

SYNDICATE MASTERS
SM
MIDWEST
MAFIA



STROKE OF FORTUNE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

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STROKE OF FORTUNE

A DARK FATED MATES MAFIA PARANORAMAL
ROMANCE

SYNDICATE MASTERS: MIDWEST



DELTA JAMES

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*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*

PROLOGUE



Chohokia was dying. Their gods had all but abandoned them. Close to the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi Rivers, it had once been the greatest city in North America, but now everyone was leaving.

Overpopulation had been rampant when an earthquake left the city in ruins, leveling buildings and spreading disease until the region had been so decimated there was no saving it. As those who had survived moved off to the West, the last of the priestesses gathered the last of her magick, mixed it with the prairie winds, and blew into her hand, releasing the guardians. To the north, the spotted leopard was dispatched; to the south, the noble striped tiger; and in between the two, the great maned lion.

CHAPTER 1



BRYONY

In the Skies Over
East St. Louis, Illinois
Five Years Ago

Bryony sipped champagne and ate chocolate-dipped strawberries as her father's private jet winged its way across the country. She snuggled into the comfy seats with their butter-soft leather coverings and luxuriated in the life she had been gifted. Most of those she worked with called her entitled and spoiled. The even less kind called her a 'mafia princess'—apt descriptors, but Bryony refused to be defined by what anyone thought of her or her father.

The jet banked and circled over the Mississippi River and headed for her bevy's private runway. Bryony wasn't looking forward to this weekend but had promised her father she would come home for her birthday. He loved bragging to the members of their bevy and business associates about her master's degree in fine arts and graphic design from a major Ivy League University, but that didn't matter to Bryony.

All that mattered was seeing her father and then getting away. She'd overheard him talking on the phone the last time she was home, trying to make a deal with her as the prize. She wasn't having it. She had agreed to come home, but that was it. There would be no tearful goodbyes, no trying to make him

understand. Just one last chance to see him and then she was off to live her own life by her own hands and means.

Cowardly? Probably, but Bryony liked to think of it as expedient and practical.

Her father had taken over the Rust Belt Syndicate from his father, but her father wasn't as good at it as her grandfather. Roland Gates had been respected and feared in equal measure. He could be ruthless but only when it was called for. Her father, on the other hand, lacked self-confidence so didn't ask for help and then blamed others when his plans didn't work.

When her mother was alive, she was the power behind the throne and ensured things were done and the organization ran smoothly. Since her mother's death, the organization had been slowly falling apart—eroding until their territory was so small Bryony wondered if they might lose everything.

Bryony worried what would happen to those in their bevy and in the criminal organization that supported it when her father died, but they too had chosen to stay instead of 'getting while the getting was good.' Her father was a target of the Feds. They posed an even greater threat to him than his mafia enemies. She knew this because she had been approached by federal agents twice—once while she was in school and the other time less than a year ago.

Worried about reprisal from both her father's organization and the Feds themselves, she'd said nothing, but the second time the Feds came calling she knew it was time to distance herself from her father and their people. She had her plan in place. Sunday afternoon she would meet the cash buyer for her Ferrari and take the money to complete the deal on her tiny home on wheels and a dually truck to pull it. Her plan was to travel and never stay in one place too long, working freelance and remotely from wherever she might be.

The plane touched down at the far end of the runway and rumbled toward the plane's hangar where her father and his entourage waited—at least, that's what he called them. What they really were, were his flunkies and bodyguards. Why he needed bodyguards when he was in their home or on their

estate was beyond her, but she reminded herself that in less than two days' time, it wouldn't matter to her.

She waited while the plane rolled to a stop and until the pilot had the engines completely shut down and came out of the cockpit to unlock the stairwell and extend the stairs leading down to the ground.

“Thank you for the smooth ride,” she said, hefting her duffle bag containing everything she was taking with her over her shoulder. She had no intention of letting it out of her sight unless she could secure it. She trotted down the stairs, pasting a smile on her face as her father and his second-in-command, Jared Pettigrew, approached her.

“Bryony! Sweetheart! It's so good to see you. Come and give your papa a kiss.”

She was enveloped in her father's hug, the smell of alcohol rolling off of him like the Mississippi River rolled down to the sea. Bryony didn't remember a time her father hadn't smelled of booze. When her mother was alive, it had only been faint, and only once in a while. But since then, the stench of booze had steadily increased.

Bryony hugged him back. Whatever he had done, whatever he had become, he was still her father and the little girl who had been blissfully unaware of both would miss him. But the woman she had become was determined not to be used as a pawn or to go down with what she was sure was a sinking ship.

“Hey, Pops. It's nice to be here. I hope you haven't gone to too much trouble. I can't stay long.” She turned and nodded to the second man. “Jared.”

“I second your father's sentiments. It's good to see you back where you belong—where you can be with your own people,” Jared replied.

Bryony had never liked Jared. Even before her uncle, who had been her father's beta, died in a freak accident, there had been something about Jared she didn't trust. It was nothing she could put her finger on, but it was there, nonetheless.

“You need to come home, Bry,” effused her father. “We’ve all missed you—some of the young boars have missed you most of all.”

“Perhaps Bryony would prefer a mate with more experience in leading our people. Should something happen to you, Alpha, Bryony will be expected to be mated to one who can protect our bevy from outsiders. Some of the young boars you speak of are little more than pups in terms of experience and leadership qualities.”

Bryony sighed. “Don’t start—either of you. I’m not staying, and I am not looking to take a mate.”

Her father set her back on her feet. “Don’t you sass me, girl. You’re my daughter and you’ll do as you’re told,” he said gruffly and loudly enough for those who were gathered to hear.

“Your father is right. It is your duty as his daughter to make an advantageous match...”

“Advantageous to whom, Jared? Certainly not to me. Pops, you promised me if I came for my birthday, you wouldn’t start back up about my unmated status. If you’re not going to hold to that, you may as well get them to fire up the plane and take me back to New York.”

She, her father, and Jared were at a standoff. She had expected her father to push, but it seemed Jared was throwing his hat into the ring. None of them could or would back down and neither she nor her father could move forward without breaking the fragile tether that still bound them. There had never been any kind of bond with Jared—and there never would be.

“Time enough to talk about that. I’m sure after you’ve been here a few days, you won’t want to leave,” her father said confidently, wrapping his arm around her shoulder to take her back toward the house.

Bryony began running the countdown clock in her head. Her father might be thinking a few days, but she planned to tell him she was going for a drive before her birthday party.

This birthday would be a kind of a rebirth. She would take the Ferrari and go... and she would never look back.



Moab, Utah

Present Day

She slid through the waters of the Colorado River. The currents were strong and the rapids right outside her home were increasing in size and speed as the mountain snows began to melt. Bryony loved white water—either as an otter or as a human. There were times she wanted to use a kayak to navigate the rushing waters, and other times she floated on her back as an otter, letting the river take her whichever way it wanted.

One of the advantages of being an otter was the speed and fluidity with which she could negotiate the swift and dangerous currents. She dove under the water and came up on the other side of one of the holes into which rafts and kayaks could become so easily caught up. As an otter, they were easy to traverse, especially if you were under the surface.

She wriggled her way to the riverbed before surging upwards and breaking the membrane at the top of the water, clearing it and splashing back down. There were times Bryony longed for the sheer joy and simplicity of being an otter.

The sun was crawling over the La Sal Mountains to the southeast as she climbed up the riverbank and scampered back to her tiny house that sat nestled amidst a small grove of juniper and cottonwood trees. She entered through the dog door she'd had built into the design that led from her back deck into her primary bath.

Bryony shifted from otter to human and stepped into her shower, turning it on full blast and enjoying soaping her skin with the natural sea sponge loaded with tea tree oil soap suds. The clean, fresh scent it left behind pleased her enhanced

sense of smell. After getting out, she was drying her hair and applying her make-up when she heard someone, most likely her landlord Cosmo, banging on the door.

“Brittany? Brittany? You up?”

Bryony groaned. She was awake but had planned on enjoying a leisurely breakfast and cup of coffee out on her deck. Cosmo was a great guy—weird, but still great. She couldn't complain, as he'd leased her a small plot of land on his acreage near the Colorado River. It offered her the best of all worlds. Grocery stores, butchers and all the usual amenities were less than ten minutes away. There were restaurants and a nightlife of sorts, as well, but she avoided those things like the plague.

Ever since she'd left her father's home in East St. Louis, she had lived quietly and off the grid for the most part. The lease she had was a verbal one, and she was paid for her artwork for romance novels in cash, or the money was wired to her offshore account. The cash she kept in a safe built into the floor. One thing she had learned from her mother was how to hide payments so they couldn't be traced. No one knew her real name, not even Cosmo.

“Hang on, Cosmo. I'm coming,” she called. Pulling up her hair and securing it in a messy bun on the top of her head, she headed to the front door.

