to distort his voice.”

“Big or small?” asked Hutch.

“I wouldn’t say small. Well, maybe small compared to Hamish, but then most men are.”

“Will,” Colby and Hutch said in unison.

“Do you think so?” said Trudy. “He’s always been so nice and friendly.”

“Hutch has been working on the identity of the mole. I have to say you never even made it onto the list of suspects until this afternoon. We’d narrowed it down to Ellis Wells, Will, or Morty.”

“Earlier today, I eliminated Wells as a suspect, which left Will or Morty. Morty would rival if not surpass Hamish in size.”

“It makes sense,” said Nora. “He’s in a great position to overhear and see things. People come and go all the time, so it’s easy enough for him to pass along whatever he finds out. When did you know Hutch wasn’t dead?”

“When Colby offered me a croissant.” She turned to Colby. “Anyone who bakes can tell the difference between a freshly baked croissant and a frozen and reheated one.” She

looked at the group as a whole. “What are you going to do with me?”

“I’m going to do what any self-respecting alpha would do. I’m going to turn you over to your mate and let him deal with you. I rather suspect he will sentence you to life with him,” said Colby.

“He’s right about that, lass,” said the Scottish snow leopard as he joined them. “And there’ll be no parole or time off for good behavior.”

Trudy couldn’t get to the safety of Hamish’s arms fast enough.

“You’re in charge of keeping her out of trouble. Until we can neutralize Will and put a stop to whatever the Master is up to, Trudy stays here at Windsong with you under house arrest. I’ll send one of our people down to run The Refuge. I think we’re going to need it.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Trudy. “I know that isn’t much.”

Nora laid her hand on her arm. “It’s more than enough. You didn’t have a choice.”

Trudy laid her hand on top of Nora’s. “Nor did you.”

“So how do we catch Will?” asked Nora.

“I don’t think it needs to be subtle,” said Colby. “I’ll send a couple of my men into town and wait for him. When The Workshop closes, they’ll pick him up and bring him out here. We can question him in the morning.”

“Do you have a secure room to keep him in?” asked Nora.

Colby chuckled. “Better than that, a nice little dungeon built under the garage. It’s probably better than he deserves, but we need to know how much damage he’s done before we sentence him to die.”

Hutch shook his head. “There’s no need for you or the resistance to get your hands dirty. Banish him to the mainland. When the Master hears how badly he fucked up, he’ll kill him as an example to others.”

Nora nodded. “He’s right. The Master doesn’t tolerate failure.”



NORA

Nora woke the next morning with the most incredible feeling of well-being. The night before with Hutch had been nothing less than spectacular. It was as if they couldn’t get enough of one another. She stretched and rolled onto her back. She knew he wasn’t beside her. He and Colby were in the dungeons of Windsong interrogating the Master’s other mole.

She couldn’t remember a single time in her life when she’d been so happy. Her body had the loveliest ache from all the lovemaking she’d done with Hutch the night before. Trudy, who she had begun to think of as a friend, had turned out to have a good reason for spying for the Master and had turned against him, they’d found and apprehended the other mole, and she herself had finally broken away from a life from which she’d never thought to be free.

Her phone rang and she picked it up, smiling at the caller ID. It was Fallon—only it wasn’t. The voice was easily recognizable. It was the Master—how had he gotten Fallon’s phone?

“Did you really think you could betray me?” he said angrily.

Wary because it was Fallon’s number on the caller ID, she suppressed her instinct to taunt him. “You gave me little choice, but then I never really had a choice at all, did I? Sometimes I think you pushed me just to see how far I would go.”

“I pushed you to maximize your potential. I had hoped you could learn to shove away your humanity and become more to me than just my ward.”

The Master really was delusional. “Your ‘ward?’ Is that what you call me?”

“But of course,” he said smoothly, reining in his anger. “I took you in and gave you the best of everything...”

“You turned me into a killer.”

“I freed you from conventional thinking so that when you were ready, you could join me at my side.”

“As what?” she asked incredulously. “Your acolyte? Your slave?”

“As my mate.”

She couldn't believe he'd said that. The very thought of it made her gag. “You know, Master, I don't think there is anything you could have said that would have surprised me more.”

“You have eliminated yourself from consideration.”

There's a bit of good news. No need to tell him I'd been fucking my fated mate's brains out all night.

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“As you should be, but that is neither here nor there.”

“So, why are you calling? And how did you get Fallon's phone?”

“I decided that perhaps with the proper motivation you could be made to see the error of your ways.”

Nora could feel the hair on the back of her neck coming up. “What have you done?” she whispered.

“Nothing that can't be mostly undone if you make the right decision and come back to the fold. I'm not sure you could ever be more to me now than a valuable asset, but your friend Fallon is depending on you to make the right choice.”

“I swear by all that you hold dear, if you harm a single hair on her head, you won't need to worry about the resistance coming for you, I'll kill you myself,” Nora said in a calm voice that didn't betray the rage of emotion storming through her veins.

“You are in no position to threaten me. You have somehow turned one of my longest placed operatives...”

“We both know you were never going to try and find a cure for DFTD.”

“Of course not, but that foolish girl didn’t know that, not until you told her—I’m assuming you told her.”

“That would be correct,” said Nora.

“And I understand poor Will was picked up by some of Reynolds men...”

How the hell did he know that and so quickly? Was there a third operative?

“You failed to eliminate either of the targets I sent you there to kill.”

“What can I say, I’m a major disappointment.”

“You are indeed,” snarled the Master, betraying his own emotions. “But I have decided to be magnanimous. I have, after all, invested a great deal in your training. You have cost me deeply, but I am going to give you one opportunity to make things right.”

“Why would I even care?”

“Because as far as I know, Fallon Kent is the only friend you’ve ever had.” He let the threat hang in the air between them.

Damn. How did I forget he was calling from Fallon’s phone and most likely was holding her prisoner?

“Unless you want to see her burned at the stake, I suggest you remember who your master is. You either kill Hutchinson and Reynolds or your little friend dies a horrific death.”

Nora knew him well enough to know that he wasn’t bluffing. “What will you require for proof?” she said coldly.

“I have hope that you might be redeemable. A picture of each and let’s say an ear delivered by overnight express. It didn’t take you anytime at all to turn on your lover and Reynolds.”

“One dick is as good as another in the dark. How do I know you’ll keep your end of the bargain?”

“As you said, if I don’t, my premiere assassin will make me her next target.”

“I want proof of life. For all I know Fallon is already dead.”

The Master chuckled—it was a malevolent sound. “I taught you well.”

Suddenly a video opened up showing Fallon bound and gagged. She was wide-eyed with fright. “I want to speak to her, and you will install her in a comfortable room and see that she is cared for.”

The video got a bit shaky as the Master approached Fallon and then ripped the gag off her mouth.

“Don’t do whatever he wants, Nora. Do you...”

The rest was cut off as the Master backhanded her and replaced the gag.

“Do that again, you bastard, and I’ll remove your hand,” snarled Nora.

“That might be more difficult than you imagine,” chuckled the Master.

“I don’t know,” returned Nora. “I understand obsidian cuts through a dragon like a hot knife through butter.”

“It seems someone has been doing her homework.”

“You taught me to be prepared. Keep Fallon’s line open. I’ll send your trophies and will expect you to exchange them for Fallon—alive and in good shape. Do we have an agreement?”

“We do. Once we have this unfortunate bit of business behind us, we should meet and have dinner. I believe I underestimated you.”

Nora ended the call without another word. She needed to find Colby and Hutch. They had work to do.

CHAPTER 18



NORA

*K*nowing time was of the essence, Nora jumped in the shower to wash away the excess of the night before. She smiled—she couldn't help it. She was happy. Even though there was danger all around and it would be a long time before they were safe, she was where she needed to be. She ran her hands over several places that had beard burn on them, and that made her almost giddy. She had a feeling that was going to be a constant part of her life from now on. Pulling on leggings and boots, she looked at the various things that had been brought in for her to wear. She pulled on her bra and grabbed one of Hutch's sweaters. There was something comforting in the way it slipped over her head and encased her in its warmth.