Cosmo was—well, Cosmo. He looked like an aging rockstar from the seventies gone to seed. He was in his mid-sixties with long, flowing gray hair and a full beard. He had a ruddy face and a happy countenance. He was a bit portly, but Bryony was the last one to judge, as her figure was normally referred to as curvy. There had been a time that looking like the models in the major fashion magazines had been important to her. That time had long passed, and she was happy with the way she looked.

Pushing at the red curls that were already escaping her bun, she opened the door, glancing at the white iron clock hanging on the wall instead of looking through the peephole.

“Good god, Cosmo. Do you know what time it is? Are you okay?”

“He is,” said Jared, tossing Cosmo to those who were circled around him, “but I’m afraid your father is not.”

“I’m sorry Brittany,” started Cosmo. “I didn’t know. Tell them I didn’t know.”

“He doesn’t know anything, Jared. Let him go. Whatever this is,” she said gesturing toward her father’s beta and his goons, “he isn’t a part of it. His son is the deputy chief of police in Moab. He might discount his father’s conspiracy theories, but if Cosmo turns up dead, you can bet your ass his son won’t stop until he finds his father’s killer.”

“Good to know,” said Jared. He turned to his men, “Show the old man back to his house. Make sure he can’t interfere, but don’t harm him in any way.” Jared turned back to Bryony, “Good enough?”

“For now. What do you want, Jared?”

“Aren’t you going to ask after your father?”

“I assume since you and your goon squad are here, my father is dead. Did you kill him?”

Bryony watched as anger seemed to surge through Jared’s system and flash in his eyes before he regained control.

“How dare you ask me that,” he seethed.

“How dare I? Fairly easily. You made it apparent the last time we saw each other that you had designs on taking me to mate in order to succeed my father. I’m assuming you got tired of waiting.”

“You are far more astute than your father ever gave you credit for. To answer your question, I did not kill your father.”

“Do you know who did?”

“Yes, and I will see to his death being avenged.”

“In other words,” Bryony said, leaning against her door jamb with her arms crossed over her chest, “you’ll make sure whoever it is knows you are now in charge.”

Jared smiled and reached up to take a lock of her wayward hair in his fingers. Before he could do so, Bryony knocked his hand away.

“Don’t,” she said, trying to keep her tone even.

She was in no position to try and escape. Her keys were in her kitchen; her truck was parked fifty yards away; Jared had at least five men with him; and she feared they’d kill Cosmo if she tried while she was here. Best to wait for a moment when she had a better chance at success.

Jared seized her upper arm and jerked her up against his body. “You will learn your place with me, Bryony. There is a difference between being a mafia princess and a mafia bride.”

He turned and stalked toward the rented, luxury SUV, dragging her resisting form behind him. There wasn’t much she could do here without Jared retaliating by harming Cosmo. She took a last look around at what had been a happy place for her, knowing she would never see it again. Bryony vowed that while she might not live here, she would live free.

CHAPTER 2



NOLAN

The Hamilton Mansion
St. Louis, Missouri
Present Day

Life was never dull in the Delta. And things in Nolan Hamilton's life were no exception to the rule.

Standing at the French doors that led out onto the expansive balcony, Nolan looked toward the dark waters of the Mississippi River. Between the main house and the river, fireflies danced over the manicured lawn like drunk fairies having a party. He lifted the bourbon in his hands to his lips and sipped deeply, feeling the alcohol burn a path down his throat. A tiny smile crooked the corners of his mouth.

Glancing down at his cell phone, Nolan answered, "Hamilton."

"Nolan, it's Joe Dawson."

Curious. Joe was the beta, or second-in-command, to Randall Beckett's Phoenix Syndicate up in Chicago.

"What can I do for you, Joe?"

"Beck wanted you to know Gutierrez made a run at us and failed. Most likely he will pull back and regroup before making a move to try and gobble up more territory."

"You and Beck think I'm most likely his next target."

“Not necessarily you, but maybe someone in that area before he takes a run at you.”

Nolan slowed his breathing, trying to tamp down the feelings of aggression and adrenaline that always accompanied the knowledge there was a fight coming. “Bryan Gates in East St. Louis. He’s weak and has all but decimated the Rust Belt Syndicate left to him by his father.”

“Could we throw in behind his heirs or something?” asked Joe.

Nolan smiled. Beck was a lucky man. Joe Dawson was a good man to have in your corner. He was a strategic thinker, loyal and strong.

“Unfortunately, no. Gates’ only heir is his daughter, Bryony. She walked away and disappeared five years ago. She wants no part of him or his syndicate.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Nolan agreed, but most likely not for the same reason as Joe. Most shifter clans, prides, or whatever they called themselves were ruled almost exclusively by a male hierarchy. The same could be said of most organized crime organizations, which was a shame as far as Nolan was concerned. His experience had taught him that there were a lot of capable females—shifter or not—who would be a better choice for alpha than some of the males who held positions of power.

“Can the daughter be persuaded to join with another family or someone in her father’s retinue?” asked Joe.

That question made Nolan laugh. “As far as I know, none of them know where Bryony went. She left when she found out about her family legacy and what it entailed. As far as I know, she disappeared on her birthday and has never contacted them again.”

“If Gutierrez moves on Gates, it may behoove us to find the girl and bring her into the fold, so to speak.”

“Your alpha would kick your ass if he heard you say that.”

“Most likely,” laughed Joe, “but it doesn’t make it any less true.”

Nolan smiled. Joe had a point. “I’ll offer Gates and his people my support, but the old man is stubborn and bitter.”

“If Gutierrez gets a foothold anywhere in the Midwest, it’s going to increase his power substantially.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I won’t have him and his Cartel sitting on my doorstep. If Gutierrez wants territory to strike from, he won’t get it from me.”

“Not without a fight. But the Cartel doesn’t fight honorably. Never forget that you have allies both here in Chicago and down in New Orleans.”

“And am grateful for it.”

“No need for gratitude. It has always been an alliance that was in everyone’s best interest. Take care and let us know if we can help in any way.”

“Will do,” said Nolan, ending the call.

This latest wrinkle in the power play going on in the Midwest was disconcerting in more ways than one, but it was only one of several balls he felt he was juggling at the moment. The threat from Gutierrez was not even the thorniest of his problems—the solution certainly not the most expedient.

Nolan was convinced that the Rust Belt Syndicate and its leader were in dire need of protection, but his offer of help had been refused. And when, not if, Bryan Gates fell, his daughter and organization would be at great risk. So, the most concerning issue at the moment was Gates’ heir, Bryony. Or maybe not Bryony herself, but certainly the legacy and territory her father would leave behind.

There were a myriad of issues surrounding Bryony, the most pressing of which was how much did she know about what was going on. Nolan had managed to locate her and even to have eyes on her, but the wily otter-shifter was crafty, had a mind of her own and had proven her ability to slip through someone’s grasp.

Even more concerning than the threat from Gutierrez was the leak Nolan feared might be in Gates' own organization. The idea that one of Gates' people might betray him didn't sit well. There were only two people who knew that Nolan knew Bryony's location: Heath, Nolan's beta, and the man who had eyes on her. Other than that, he had told no one, not even those closest to him in his pride. For all he knew, it could be one of them. He couldn't tell Beck or Bodie; they had their own problems, and besides, it was never wise to show any signs of weakness or vulnerability.

As much as he hated to admit it, Dawson was right. The key to holding onto Gates' territory and enterprises was the daughter who had rejected her father, their way of life, and the legacy to which she was the only legitimate heir. More than most, the leadership of otter-shifter bevvies ran along hereditary lines, as opposed to falling to the person best suited to it.

Nolan marveled at the way Gates had been able to keep his daughter's knowledge of where the money came from that supported her lavish lifestyle hidden from her. That money included the most exclusive boarding schools for most of her life and an ivy league education. The theory was that when she could no longer delude herself, she chose to remove herself from her home, family and bevy. There was a part of Nolan that admired that.

Whether she liked it or not though, Bryony Gates was a true 'mafia princess,' even if she hadn't always known Gates wasn't fool enough to think anyone—including his own people—would allow her to take over. It went against centuries of precedence. No, Bryony had been raised to be one thing: a pawn in her father's power play and a means to secure his legacy. The fact that he'd never said as much to her did nothing to change that.

Sad as it was, her fate had been cast a long time ago and there was little she could do to change that. She might think she had escaped her destiny, but she hadn't. Her biggest issue now—though she didn't know it—was that it would no longer be her father who controlled her future, it would be Nolan. He had a vested interest in who controlled the Rust Belt

Syndicate. They literally sat across a river from his own Gateway Syndicate.

A knock on the door and his second, Heath Miller, entered the room. "Sorry to bother you, Nolan, but it's important."

"What is it?" he asked, without bothering to turn around.