She ran down the stairs, almost colliding with Hamish, who had Trudy with him. Impulsively Nora hugged her close. And put her finger over Trudy's lips when she started to speak. "There is no need for apologies, not with me. I have done so many things that are so much worse than you did, and I wasn't trying to save my species."

Trudy's eyes filled with tears. "Everyone has been so understanding..."

"See, lass, I told you all would be well," said Hamish.

"Any chance you can show me where Hutch and Colby are?"

"I can do you one better than that," he said in his thick brogue. "They're headed up from questioning the weasel to

have breakfast.”

“Good. Can you direct them to the study? I’m going to see if Maya will bring us something there. I need to speak with them.”

“Should I see Trudy to our room and join you?”

“No. You stay with your mate. When we know what we’re doing, we’ll include you.”

Hamish nodded and Nora trotted down the hall to ask Maya if she could serve the three of them—Nora, Hutch, and Colby—in Colby’s study. Once that was arranged, Nora went back to Colby’s office and fired up her laptop, finally managing to connect with Deke Campbell via video chat.

“So, you’re the Ghost,” he said by way of greeting.

“News travels fast.”

He chuckled. “You have no idea. Glad to have you with us, by the way.”

“There were only two people the Master was ever truly afraid of...”

“Hutch and Colby?”

“Not to hurt their egos, but no. They were inconveniences. One he thought I could and would eliminate for him. The two that scared him were you and the hellhound.”

Deke nodded. “Hayden North. Truth to tell, Hayden scares everybody, including me.”

“Can he be trusted—either because we’re paying him, or because he believes in our cause?”

“I’ve never heard anyone say that once North agreed to a contract that he didn’t fulfill it. I take it you think we have need of his services?”

“Me more than the resistance, but yes. I have a friend who needs rescuing. The Master is holding her hostage. She knows nothing of shifters or my being the Ghost...”

“The Master will kill her if you don’t take out Hutch and/or Colby.”

“Both. I need to send him trophies in addition to photos.”

“You propose we send Hayden to get her.”

“If it comes to that, he could make the exchange, but I don’t expect it will. Can a hellhound stand up to a dragon?”

“It’s one of the few creatures who can. What are we sending with the pictures?”

“An ear from each. Do we know anyone...”

“You let Hayden and I worry about that. If Hayden won’t agree, I will go get your friend myself. She can’t just go back to her normal life. She’d be too vulnerable.”

“I know,” said Nora, knowing Fallon’s life would never be the same.

“She’ll be fine, Nora. It might take her a while, but she’ll be surrounded by people who will help her. Do you know where she is?”

“My guess is the Master’s manor house on Lundy Island off the coast of Devon. But I’ve told him he’s to keep Fallon’s phone open. I don’t know that it’ll do anything to protect her...”

“It’s not the worst idea. Do you need me to approach Hayden?”

“Yes, but I want to run this past Colby and Hutch. They should be joining me for breakfast—” Nora hesitated as the door to Colby’s study opened. “And here they are. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Hamish said you were upset; you didn’t sound that way,” said Hutch, joining her and giving her a kiss.

“I agree with Hutch,” Colby said, entering behind him. “Hamish was concerned, but—”

“I was, but only because I forgot for a moment I’m no longer alone. I have all of you, and I reached out to Deke Campbell,” Nora explained.

“You knew how to get in touch with Deke?” asked Colby before turning to Hutch. “I am so not losing her to you and the bakery. Being able to reach Deke is something not easily done.”

Nora grinned. “Besides the people I’ve met here in Mystic River, I’ve only ever had one friend, a human named Fallon...”

“Let me guess,” said Hutch, “The Master is holding her hostage until you kill Colby and I.”

“Bingo. I was a bit freaked out. Fallon knows nothing about shifters or the Shadow League or any of it.”

“You asked Deke to go after her?” asked Colby.

“Not exactly. I made a deal with the Master. In exchange for him sparing Fallon and turning her over to me, I will kill both of you, providing pictures and one of each of your ears as proof of my side of the bargain.”

“You’re not going,” growled Hutch.

“Of course not. I wouldn’t survive the encounter. But there’s only one other person that the Master is actually afraid of, and it isn’t either of you.”

“I’m crushed,” said Colby.

Both Hutch and Nora chuckled before she continued. “It’s the Hellhound. Apparently, Deke knows him.”

Colby nodded. “I know of him. Hayden North. Deke was going to see if he couldn’t get him to commit to our cause. I hope you know, regardless of whether North agrees, we won’t let the Master kill your friend—not if we can help it.”

She nodded. “I’m counting on that, but we’re going to need to doctor some photos of you two dead and steal a couple of ears that look like they could come from you to send him.”

“Neither should be a problem,” said Colby who seemed to be thinking. “Sean Campbell is the alpha of the snow leopards in the Scottish Highlands. He’s mostly been successful at uniting all the snow leopard clans in Scotland. My former second is his mate. Lundy Island is closer to Scotland than

Alaska. If he needs it, we can probably offer North some support from the Scottish contingent.”

“North could be a huge coup if he would commit to us,” said Hutch.

Nora nodded. “Deke said as a hellhound he’s one of the few creatures who can stand up to a dragon.”

“And I know he has some connections to the Phantom Fire,” said Colby, “so he might be the tipping point for them to join us. If nothing else, it would be easier for North to get your friend to Scotland than Alaska. Once we have a plan, I’ll run it by Winter.”

“Do you think the Shadow Sisters might offer their support? I would think this is right up their alley,” said Nora, which caused Colby to smile.

“And therein lies the stupidity of the Master. He’s afraid of Deke and North, but not Brie and her avenging angels. Trust me, the Valkyries had nothing on the Shadow Sisters.”

“I think we need to wait to hear from Deke before we put our plan into action,” said Nora.

“Agreed,” said Colby. “I’ll get to work on figuring out a good place to photograph our deaths that will seem believable. I’ll also see if Doc can’t help us out with a couple of ears. Hutch, why don’t you and Nora go for a run or a drive or something? You’ve both been put through the wringer in the past twenty-four hours, and I need the two of you at your best.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” said Hutch, standing up and offering Nora his hand. “What do you say we shift and go for a run on the beach?”

Nora closed her eyes and smiled. “That sounds perfect.”



It didn’t take long for Hutch and Nora to make their way down to the beach, build a bonfire and find a place to stash their

clothes. Each of them called forth their clouded leopards and marveled at the way the two shifting storms seemed to dance and feed off each other. The lightning seemed to have more spark and crackle, the thunder was louder, and the colored shards rivaled the aurora borealis in their dazzling display.

Emerging from the shift, Nora charged Hutch, bumping into him with all her might and found she could barely move him. He clubbed her flank with his paw, sending her sprawling. She was quick to recover and bounded away from him. They chased each other along the waterfront, rushing in and out of the frigid water and splashing one another.

Clouded leopard-shifters rarely engaged in sexually dominant games in their shifted form due to the disparity in size between males and females with male cloudies being twice the size of their female counterparts. In addition, the clouded leopard was often referred to as the closest living relative to the prehistoric sabre-tooth cats because of their large canines—the largest of any cat in proportion to its body size. These two facts had contributed to the endangerment of their purebred brethren.

Nora pulled ahead as they raced side-by-side and jumped up on the side of the cliff, using it to vault back over Hutch's head and race back down the beach. Hutch snarled in annoyance and took up the chase. She knew on a straight, flat course, Hutch's size and strength would allow him to catch her, but her quickness and ability to turn more quickly meant as long as she zig-zagged and switched back, she could avoid being captured. That was the theory, anyway.

Proving just how wrong she was, Hutch anticipated one of her zigs and he managed to topple her, tumbling in the sand with her. When they came to a stop, they both stood and nuzzled one another before heading back to the bonfire and their clothing. Shifting, she realized, had the same effect on Hutch as it had on her—the size and engorgement of his cock was a clear sign that he had found their game as arousing as she did.