Heath advanced into the room and poured himself a bourbon before joining Nolan on the balcony. "There's been a hit in East St. Louis."

East St. Louis sat just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis in Illinois. Before the industrial restructuring in the second half of the twentieth century, it had been a bustling center of commerce. The advances in automating many industries had decimated the city's population as those who lost their jobs left to find work elsewhere. The city had once boasted a population of more than eighty-two thousand; now it could only claim, at most, twenty percent of that.

"Gates?" Nolan asked.

"I'm afraid so," answered Heath, sipping the bourbon.

"Do we know who's responsible?"

"Information is sketchy at the moment, but it doesn't look like it was internal."

"Do we know what happened?" Nolan asked, looking over at his beta.

Heath nodded. "Apparently, he was lured out alone to an unpopulated stretch of the river just south of his territory."

"That's Waylon Foster's territory."

"Yes, but he's been quick to say it wasn't him. Our source says the body was riddled with bullets and was then returned home from a low-flying prop plane."

"Define low-flying."

"Low, like crop-duster low. His body was just tossed out the door."

"Human or otter form?"

“Human.”

“Any information on if there will be a funeral?”

“No. According to our inside source, they’re trying to keep a lid on it.”

“Hmm,” said Nolan, thoughtfully, “it would appear that one or more people on the inside are trying to consolidate their power.”

“Yes, and at least one person is trying to find the daughter.”

“That’s not good, as I suspect whoever killed Gates is trying to do the same.”

“I take it we’re going to throw our cap into that ring?” asked Heath.

“I don’t think we have a choice.”

“Agreed.”

Nolan drained his glass. “Tell Cosmo we want to know everything that’s going on. More than that, I want a complete update on the daughter—not just how she’s been doing, but anything from anyone that might give us a clue as to where she might hide if she gets wind of her father’s death and bolts. Also, call our mole at the Organized Crime Bureau. See if they have any plans to take her into protective custody.”

“Last time we checked, they didn’t have her stashed or have her on any witness list.”

“Gates’ death might change that. She’s rejected her family. Perhaps his murder will make her want to turn on them.”

“Do you think there’s anyone who might be looking to put her in power?”

“Amongst the otters? Doubtful. If anything, one of them, or someone else for that matter, might be looking to take her to mate to claim her inheritance.”

“You?”

Nolan snorted. “Oh, good god, no. Feisty would be the kindest description of Bryony Gates.”

“True. The only reason she got away with what she did was that her father was alpha, and he doted on her. When she left, it damn near broke his heart.”

“Anybody know what precipitated her exodus?”

It was Heath’s turn to snort. “Can’t you just use regular language like the rest of us? Seriously ‘precipitated’ and ‘exodus?’ Can’t you just say, ‘why’d she leave?’”

“I could but my language is more precise. I don’t think she just walked away on a whim. And to have eluded her bodyguards and those looking for her, she had to have had a plan and executed it with precision.”

Heath shook his head. “I’ll see what I can find out. But I’m curious. If you’re not looking to take over Gates’ territory...”

“I didn’t say that. I said I wasn’t looking to take the girl to mate, and I’m not, but her grandfather controlled a vast empire...”

“I wouldn’t call East St. Louis a ‘vast’ anything.”

“Nor would I. But Bryony’s grandfather controlled enormous holdings and he had his hand in a lot of things, some of which her father lost due to his carelessness. The man might have been the don of their organization, but he was no alpha. He wasn’t nearly as ruthless as an alpha needs to be, and he never had much luck to offset that softness.”

“True enough. I’ll get on the horn to our colleagues in the morning and see what I can find.”

“Good man,” said Nolan, slapping him on the back as he returned to the interior of the house. “Tell Cosmo to be prepared to move and to take the girl out of harm’s way. I don’t want her hurt.”

“You *are* interested in her you sly dog,” said Heath.

“Never a dog, but a lion who doesn’t like nasty surprises. See what you can find out about Gates’ death. I’m of the opinion that it was either his beta or the Cartel.”

“Or maybe them working together.”

“That could very well be.”

Heath finished his bourbon in one gulp, placed the glass on the tray which sat on the dresser and exited the room. Nolan followed him and poured himself another drink. What was the old curse? ‘May you live in interesting times.’ Well, Bryan Gates’ murder certainly made things more interesting, that was for sure.

Nolan walked back out on the balcony. *What are you up to, Bryony? Are you actually trying to disassociate yourself from your father and live your life, or have you been waiting?*

Taking another sip of his bourbon, he placed one hand on the railing and raised his glass to the mighty Mississippi. Nolan knew if he didn’t take steps to ensure her safety and silence, there were those who would use her not only against her bevy—the collective name for a group of otters—but against him, as well. He couldn’t afford to have an enemy on his doorstep, especially with the cartel gunning for him. Nolan didn’t discount the idea that it was the cartel who’d murdered Gates. After all, if they were going to make a play for the Rust Belt Syndicate, they would need to control Gates’ only heir.

Nolan raised his glass toward the west. *Here’s to you, Bryony. May you not end up as dead as your father.* His cell phone buzzed, and he answered.

“Nolan, it’s Cosmo. They’ve taken her. I couldn’t stop them...”

“Not to worry. I never expected you to. You’ve done what I paid you to do—keep an eye on her and let me know if and when something happens. Do you know who it was?”

“She called him Jared.”

“I want you to make sure that everything is turned off, but then I want you on the way to the airport. Leave everything behind. There will be a plane ticket waiting for you to bring you back to St. Louis. It’s time you rejoined the pride.”

“My son...”

“I know. But both you and he will be safer once you’re here.”

“True enough. I suppose he has his own destiny to fulfill.”

“He does. Once you’re at the estate, you can call him to let him know you’re here and I will ensure someone is watching in case Pettigrew or anyone else tries to use him against you.”

Cosmo chuckled. “He’s a good boy. He’ll understand. He knows I’m not his biological father, but I loved his mother enough to leave my own people behind. I don’t think it will surprise him much, although I do think he’ll get a kick out of finding out his old man is a lion.”

“He is welcome to join you—both as a lion and here in Missouri. I can always use another good man or two.”

“I’ll let him know, but his people and his life are here.”

“He is always welcome—lion or coyote; permanently or for just a visit.”

“Thank you. I’ve got things buttoned up, Alpha, I’m getting in my truck now. I’ll let you know when I’m in the air.”

Jared Pettigrew, Gates’ beta. In some ways that would make things easier, as he would bring Bryony home and try to put as good a face on it as he could. Nolan would send Heath and some of the men to East St. Louis, not only to watch over Bryony, but to see what they could learn about the assassination.

Swirling the last of his bourbon in his glass, Nolan mused.

So, it has begun.

CHAPTER 3



BRYONY

*B*ryony looked out the window of the SUV as it drove towards an unknown destination, but she was willing to bet serious money that it was a private airport.

“You do know that technically you are kidnapping me,” she said conversationally without ever looking toward Jared.

“Your point is?” he asked.

“That you’re breaking the law.”

Jared chuckled. “Are you truly so naive that you believe my kidnapping you is the least of the things I would do to ensure the continuation and viability of our bevy?”

“Let me guess, with you as alpha, inheriting the role as my mate.”

“You may be spoiled, but you were always clever. You escaped me five years ago. You will not do so again.”

That got Bryony’s attention and she turned in her seat to stare at him. “Do you think my father would have let you force me into a marriage? You’re what? Twenty years older than me?”

“Only fourteen, and I could have forced your father’s hand had I chosen. I turned a blind eye to you leaving that morning. I knew you were never going to come back, but I failed to realize you had planned your escape with care and intelligence. I thought your father might try to retrieve you, but your leaving left him a broken man.”

Bryony snorted. “The only thing that bothered him about my leaving was that he couldn’t use me in some kind of power play. I realized on the plane trip out that he had no intention of letting me return to New York. I’m surprised you didn’t convince him to let you marry me.”

It was Jared’s turn to snort. “He didn’t think I was worthy of you. He was entertaining several proposals from other bevis—mostly the second sons of alphas, but there was an alpha who offered to put his mate aside to take you to mate. Even your father wasn’t desperate enough to do that.”

“Because he was too old?”

“No, because his territory was up in the Pacific Northwest, and he didn’t offer enough money.”

Bryony shook her head. “So do you think he killed my father?”

“No. It was five years ago, and the old alpha is dead. The rumor is his son caught wind of his father’s offer to oust his mother and took the old man out himself. He is mated to the sister of another bevy’s alpha, and they have combined their power to take out the two territories that separated them.”

“So why didn’t you make a move on my father?”

“Our bevy is old school. You were his only heir. Without having you as my mate, the bevy and our business...”

“Your syndicate...”

“Our syndicate is old school, too. I need you to avoid a nasty fight to lead the bevy. You will attend your father’s funeral, look appropriately grieved, and then turn to me for comfort...”