She stretched out alongside the fire, spreading her legs and holding out her arms to him. "Please, Hutch, I need you."

The feral smile he gave her made her shiver, but not in fear. This man truly was her fated and natural mate. He understood what she wanted and needed and was ready and willing to give it to her. He knelt between her legs, pulling her up with his hands and holding her hips. The broad head of his cock paused only for a moment at the entrance to her core. She clutched at his heavily muscled biceps as he pushed himself inside her. Her pussy softened and welcomed him home.

Holding her tight, he began to thrust inside her with short, sharp strokes—allowing the nubs to cause friction as he surged in and become longer and stiffer as he pulled back. It was a unique sensation to which she was becoming addicted. Each time it seemed his cock drove deeper and deeper. She was wet and slick and still he filled her to capacity—rasping her tender flesh as the barbs raked furrows along her inner walls. She could feel the pleasure and pressure building. Her body had learned the ways of his all too well. Nora realized there would never be a time she could resist him. Everything she had done and been had led to this—an erotic encounter of the first order on a beach in Alaska. People could be watching, but she didn't care.

Over and over, he stroked into her, compounding her pleasure with his relentless thrusting until she came, yowling his name, digging her nails into his flesh, and bowing her body. That little bit of pain released the beast within him, and he began to pound into her. He drew all the way back and then drove deep, filling her with cum. The warmth filled and soothed her ravaged pussy in a way that made her purr in contentment and pleasure.

CHAPTER 19



HUTCH

“*I*’m not ready to share you with anyone else,” he said as he helped her up and they got dressed and extinguished the bonfire.

She re-holstered the gun she’d insisted on bringing and slipped a knife into a sheath under the sleeve of her sweater. Catching his side-eye she said, “Don’t start.”

Taking her by the hand, he led her along the beach and to the path that led up the seaside cliff and away from the house. He realized that he would do whatever it took to keep Nora safe and happy, and he knew she felt the same.

“I’d die for you,” he said quietly as they walked hand-in-hand.

“But would you kill for me? Because I know I would kill whoever I had to in order to keep you safe.”

Hutch stopped, looking down at her and pushing her hair out of her face. “You are not allowed to feel guilty about the work you did for the Master.”

“I killed people, Hutch. I ended their lives and destroyed the lives of those who loved them, and I did it without ever questioning why.”

“Because he raised you that way. Somewhere along the line, he figured out how to turn off that switch inside you that would have allowed you to refuse. He normalized it for the child who owed him everything. My guess is it wasn’t until you met your friend—”

“Fallon,” she supplied.

“Fallon—that the switch flipped on. Her humanity is what brought you back from the brink. I’ll bet it wasn’t until you allowed her in that you ever questioned him. He is at fault—not you. He knew that if he raised you the way he did, he could create a perfect killing machine. He didn’t count on the enormity of your heart and the strength of your spirit. And now that he knows, he can’t allow you to live.”

She nodded. “I know. No matter what else happens, no matter who else gets hurt, the Master has to die. Do you know that sick fuck actually thought that at some point he’d take me to mate?”

“Again, he wildly underestimated your strength, courage, resiliency, and honor.”

“Honor?”

“Absolutely. It got buried for a while, but deep down inside, the spark remained, and the first chance it had to erupt into flames, it did. You want to tell yourself it’s because I am your fated mate, but that isn’t it. The Ghost knew no other life, but becoming friends with Fallon was the first step towards your truest self. Doc always says there’s something in the water, and I’m not sure he isn’t right. But once you got to Mystic River, your soul recognized its home in the same way your heart recognized mine.”

“Are you always going to be gushing romantic stuff?” she asked, oddly touched and hoping the answer was yes.

Hutch chuckled. “Yes. Get used to it.”

She wrapped her other arm around the one she was holding hands with. “I think I can do that.”

As they came around a bend in the path they were walking on, something seemed to come flying out of nowhere. Literally, there was nothing behind which it would have hidden. Had the Master known Nora would never kill him or Colby? Had he really not understood Nora was not one to believe in the ‘no-win scenario?’

The thing was moving so fast, he couldn't even tell what it was or wasn't or who it was trying to attack—him or Nora. He pushed her away, assuming it was him. It would be just like the Master to make her watch him die. But instead of coming for him, it turned on Nora.

Snarling and slaving as if it were rabid, it attacked, knocking her to the ground—out of control in its rage and fury. There was something vaguely wolf-like about it, but it was much smaller and seemed to have wings of some sort. What the hell was it?

He batted it away from her, and it ignored him—intent on its only prey, Nora. Nora used the momentary distraction and leapt back to her feet, drawing the knife she had so wisely brought with her. She stabbed at the creature, but it seemed ineffective; partly because not every strike was hitting its mark and partly because the thing seemed impervious to the knife's lethal blows.

Hutch dove for the ground, close to her ankle with the small, aptly named Hellcat Pro, a compact 9MM handgun. Rolling onto his back, Hutch switched off the manual safety. The thing was moving too fast and too close to Nora, and he was afraid if he fired, he'd miss the creature and hit her. He realized the thing was inflicting a great deal of damage to Nora and something in its saliva must be toxic as she seemed to be slowing down.

He took careful aim, cognizant of the fact that if he fired and hit her, it wouldn't kill her, but it would make her hit the ground, giving him a much clearer shot at whatever that mutant thing was. Aiming for the creature's flank, Hutch squeezed the trigger over and over, sending a hail of bullets into the thing. Finally, it seemed to realize he was a threat and turned its attention to Hutch. As it did so, Nora drove her knife through its back, causing the thing to scream in final, feral fury as she pinned it to the ground. They watched it dissolve into a black, gooey, tarry puddle with bullets with the knife sticking up out of the gore.

It was only later that Hutch realized Windsong was monitored by a private satellite as well as drones with a kind

of stealth technology. Colby's people had seen the attack and as Hutch crawled to Nora, he could hear the sound of an approaching helicopter. He checked the number of rounds left in the magazine and brought the firearm up to bear.

"Hutch, Colby sent us. He saw the fight. We've got a paramedic on board and Colby is coming with the other chopper. Let us set down."

Recognizing the voice as one of the men he'd spent some time with, Hutch waved them down. The helicopter landed, and two men with a stretcher and what looked like an enormous first aid box rushed towards them, ducking under the chopper's rotor blades.

"The drone spotted this thing moving fast, and then we realized it had to be heading for you and Nora. We got airborne and one of our guys on the ground called the alpha. He should be here any minute now." He looked at the black goopy puddle. "What the fuck was that thing?"

"I have no idea," said Hutch as the paramedics got Nora on the stretcher. Another Windsong chopper landed, Colby bolting out of the door before it was completely on the ground.

"Fuck," Colby growled as he joined them. "They're further along than we thought."

"Do you know what this thing is?" asked Hutch.

"Specifically? No. But my guess is it's one of their experiments out of Reykjavik. We'd gotten word that not all of their experiments were failing completely, but they had yet to have something viable for more than a few hours."

"That means someone here in Mystic River sicked this thing on Nora."

"It looks that way. I'm going to reach out to Deke. We need to move up the timetable to get Nora's friend out and then hit that bastard with everything we can. Without his oversight and money, we'll set the League back on its heels. We might not stop them, but we'll sure as hell slow them down. We're also going to have to expedite getting Carson Payne's old team out of Reykjavik."

“We’ve got her stable, Colby, but I think it’s better if we call Doc and fly her into his clinic. As good as our medical facility is, his resources are better.”

Colby nodded. “Agreed, if it’s okay with Hutch.”

“It is, but I’m going with her.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. I’m going to get Doc’s help in upgrading our medical facilities as well as the others we have spread out between here and Otter Cove. Derek Grayson, the deputy here in Mystic River, has a sister-in-law who’s heading up our medical team in Otter Cove, but we’re going to need to start recruiting doctors.” He turned to one of the men who had joined them from his chopper. “I need you to collect this thing and put it inside of some kind of fool-proof, sealable container. Get it to Carson’s people at Polaris. He’s going to want to see it.”