“Love blooms. We say my father always wanted us to wed, as you were the son he never had,” she finished for him in a singsong voice.

“Precisely. We will live as mates until you give me several sons and then you can retire to a private cottage on the estate.”

“You are as delusional as my old man. The idea of sleeping with you makes me want to vomit.”

“Nevertheless, I will have my way in this. Unlike your father, it won’t bother me in the least to physically hurt you. But who’s to say that we won’t find a real romantic partnership? I can be a generous man when I am pleased.”

Bryony stuck her finger down her throat and made a gagging sound. Before she could withdraw her finger from her mouth, Jared’s hand cracked across her cheek hard enough to knock her back against the corner of the seat and the door.

He leaned towards her, “I will also not tolerate your disrespect or disobedience. You would do best to remember that.”

She looked at him with a cold, dispassionate stare. “I never forget anything, and I will remember your threats and treatment of me.”

“Empty threats from a spoiled princess don’t impress me,” Jared scoffed.

Let him think me weak and spoiled. He will soon learn how very wrong he is.

The SUV turned onto a drive that led to a high chain link fence. They were waved through the gates and Bryony could see a private plane waiting for them. Running parallel to the runway was a small river, most likely a tributary of the Colorado River. They were a long way from Illinois and the Mississippi.

Bryony thought briefly about trying to make a run for it, but they were far too close to Cosmo’s place. If she tried here, they would most certainly head back there and harm her friend. No, she needed to bide her time until either they reached Illinois or stopped to take on fuel.

The SUV came to a halt beside the plane and Jared dragged her out of the SUV and to the stairwell that led up into the jet. Seeing as it was a good-sized jet, Bryony was almost certain it wouldn’t need to refuel. As Jared pushed her into a seat, she began to think of ways to escape once they reached her father’s estate.

The thought of her father having died had her throat catching. They hadn't been close since she realized that although he cared for her, her true worth to him was as a pawn to ensure the continuation of their bevy. The fact that he was dead—murdered—was upsetting, but she couldn't allow misplaced feelings of guilt and loss to interfere with her need to get away.

There was so much to figure out. How to get a new identity? How to access her offshore accounts? Where to go? How to create a new life that did not lead back to the old? Utah and living off the grid hadn't worked; perhaps it was time to head to Europe. Maybe she could resume her work doing book covers, but it might be too easy for someone to recognize her cover art—she would need to find another way to use her graphic artist skills.

Once all of Jared's men had boarded, the stairwell was drawn back up into the plane, the door locked, and the jet began to taxi down the runway. Bryony looked out the window as Jared took up the seat across the aisle from her.

"You're being awfully quiet," he said. "I suggest that you let go of the notion that you can escape me; you can't."

She turned her head to regard him with a cool gaze. "I rather suspect my father thought that, as well."

"I'll kill the old man if I even think you're planning to get away."

"If you harm so much as one hair on his head, I'll end you."

Jared laughed malevolently. "Empty threats will not endear you to me."

"They aren't empty, and I have no intention of endearing myself to you."

"You don't truly believe you could best me in a fight, do you?"

"I don't have to. I'm sure there are any number of people who would be willing to beat the shit out of you for the right price."

He snarled and came out of his seat, raising his hand as if to strike her again.

“Careful, Jared. You want our people to buy this bullshit story you’ve concocted. I doubt you would win any popularity contests among our bevy, which is why you need me. If it looks like you’re beating me, there will be those who think to rise up against you.”

Jared stopped, lowering his hand. “When I get you naked, princess, there are all kinds of marks I can leave on your body that won’t be seen by others, but that you will feel.”

“And you wonder why it is I would want to refuse your charming, romantic proposal. You’re a bully, Jared, and I won’t be your victim. You may beat me, but trust me, before it’s over, I will have my revenge.”

She said nothing more and turned to look back out the window. The plane flew toward the estate’s private landing strip with nothing more said between them. Telling him off had probably not been her best idea, but it was truthful. Her father had always valued Jared because he was a bully and wasn’t well-liked. She might have to turn that to her advantage down the road if she couldn’t manage to get away.

If Jared’s plan was to present them as a happy couple, she most likely had until the day after her father’s funeral to make good on her escape. She could get a disposable cell phone and tell Cosmo to go and stay with his son for a while. Bryony had long ago recognized him as another shifter, but was unsure as to what specific species, but a shifter for sure. She closed her eyes. That wouldn’t work as a long-term solution, but it would buy her time to figure out what to do.

As much as the idea of simply disappearing appealed to her, it was most likely not a long-term solution. Bryony couldn’t even begin to imagine living her life on the run. She would need to pay attention to relationships within the bevy to try and find possible allies. The real problem was that as much as members of the bevy might not like Jared, they didn’t know her and what they knew probably wasn’t good. In addition, she rather imagined Jared’s security force had been hand-picked

by him. She would need to tread lightly in order to prevent others having to pay for her decisions.

Without taking her eyes off the clouds through which they were flying, Bryony asked, “When is my father’s funeral? I take it you’ve already made plans.”

“Well, you weren’t there to do it,” he sneered. “So much of what has happened and what will happen can be laid at your doorstep. I hope you know that. You aren’t any better liked than I am, but at least people respect me.”

“If you think what most of them feel is ‘respect,’ you are a bigger fool than I thought. They don’t ‘respect’ you Jared; they fear you. You need me, and any children I bear you, to shore up your position not only within the bevy, but within the otter-shifter community at large and the other organized crime families. Otherwise, you will be seen as an usurper and not to be trusted.”

His laugh was bitter with a twinge of evil. “You’re smarter than I remember. Fear is a much better commodity to have to keep people in line and the other otter-shifters will see it as a well-laid plan.”

“Do you think anyone will trust you when they know you murdered my father?”

“I told you I didn’t kill him.”

Bryony twisted in her seat until she was staring at him. “I don’t believe you. It may not have been your finger on the trigger, but I’m quite sure you were the one behind it. Were you there when he was killed?”

“No. He was lured out onto a desolate spot on the estate and was gunned down.”

“Alone?”

“Yes. I tried to dissuade him.”

“I’ll just bet you did...”

“He made the decision to go alone. He believed he was safe. He was wrong. We think a chopper of some sort—maybe with stealth capability—came up the Mississippi and gunned

him down. His corpse was riddled with bullets. You might take comfort that at least he went out in a blaze of glory.”

Bryony felt as though she'd been punched in the gut. It was one thing to know her father had been killed. It was another thing altogether to know it had been so bloody and so violent and that most likely she was sitting across from the man who orchestrated it.

Fighting down her emotions—grief, fury, and guilt—she said evenly, “I’ll try to see the same can be said of you.”

CHAPTER 4



BRYONY

When the jet made the final approach to their landing strip and set down with a jolt, Bryony waited until it came to a stop, the stairwell was let down, and Jared helped her to her feet.

“I’m going to need some clothes...”

“I am aware. I have already had one of the other females purchase some appropriate things for you, including a dress for the funeral.”

“You never answered me earlier,” she said as she descended the stairs, “when is that?”

“The day after tomorrow. We will have a great many important guests. If you do not convince me you can behave, or if you choose to act out, I will simply have you locked in your room under guard until I take you to mate. I will tell those who inquire that you were too overcome with grief and guilt to see anyone.”

“I have to hand it to you, you seem to have planned for every contingency.”

“I’m glad you realize that. Trying to escape will be futile and I will use your punishment to prove to those who doubt I am capable of ruling our bevy that going up against me is a bad idea.”

She turned around and smiled at him at the foot of the stairs. “You really are a bastard, Jared.”

“No doubt the reason your father blocked a pairing between us.”

“I’m sure it was only one of many.”

The way he gripped her upper arm, she knew she had hit a spot of contention. While keeping Jared on the edge of anger might be a dangerous game in the future, keeping him off kilter for now might help her in her gambit to get away.

Thrusting her into the car, he gave the driver the order to take them to the main house. “You have a choice. You can go to your room, refresh yourself, change, and join the bevy for dinner, or I can lock you in your room for the night.”

“I wonder, Jared, who it is you’re trying to protect—me? You? Those who might think to challenge you?”

“Quit pushing at me, Bryony. Once I have you mated and you bear me a son, your usefulness will be greatly diminished. I will have had you, sired my successor on you, and were something to happen to you, I could take another mate and sire more sons on her.”

She wasn’t worried about that. She had a birth control implant that was effective for at least another two years. Besides, she had no intention of allowing Jared to touch her intimately.

They rolled to a stop in front of the house. Many members of the household staff and bevy were there to greet them.

“Please, give Bryony some space. She’s had a terrible shock. I’d like to get her up to her room. I’m hoping with a little down time she’ll feel like rejoining the bevy for dinner.”

She had to hand it to Jared, he sounded very sincere as he walked her past their people and up the stairs towards her room.

“You know, Jared,” she whispered. “If this gangster thing doesn’t work out for you, you might think about taking up acting. I almost believed you down there.”

He shoved her inside her old room. “You better hope they believe me. If it comes down to it and there’s a fight for

leadership, I'm better off with you dead." Jared closed and locked her door as he left.

Well, he was nothing if not honest, and she'd already figured that out. She surveyed her room and its contents. There were a few clothes and undergarments, a nightgown and robe, and a few toiletries. Dumb and arrogant as Jared was, Bryony was certain he wouldn't let her go shopping on her own. She took a quick shower, washed her hair, and applied the little makeup that had been provided. Now she was ready regardless of what time they came to collect her.

Finding pen and paper, she began to make an inventory of what she would need. If she could get Jared to have the items picked up for her tomorrow, she could find some kind of bag to stash them in when she made her escape, preferably something waterproof she could carry. The bevy's estate was somewhat isolated, and she was sure the garage and vehicles would be guarded.

Her best bet was to play nice—maybe even make Jared think she was a little afraid of him—and wait until cover of darkness, toss whatever she could find to carry her clothes from the window, and climb down from the balcony, either with the emergency ladder her father had insisted she keep in her closet or via the vine-covered lattice. She could then shift into an otter and make a mad dash for the Mississippi. The river's undertows, currents, cottonmouth snakes, and the occasional alligator were most definitely risky, but remaining here and getting caught up in Jared's schemes was far more dangerous.

Depending upon when her escape was discovered, she might be able to make it to the river before being detected. If that happened, she might be able to find a boat somewhere along the Mississippi, borrow it and change back into human form. If she couldn't manage to take something to change into, she would need to find clothes before shifting from otter to human.

There was a knock on the door. Definitely not Jared: he would have barged in without a second thought. "Come in."

“Ms. Gates, Jared has asked if you feel up to joining us,” said a man she didn’t recognize.

“I’m ready. Jared was right; a nice shower and a bit of rest were just what I needed.”

She followed the man downstairs to Jared, who was waiting at the bottom of the steps.

Taking her hand, he leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I’m glad you decided to join us. You look lovely and our people will be happy to see you.”

“I didn’t think I had much of a choice.”

“You didn’t, but I think we may find we get on quite well. As I said, I can be a generous man.”

“I took the liberty of making a list of things I need. I’m assuming I won’t be going into the city to do my own shopping for a while, but if you could send someone tomorrow so I have them before the funeral, I would be very appreciative.”

“Let’s see how the evening goes. If you behave, I might be inclined to send someone to pick up the things on your list.”

They walked into the dining room and Bryony was taken aback. In the past, there had been an enormous buffet and individual tables had been arranged around the room with no set seating. People came and sat with whom they chose. Now, there was a large U-shaped dining table with a raised head table and people sitting on either side of the long parallel sides. It was obvious seating was assigned by rank. As they entered everyone in the room quieted and stood.

It was a bit surreal as otters, at least all the bebies she’d ever seen, tended to be boisterous and full of good cheer, especially at mealtime. No doubt at least some of those standing grieved her father’s death, but it appeared that most stood in fear of the man at her side.

Jared assumed the most ornate chair at the center of the head table, seating Bryony at his right hand, and another otter unknown to her, at his left.

Before sitting, he tapped his wine glass and everyone in the room, servants included, looked to him. “As you can see, I have returned with our dear, departed alpha’s only daughter and heir. I am sure you will all make her feel that she is most welcome in the home she has returned to.”

There was polite applause as Jared sat down.

“Your beta, I presume?” she asked quietly, nodding to the man sitting on Jared’s other side.

“You have forgotten our ways. I am still beta to this bevy as your father, our alpha, has not been buried and no one has been chosen to take his place. Enrique is a guest and business associate.”

“It is an honor to meet you,” said Enrique who spoke with a heavy South American accent. “I’m sure your presence here makes your father’s passing more bearable for those in his bevy.”

She bit her tongue to keep from correcting him. Her father hadn’t passed, he’d been murdered. If the cartel was responsible, Jared most likely had recruited him from amongst their ranks. Or perhaps the cartel didn’t trust that Jared could deliver and thus had placed him here to guard their interests.

“That’s kind of you to say, Enrique. How long were you doing business with my father?” she asked, innocently.

There was a flash of anger in Enrique’s eyes and a small growl from Jared. “Not long. He was not as keen to expand your territory as my friend Jared has been.”

“You forget yourself, Bryony. It is your place to make our guests feel welcome and not subject them to some kind of interrogation,” said Jared.

“My apologies, Jared. I was just curious. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.”

“I see you changed the seating arrangements. It seems more formal and subdued.”

“It allows people to know their place and keeps them from dillydallying, especially in the morning. It was something your father and I discussed, and he agreed with me that it was more efficient. Food is served to the tables and people help themselves. On Sundays, we do try to have a more elaborate brunch and then dinner.”

“I’m sure whatever you prefer is what we should do. I think I’m a little under-dressed for dinner,” she said quietly.

“You are, but it can be excused this evening. What you have on would be fine for breakfast, but we have taken to being a bit more particular about our dress at night.”

“I’ll revise my list when I go upstairs.”

Jared lifted and rang a bell that was next to his water glass and servants began bringing in the food. Her father had always referred to those who worked in the house as staff, and there was a certain panache to it. But these people weren’t staff, they were most definitely servants and Bryony didn’t believe for a moment they were otter-shifters.

“The people serving us aren’t otters, are they?” she asked.

“No. We need for those in our bevy to rise up above the servant level,” Jared replied. “They’re groundhogs.”

“I see,” she said, but she didn’t.

“They are beneath us and therefore they serve us.”

“So does that mean we serve the apex predators?”

“We serve no one,” growled Jared.

“Well, if your theory is that those who are not as strong and powerful serve those who are, then it stands to reason that we would serve those stronger and more powerful than us. If I’ve missed something in your analysis of the social order, I’d appreciate you educating me.” Bryony knew she was pushing him but couldn’t seem to help herself.

“You’d do better to keep your thoughts to yourself. I will not have you disrupting things.”

“I’m sorry, Jared. I didn’t mean to step out of place or cause any problems. I won’t do it again.”

“See that you don’t and watch what you eat. You aren’t as sleek as you used to be.”

It was all Bryony could do not to put her fist through his face. It was true she had put on some weight in the past five years. Most of it was muscle, but she had no intention of telling him that. She finished dinner mostly in silence as no one seemed inclined to talk with her. In fact, very few even looked her way and those that did would not meet her eyes.

Bryony couldn’t tell if it was because they resented her return or they feared Jared and had no intention of crossing him. It made her want to cry. Her father may have run a criminal organization, but he had cared for his people, and most had been happy. At some point during the past five years Jared had managed to impose a culture where people were afraid to talk, to laugh, or even to grieve. It was as if they had died, too.

She looked around the room and wondered what would happen when she left. Bryony was confident she could get away but was beginning to question whether she should wait until she had additional clothing. She wondered if Jared thought her capable of leaving with no firm plans in place. He seemed to have known how carefully she’d planned everything five years ago. Maybe the better plan—the one with the most success—was to leave tonight when Jared seemed convinced that she, too, would fall in line.

CHAPTER 5



BRYONY

Dinner was awkwardly silent until they concluded their meal. Jared stood and pulled out her chair, helping her to stand and leading her back to the staircase, before handing her off to one of his men to take to her room.

“Your behavior this evening was most pleasing. If you have a list ready for me by nine in the morning. I’ll have someone go into the city to see if we can’t get you a more suitable wardrobe. Good night, Bryony,” he said, kissing her cheek.

There were times with Jared that she felt he resembled some kind of snake-shifter more than otter-shifter. There was nothing warm and joyous in his bearing—more the kind of coolly sinister bearing one would expect from a reptile. He had been thoroughly disagreeable when her father had been alive, but since his death he had allowed even the thin veneer of civility to slip away.

She was marched back to her room and locked in. Bryony was sure she would be left alone until at least nine in the morning, but she would need the cover of darkness to make good on her plans to escape. Walking out onto her balcony, she casually leaned against the railing and watched the pattern of the guards as they patrolled the grounds. At least one man seemed to patrol directly under her balcony which would make using the emergency ladder or the vine covered lattice problematic.

Without moving her head, she surveyed the architecture of the old mansion to look for a means to accomplish her goal.

There was no way she could get away as a human, but it looked as though there were enough chinks in the exterior that she could shift and use her claws to climb to the roof and run along the drip edge and gutters of the roof to a drain spout which she could navigate as a kind of slide to get to the lawn. Once on the lawn she would need to use the darkness as cover to get to the river and escape.