“Colby,” said one of the paramedics. “I want a sample to take to Doc. Those wounds look like they’re already infected. They might be toxic, and he’s going to want to know what the toxin is. Having a sample might expedite that.”

“You take Nora and Hutch to Doc. I’ll collect a sample and bring it in to you. From there the other chopper will take whatever the hell this thing is to Carson for examination.”



NORA

Sometime later, Nora’s mind began to make its way to the surface of her consciousness. Recognition of sounds as words was the first sign that she was waking up.

“Nora, baby, I’m here. You’re going to be okay,” said Hutch making her smile. Of course, he was here. Nora guessed he’d never left her side. In fact, she was sure she could remember his presence being with her from the time she was attacked to whatever had happened afterwards.

“Is it dead?” she said in a gravelly voice.

“It is,” answered Hutch.

“Did I kill it?”

She opened her eyes to his smile. “It was kind of a group effort between us, but yes, yours was the fatal blow. If it helps, it screamed bloody murder like you really hurt it.”

“Good, because I feel like shit and my mouth feels like it’s been stuffed with cotton.”

“That would be the propofol. We had to induce a medical coma so your body could help us heal it,” said Doc Hadley, checking her vital signs. “When you started fighting the sedation, we backed it off so you could rejoin us. You’ve got a strong will to live, young lady.”

Nora smiled at Hutch. “I have all the reason in the world to want to. Fallon?” she asked.

“Safe. Deke got to North. He managed to get in and out with her,” said Hutch a bit evasively.

“What?” she asked.

“We don’t think it’s anything to worry about,” said Colby.

Now, she knew there was. “What is it you don’t want to tell me that you know is going to make me worry?”

“North would never harm her, but he got her out and then disappeared. He was supposed to rendezvous with a small group of the Shadow Sisters, and they were going to get them to Scotland. Instead, he left them some kind of message in runes—the gist being he had her, and they were going underground. Deke is certain he’ll contact us when he feels it’s safe.”

“Are you telling me that some hellhound-shifter has gone all caveman on my friend?” she asked.

“Actually, Colby is trying really hard not to tell you that. He’s been pressing Campbell, but not getting very far. The one rune that the leader of the Shadow Sisters recognized was the one that stands for fated mate.”

“That is so not happening,” Nora said trying to unhook herself from the IVs.

“Nora, calm down. The Shadow Sisters are looking for them, as are the snow leopards out of Scotland. My former second is there, and in fact, is second-in-command to her mate. Trust me, there’s no way Winter lets this go. We’ll find them.”

She looked helplessly at Hutch. “Oh god, what did I do? I’m responsible for this. Poor Fallon.”

“She’s his fated mate, babe, and she’s alive,” said Hutch reassuringly. “He won’t harm her. He’ll keep her safe. If it were me, I’d want to go to ground some place I knew was absolutely safe. My guess is he’ll make his way back to wherever his lair is. He’ll contact us. He’s going to want to go after the Master and make him pay.”

Realizing there was nothing she could do, she looked at Colby, “Any idea what that thing was?”

“Not really. It was some kind of hybrid. With Carson’s help we were able to identify the DNA structure of the toxin, but so far, they’ve found DNA strands from at least three different species—bats, foxes, and Tasmanian devils. You were right about them trying to weaponize DFTD.”

“Bastards. I hope they—the bastard and all of his minions—rot in the deepest pits of hell.”

“And on that happy note,” said Doc, “I’m going to shoo all of you, except Hutch, out. I’ve already learned that isn’t going to happen. But do me a favor, Nora, and see if you can get him to eat something and maybe lie down on the cot over there. If he doesn’t get some food and sleep soon, I’m going to end up having to treat him.”

Everyone, including the doctor, shuffled out.

“Are you sure Fallon will be fine?” she asked him.

Hutch nodded. “I am. More than one great fated mate love story starts with the female being taken captive. Deke assures us North is an honorable man and Colby has people looking for them. You’re not going to fuss at me about sleeping all by

myself all the way over on the other side of the room, are you?”