She returned to her room and looked around. There was little, if anything, she would be able to take with her. There was nothing small and waterproof in which she could take some kind of clothing. She'd been removed from her home without her purse or wallet, but the only thing she would have taken would have been cash. Brittany Gerard was a thing of her past. She would never allow herself to return to Utah or use that name again. Fortunately, she had planned for this, and her offshore accounts used numbers not names. She hated that there was more than twenty thousand dollars in cash stashed in her floor safe back in Utah, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Bryony spun on her heel and rushed to the ornate molding to the right of the French doors leading to the balcony and pushed the drapes aside. Smiling, she began to wriggle the molding, loosening it until finally she pulled it free. Even as a child she had hidden things in her room. This particular place she'd created as a rebellious teen. It contained documentation for a false identity—Genny Banks—in a small plastic bag. *What a truly dreadful name—what was I thinking?*

The passport was still good, but the driver's license and credit cards had expired. There was, however, five thousand dollars in cash and a prepaid cell phone. It had been sitting there turned off, but there was no way to know if it would work. She didn't want to test it here in the house in case someone was monitoring her room for electrical devices. She didn't know if they could do something like that, but she wasn't willing to risk it.

Taking the small plastic baggie, she went into her bath and closed the door behind her. She removed the items contained within and tested the baggie to see if it was still waterproof. It

was! She dried the exterior and placed all of the items back in the baggie. She would need to be careful to only grasp the top of the bag where it zipped together to ensure her few valuables remained dry as she traversed the water.

Twilight had been fading as the bevy had eaten dinner and as true night fell, she was grateful for the enhanced night vision which came from her otter DNA. The moon and stars were hiding behind the clouds, but she could hear the regular rhythm of the man below as he paced back and forth.

Bryony cracked open the door leading out onto her balcony before retreating to her walk-in closet to shift. Like most aquatic shifters, there was no rolling thunder or lightning, just twinkling lights and the feel of a gentle mist as her body smoothly morphed from human to otter. Once the shift was complete, she slipped out the door and up onto the railing by the lattice. She glanced below, spotting the man as he patrolled.

Carefully she reached for the lattice, swinging out onto it silently as she began to climb steadily up to the gutter and drip edge. Before trusting any part of the trellis with her weight, she pulled on it to ensure it was sturdy enough to hold her. Whenever something like this was depicted in a movie or television show, it seemed so easy. But even the lattices that were reinforced with vines and well cared for could grow weak over the years. The last thing she needed to do was fall and get caught.

Bad as it was, the trellis at least gave her handholds and footholds—although in her current state it was more about what her paws and claws could grip. Not only did she need to ensure her escape wasn't discovered until she was well away, but she also needed to make sure she didn't tumble to the ground—it probably wouldn't kill her, but it might render her paralyzed or incapable of shifting back to her human form. The thought of either made her shiver, but she focused on getting to the top—one rung of the trellis at a time.

She could hear his voice inside her head. *“Steady. You can do this. I will be waiting.”*

It was a voice she had heard a number of times over the past year. It was always encouraging and always seemed to come to her when she needed it most. The voice was dark, low, and smooth—reminding of her really good, really old bourbon with just a hint of molasses. She had never dreamed of the man, but oftentimes she allowed the haunting memory of his voice to inspire her artwork.

Finally, she reached the gutter and managed to scramble up onto the roof. She froze in place, using her enhanced senses of hearing, sight, and smell to ensure she was safe, and her movement had gone undetected. The night had grown deeper, but her eyes had adjusted. The roofing was made of slate tile, slippery to most but easily navigated by an otter. Instead of climbing towards the top, Bryony ran along the thin strip of roofing between the tiles and the gutters toward the end of the house, negotiating corners and broken roofing to get to the place that was furthest from the light, but closest to the river.

She located the down spout and prepared to slide down. The position and webbing of her feet would make it possible for her to virtually slide down the drain spout, using her feet as a braking system. Still, if she put a paw wrong, she could give new definition to the term face plant. A part of her wanted to retreat, but retreat to what? There was no way she would remain here with Jared as her mate, and she couldn't return to Utah. No, the only thing to do was proceed.

Bryony silenced her own internal dialog and began the perilous descent down the drain spout. She didn't need to think or use her brain; what she needed was to recall muscle memory and how she had done this hundreds of times growing up. Grasping the down pipe between her paws, she upended her body and began a slow, controlled slide to the bottom. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding her breath until she reached the bottom.

She flattened herself to the wall, once again allowing her senses to tell her if she was safe—so far, so good. Turning toward the river, she crept along the shadows of the lawn until she reached the dense low foliage and unmanicured banks of the Mississippi. An owl hooted overhead, but she paid it no

mind. They weren't generally big enough to scoop up even a pureblood otter, much less the larger otter-human hybrids.

Sliding down the embankment and into the water, she had to fight a particularly strong undertow, but remembered her mother telling her that if she didn't panic, she could always swim her way to safety. The water closed over her head, and she feared she might not find the surface again, but calmed her nerves and swam parallel to the beach until it no longer felt like it was trying to suck her under.

She remained mostly submerged and began to paddle her way towards the city. She was certain that at some point, she would come to some kind of suburban subdivision or golf course where she might be able to search for clothing and a vehicle of some type. She wouldn't need it for long. Her destination was the St. Louis airport and the first flight out to Europe where she could lose herself until those who might follow lost interest and gave up the hunt.

It was a long swim, and she was happy she had kept up on her swimming and was in relatively good shape. When she tired, she flipped to her back and let the current carry her closer to the Missouri side of the river. She smelled civilization before she heard or saw it. Even as an otter, she recognized the lingering aroma of barbeque wafting through the air.

As she scrambled up the bank she realized she was in an upscale subdivision filled with McMansions—enormous homes on tiny lots. Most likely there would be no clothes hanging on the line, but even people with ritzy houses and alarm systems were probably not thinking of protecting their clothing from a clever otter-shifter bent on escape.

Bryony ran along the back fences, peeking in where she could until she found what she wanted, a home with a pool and a cabana. She slipped under the gate where it didn't meet the ground and hugged the fence line until she reached the cabana. Nothing.

She heard the door from the house opening before she heard the sound of teenage voices as kids raced to the pool,

tearing their garments from their bodies and tossing them into the bushes that surrounded the pool.

“Last one in has to go for pizza,” shouted a young man.

Bryony watched as each of the five teenagers bounded out naked into the light before diving in. She was glad to see one of the boys was what had once been referred to as ‘husky.’ His things might fit just right. And more than one of the girls had flung flip flops off her feet. She found the young man’s jeans and his t-shirt. They’d be big, but she could make do until she got to one of the clothing stores at the airport.

“Oh my god, Barry, that otter has your t-shirt,” cried one of the girls before breaking into peals of laughter.

Apparently, Barry didn’t seem to mind, nor had he noticed that Bryony also had his jeans and a pair of flip flops. She scooted back out under the gate and ran back to the river and then along its banks until she was alone and in the dark once more.

Taking a minute to catch her breath, Bryony looked down the river and was pleased to see no one was following her. She shifted and then pulled on her borrowed clothing. The waist in the jeans was too big, but she folded it over until they hung fairly securely on her hips. She pulled on the t-shirt, knotting the hem so that it fell below her ass and mostly disguised that she had on no bra. Thankfully, the flip flops fit better than anything else.

Bryony transferred the items from her baggie into the various pockets of the jeans and then began to make her way back to the house from which she’d stolen the clothes. Risky? Perhaps, but it made sense to think the teenagers might be a little less careful about the security of their cars. She tried the doors of a Mini-Cooper, no luck. She moved to some kind of cross-over vehicle with the same result. When she came to the Jeep, she could see it had no top and so she slid into the driver’s seat. It didn’t have a push button ignition, but she found the keys over the visor.

Starting up the Jeep, she backed out of the driveway and then turned toward the main road. It didn’t take long for her to

reach the Poplar Street Bridge that would get her out of Illinois and into Missouri. Once in Missouri, she followed the signs to the St. Louis Airport and parked the jeep in long-term parking. She would wait for the first transport up to the main terminal.

Fishing the prepaid cell phone out of her pocket, she hit the button to turn it on. She waited until it lit up, ran through its initial cycle and all of the updates from the past five years. The phone recommended she upgrade. Bryony laughed. No need for that; she would ditch it as soon as she entered the airport.

She found a flight that left within the next two hours—Lufthansa had a direct, non-stop flight to Frankfurt. If the stores in the airport weren't open, so be it, she'd travel to Germany as is. Germany wouldn't have been her first choice as she didn't speak the language, but expediency trumped convenience.

Bryony left the Jeep and placed the keys along with a note to call the owner in the lot's drop box and then began to make her way to the terminal. There was a skeleton crew at the Lufthansa ticket counter, and she had to stand in the queue. Without a credit card, she would need to pay cash and thus could not use one of the convenient kiosks.

Just as she stepped up to the ticket counter, a tall, well-built man in a tailored suit and tie stepped up, gently wrapped his hand around her upper arm, and pulled her out of line.

“Hey,” she said, snatching her arm back.

“Please, Ms. Gates, if you could come with me? I'll only take a minute of your time and if you still want to leave after I'm done, I'll personally see that you get on that flight.”

“How can you do that?” she asked.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a very official-looking badge and credentials. “Please?” he asked, nodding to a place that was a bit more discreet.

Bryony nodded and followed him closer to the automatic revolving doors that led back outside.

“Ms. Gates, my name is Alan Bergstrom. I’m with the federal taskforce assigned to bringing down the Gutierrez Cartel. We believe the cartel killed your father.”

CHAPTER 6



NOLAN

Nolan pulled his phone from his pocket and answered.
“Hamilton.”

“Alpha, she’s gone.”

“Gone where?” No need to ask who ‘she’ was.

“They have no idea. She seemed fine at dinner and then went to her room. Pettigrew had men stationed outside her door both in the hallway and under the balcony.”

“How did she get past them?”

“They think she shifted and got to the river.”

“That’s not too smart. What will she do for clothes, money, and identity?”

“They found some of the baseboard pulled up behind the curtains next to the French doors leading out to the balcony. It looks like she had a stash hidden there. My guess is it is from when she lived here. The day she left before her party, she simply disappeared. She had to have money and what she needed to start a new life. Perhaps she had more than one and this one was left behind. Pettigrew is losing it. He’s storming around, shouting, cursing, and hitting anyone who comes too close. The vehicles were all well-guarded, but there is an intensive search of the estate underway.”

“She’s too smart for that. If she shifted, she’s headed for the river and most likely this side of the river. My guess would be St. Louis—there’s a lot of ways out of the city. Well done. Keep yourself safe and check in if you can.”

“Pettigrew is a fool. He was all but gloating at dinner, but Bryony didn’t look cowed. She was calm and thoughtful. My guess is she was already planning her escape.”

“You’re probably right. We’ll find her.”

Nolan ended the call, far more pleased with the events of the evening than he probably had a right to be. Nonetheless, it seemed Bryony was not to be underestimated. He arranged surveillance at the airports, train stations and bus terminals in both St. Louis and East St. Louis. Bryony had managed to escape from Jared, giving Nolan a reason to smile. Who would have thought the princess would be able to pull that off? Clearly, Bryony Gates was more than she appeared to be.

His people at Lambert Field, St. Louis’ main international airport, reported Bryony had parked a Jeep in long-term parking, left the keys, and walked to the terminal. The call had come in to him before she ever left the lot. She had gone immediately to the Lufthansa ticket counter and was preparing to buy a ticket to Frankfurt.

The airport was more than an hour away by car, but the chopper could make it in under ten minutes. He ordered his men to move back but to make sure she didn’t board the plane. Had someone bothered to ask, Nolan would not have been able to tell them why he had such a sense of urgency or why he wanted to ensure Bryony was safe. He couldn’t explain it to anyone else, as he wasn’t sure of the reason in his own mind.

“They are not going to allow you to land this thing close to the public terminal,” said Heath as he joined Nolan in the helicopter.

“Of course, they will. We have people inside the tower; they’ll make sure we can land where we want to. Besides, we’ll only be there for a few minutes. I’ll offer her my protection and a way to work together...”

“And if she refuses?”

Nolan looked at him, allowing the corners of his mouth to slowly tick up. “What’s the old saying? I’ll make her an offer she can’t refuse.”

Heath rolled his eyes and groaned. “How do you plan to do this?”

“We’ll isolate her and then ask her to come with us. If she proves to be difficult, we have tranquilizers that will render her unable to protest, and we’ll just walk her out.”

“What if the cartel or Pettigrew are there?”

“Then we will try to contain the collateral damage, but we will have Gates’ daughter when we leave. Neither Pettigrew nor the cartel can take Bryony into their possession.”

“You really believe she is the key?”

Nolan nodded. “Yes. She has to be. Gates may have been an ineffective alpha, but he did care for his people, and he didn’t mount much of a search for Bryony. I suspect he cared too much for her to use her as a pawn, but had she remained close to him, he would have had no choice.”

The chopper lifted off and glided through the night sky, close enough to the ground to avoid radar detection. When he checked with their inside man, Nolan was told she was in the airport lobby by the ticket counters. The chopper was directed to a spot immediately adjacent to the terminal. The door had been left unlocked by their informant to grant him access into the terminal itself.

Once the helicopter had landed and the pilot signaled that all was secure, Nolan, Heath, and two security men exited the craft, entering the terminal via the unlocked door and rushed up the stairs to the lobby. Even though the door was unlocked, Nolan fumbled with getting it open. The normally cool and calculating alpha had been off his game ever since Bryony’s father had been murdered. And now here he was plagued by the strange sense that something was amiss, and that Bryony was in danger. There was no explanation for this feeling, but Nolan had long ago learned to trust his instincts, especially when they were telling him there was danger. The difference was this time it wasn’t danger to himself that he felt, but to a woman he didn’t even know.

They were just entering the terminal lobby by the ticket counters when Nolan noticed a tall, well-built man in a tailored suit and tie step close and capture Bryony's upper arm to pull her out of line. Anger and a sense of entitlement surged through Nolan's body. His cock stiffened and he wanted nothing more than to shift into his lion form and rip the man limb from limb. It was as if the truth slapped him across the face. No one was allowed to touch her but him. No matter what else might happen, if the man harmed Bryony in any way, he would die.

Bryony jerked her arm away angrily.

"Hey," she said, snatching her arm back.

Good for her. He didn't know who the guy was, but right now the last thing Nolan needed was interference from some unknown, outside force. Nolan's keen sense of smell, brief observation and instincts all told him the guy was not a shifter. He tamped down his own desire to overreact and take control of the situation. There were ways other than brute force, but at the moment that was the one he favored.

"Please, Ms. Gates," the man said, "if you could come with me? I'll only take a minute of your time and if you still want to leave after I'm done, I'll personally see that you get on that flight."

Nolan doubted that very much.

"How can you do that?" she asked. Bryony was no fool. She wasn't just going with some guy who promised vague assurances.

Nolan tensed and prepared to charge as the man reached into his pocket, relaxing only a small bit when he pulled out what appeared to be some kind of badge and credentials.

"Please?" the man asked, nodding to a place that was less public and from which Bryony could be more easily taken.

That suited Nolan just fine, so he motioned to his men to hang back as he followed Bryony and her escort to the automatic revolving doors that led back outside.

Nolan was close enough to overhear their conversation. “Ms. Gates, my name is Alan Bergstrom. I’m with the federal taskforce assigned to bring down the Gutierrez Cartel. We believe the cartel killed your father.”

As far as Nolan knew, no taskforce had yet been convened. Bryony’s father had been killed less than forty-eight hours before. No federal anything could get its shit together fast enough to put together a taskforce or anything else. The guy might be a Fed, but Nolan would bet good money on the fact that he wasn’t here on behalf of the authorities. He was either one of Pettigrew’s stooges or he was working for those who had committed the murder—most likely the Cartel. Other than Pettigrew, the two factions that had the most to gain from Gates’ murder and acquiring control of Bryony were the cartel and Nolan himself. As he knew he wasn’t the murderer, that left the most likely prospect of this guy’s employer being the cartel.

Whoever they were, they were well-prepared. As the agent rushed Bryony through the revolving door, he used her inertia to propel her into the open door of a black SUV, slamming it behind her and jumping into the passenger seat as the vehicle pulled away from the curb and into the airport’s traffic. Nolan spun on his heel and raced back into the terminal, meeting his men coming out as he was going in.

“They have her,” he explained.

“Who?” asked Heath.

Nolan kept moving, back through the revolving doors and towards the door they had used to enter the building. His men followed in his wake.

“Unknown. Best guess is either Pettigrew or the cartel—whoever has the most to gain from Gates’ death and control of his daughter.”

They ran down the stairs and out to the waiting chopper. Seeing them coming, the pilot began his preflight routine and by the time they jumped into the cabin and were closing the door, the craft was beginning to lift off.

Nolan put on his headphones. “They’re in a black SUV, heading out of the airport.”

“That’s not a lot to go on, Nolan,” said Heath. “There’s a lot of black SUVs out there.”

“Granted, but none of the rest of them have my mate. I should be able to tell which one has her.”

“Your what?” asked Heath.

Nolan swiveled in his seat to look directly at his beta. “My mate—you know, the one the legends say I am fated to be with?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in those tales.”

“I didn’t, right up to the point I saw some goon put his hands on her.”

“She’s not a lioness. For god’s sake, Nolan, she’s an otter.”

“She won’t be once I’ve claimed her.”

“You do know that sort of thing is frowned on.”