“Not a chance,” she said with a grin, scooting over to make room.

Hutch crawled into bed with her, wrapping his arms around her. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow. Nora snuggled in and followed him into the land of dreams. For now, it was the only place they were truly safe, but she knew to the depths of her soul that would not always be true. They’d thwarted the Master once. They would do so again and again until they beat him down, and he could no longer rise. They would be triumphant, but for now she could allow peace to reign in her dreams.

EPILOGUE



Dragons. There were dragons—real live, fire-breathing dragons. And the one that had kidnapped her knew Nora. How could he know Nora? For that matter, how could dragons exist? Madness.

He'd tried to get Nora to do something she didn't want to. He'd used her phone to reach out to Nora, who had seemed as cold as ice.

The dragon had approached her with her camera's video turned on. Fallon knew how she must look to anyone seeing her—bound, gagged, and scared to death.

And then Nora's voice, cool, calculated, and not at all like the best friend she knew. "I want to speak to her, and you will install her in a comfortable room and see that she is cared for."

The gag was ripped from her mouth and Fallon knew whatever it was that he wanted Nora to do, wasn't good, and Fallon had no doubt that the dragon wouldn't hold up his end of the bargain. There was no way she was making it out alive. Fallon would be damned if she would be used against her friend.

"Don't do whatever it is that he wants, Nora. Do you..." she cried out but was cut off as the dragon backhanded her, before replacing her gag.

"Do that again, you bastard, and I'll remove your hand," Nora snarled. The voice had been unmistakably Nora's, but it had sounded nothing like her.

Fallon had been untied and taken to a large bedroom with an ensuite bath. It would have been nice had it not been for the locks on the windows and doors. She'd finally fallen asleep. No doubt they'd put something in her food or drink. She'd thought about that when they'd brought it, but she was hungry, thirsty and needed to rest.

She woke with a start, barely managing to stifle a scream. An enormous man sat on the footboard of the elaborately carved bed. His eyes seemed to glow with some kind of ethereal glow for just a moment before it faded away. A trick of the light perhaps.

“Who the hell are you?” she hissed, throwing a pillow at him. She knew it was ineffective, but it made her feel better to do something, and she supposed he got the idea.

Fallon glanced toward the window. It was closed, but she could feel the cold breeze from the balcony. She'd thought the lock on the balcony door was redundant, as the balcony overhung a cliff with a perilous drop to the jagged rocks below.

All in all, she'd never been so glad to see anyone in her entire life. If he'd gotten in here, he had to have a way to get them out. He might be her only chance at getting out of this alive.

She looked at him more closely and realized he was the same man who had haunted her dreams and fueled her most erotic fantasies for the past few years. Was he even real? Was she asleep and in desperation, she had conjured her own romantic hero to save her? He was certainly the embodiment of everything from which storybook heroes were made.

Fallon rolled up and onto her knees, only realizing after he'd had a long appraising look that she was naked. She snatched up the silk sheet to cover herself.

He snatched it back. “I don't think so, Princess. You and I have a date with destiny, and it's time for us to go.” He hopped off the bed frame, his deep voice reminding her of a growl covered in dark chocolate.

Before she could speak or ask further questions, the stranger hauled her up against his muscular body and looked down at her from his great height. She thought he might lean down to kiss her. He didn't. Instead, he gagged her—why anybody thought that was sexy Fallon would never know—and tossed her over his shoulder as if her weight was nothing. His hand came up and smacked her backside once, making it sting before he settled it there.

“Let me be clear. In another time and in another place, I'd have you on your belly, and I'd fuck you until you were spent and sated. Then I'd take you home and rut with you until you couldn't walk. But that particular pleasure will have to wait. Before I can settle myself between your thighs, I need to get us out of here.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE



I hope you enjoyed reading Hidden Mate (Mystic River Shifters)! The next book in the series is Unforeseen Mate.

BONUS SCENE



I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Hutch and Nora as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

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ABOUT DELTA JAMES

Other books by Delta James: <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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