“Who’s to stop me? The other lion packs, as well as most of the large cat-shifters, will back us. The other large predator species won’t care, and I can’t believe you’re afraid of a bevy or two of otters.”

Heath growled low, leaning forward. Friend or not, it was never a good idea to growl at one’s alpha. “I’m not, and you know it.” Heath sat back as recognition dawned. “You’re sure of it.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement of fact.

Nolan smiled benevolently. “Trust me, old friend, I am as surprised as you are.”

“There are going to be a lot of unhappy lionesses, not the least of whom is Sasha. Her father sent her here to be considered as a mate.”

“Yes, and Sasha has no interest in returning home to her father’s territory—”

A sudden flash of fear came over Nolan. It wasn’t his, it was Bryony. She was close. He picked up binoculars and

spotted an SUV getting on the freeway and heading south toward the Poplar Street Bridge.

Tapping on the shoulder of the pilot, Nolan pointed to it. “That’s the one. We’ll need to get them off the main highway. I don’t want them to make the bridge.”

“Luckily, there’s almost no one on the highway, I can go low and get in front of them, blocking the bridge. Then, they’ll either have to stop or get off.”

Nolan nodded. “Good enough. Once they’re off the road and not going at high speed, we can shoot out a tire or two, but not until it’s safe to do so. I don’t want to risk injuring Bryony.”

The chopper picked up speed and altitude as he raced through the night sky. Nolan was impressed by his pilot’s skill. He neatly maneuvered the chopper in front of the entrance to the bridge hovering above the highway until the SUV was in sight. Luckily it was travelling relatively alone.

As the helicopter dropped in front of it, blocking the entrance onto the bridge, two men leaned out of the windows with automatic rifles and began firing at the chopper as their SUV turned and went down an access road, breaking through the wooden barrier. The chopper followed and once the SUV was on level ground, one of Nolan’s men aimed his rifle and shot out the two tires on the driver’s side, rocking the SUV.

Nolan watched in horror as the SUV pitched back and forth several times before finally listing enough to the side of the shot-out tires to roll completely over, toppling down the embankment and landing upside down in the waters of the Mississippi River.

CHAPTER 7



BRYONY

The words had barely left the man's mouth when he was propelling her through the revolving door and shoving her into the SUV. Bryony didn't have a chance to sit up before the man was pushing her down onto the floorboard behind the front seats. The SUV didn't exactly race away from the terminal, as even at this late hour there was far too much traffic, but she lost her sense of direction and time ceased to matter as they drove away. Eventually she felt the SUV headed up a short incline as it picked up speed. They must be headed up onto the interstate. She needed to know if they were heading north or south and the disorientation from being kidnapped out of the airport prevented that.

Bryony pushed up from the floorboard to try and ascertain their direction. The man with the badge shoved his rifle butt between her shoulder blades, knocking the wind out of her momentarily. All of her self-defense training told her to make herself look passive and to not initiate anything until she could see a clear way out, but doing that was far more difficult than she had once imagined.

She had to fight down her panic and fear; she needed to focus on what she could control, and at this moment that wasn't much. She was pitched forward as the SUV hit the brakes and rolled her forward, into the back of the seat. She could hear the sounds of a helicopter as well as a kind of calming purring noise that seemed to envelop and soothe her, restoring more equilibrium and with it the ability to think clearly.

The man who had abducted her, as well as the man sitting in front of him on the same side, rolled down their windows, sticking their bodies half out and opening automatic fire as the SUV swung around and headed back in the direction it came. It angled away from the highway down a bumpy road, crashing through some kind of barrier. Bryony was jostled and ping-ponged between the back of the front seat and the back seat. She covered her head with her hands and arms to protect it from getting smashed into anything.

Both men were back inside the vehicle and all of them were yelling in Spanish. Yet another time Bryony wished she had picked Spanish over French when she had the choice of which foreign language to learn. It was easy to tell from their tone of voice and rapidity of speech that they were upset, but that was all she could pick up. That alone told her she most likely wasn't dealing with people sent by Jared. No, if she had to hazard a guess, they were with some cartel. Which cartel remained an unanswered question, but from all she knew, getting involved with any cartel was a bad idea.

Two single shots rang out in the night, immediately silencing her kidnappers. The SUV rocked violently from side-to-side, finally tilting to the left and rolling down an embankment. It came to rest upside down under the Mississippi. The men tried frantically to unfasten their seatbelts as the water began to pour into the vehicle.

Their focus was not on her, which gave her the opening she needed. She removed the pouch containing her paperwork and money from her pockets before calling forth her otter. The shift would disintegrate not only her clothing, but anything the clothing contained or concealed, except jewelry made of precious metals and gems. She could feel the gentle, almost tickling sensation that covered a shift envelop her. The men were so intent on trying to save themselves, that they paid her no attention and didn't seem to notice when she morphed from human to otter, grabbed her waterproof baggie and pushed her way through the shattered window. She could hold her breath a little longer than a non-shifting otter, but not much more than ten minutes. Being a strong swimmer, though, gave her more than enough time.

Moving to the surface so she could poke her eyes and nose out, she heard a chopper landing close to where the SUV had rolled down the embankment and into the river. Men with guns jumped out of the helicopter and began making their way toward the river and the SUV. Her bedraggled would-be kidnappers stumbled out of the river and immediately fell to their knees with their hands raised.

Taking a deep breath, Bryony dove under the surface and began to swim towards the bridge. It wasn't much but it would offer her a little protection. She shook her head as she began to hear the rhythmic purring she had heard earlier. She wasn't sure what it was, but she sure as hell wasn't going to simply give into the urge to turn and follow it back to where it originated.

She had no idea who was in the helicopter, but her best guess was Jared or Nolan Hamilton, the alpha of the lion pride that controlled St. Louis and had one of the largest territories in the Midwest. Only the two of them had enough at stake to warrant the use of a helicopter to search for someone who had no stake in their fight. Jared was a bit of a stretch as she didn't think the bevy had a helicopter and venturing into Hamilton's territory was out of character for Jared, who liked to play it safe. He might have had goons to accompany him to Utah, but there was no way he could out gun or out man Hamilton. The lion was a fierce enemy, and few even deigned to challenge him. Those who did invariably lost and most often paid with their lives.

Bryony was under the bridge when she turned to see the chopper lifting off and scouring the river and the Missouri side of the bank with its powerful searchlight. As it approached the bridge, Bryony took a deep breath and submerged herself just under the surface, where she could watch them but they couldn't see her. Each time they turned the chopper away, she allowed her nose to go above the water to take another breath.

Whoever was in the helicopter seemed determined to find her, but after more than an hour and with the arrival of both the river patrol and the cops, they faded off into the distance. Bryony allowed herself the luxury of crawling onto the bank

up high where the bridge joined it. She remained an otter until she was sure there were no humans lurking nearby. She could smell the stench they had left behind, but for the moment, she was alone and safe.

She recounted the money she had remaining. If she had to, she could purchase another ticket. But her boarding pass for the Lufthansa flight was still on her phone. If she could get back to the terminal and get inside, she might still be able to make that flight. She was willing to gamble, in order to save money, that the cartel members were not about to cooperate with the police, nor had they had a chance to call anyone to let them know what had happened. It might not be the cartel, but they had the resources and seemed determined to find her.

Bryony crawled out from under the bridge and looked to the East—the sun had yet to begin its ascent into the sky, but the night wasn't quite as dark as it had been before. She needed to find clothes and return to the airport before the morning sun made it easier for those who meant her harm to find her.

She shifted again—she would sleep well on the flight, as shifting and swimming as she'd been doing could tax one's strength—and trotted back down to the river, slipping into the water and beginning to swim closely parallel to the shore to see if she couldn't find clothes and some kind of shoes. That was her first order of business. Without them, there was no way to get to the airport and out of the country.

It would seem her luck was holding. Bryony knew that many people wouldn't think she'd been lucky this evening, but she would disagree. Sure, being kidnapped by first Jared and then the cartel was a setback, but on the other hand, she had escaped both and was still breathing. She had a valid ticket, passport, and money to get out of the country. Now, just to find clothing and some kind of transport back to Lambert field.

Spotting a grouping of what appeared to be loft apartments sitting right on the waterfront, Bryony believed her chances of not having to buy another ticket were fairly good. But it was a high-end community and had security measures in place to keep intruders out. Well, two-legged intruders anyway. There

was a waterway from the condos that emptied into the river. Doggedly, Bryony began to swim up the channel and into the condos, which led her into the pool's common area.

There were no clothes conveniently left out, but she did find a pair of red Vionic flip flops that would do nicely. As red was her favorite color, Bryony decided things were looking up. There were seven changing stations in the pool area, and she checked them one-by-one with no luck. She needed clothing and she needed some kind of transportation.

Bryony slipped under the fence that surrounded the pool and went in search of the parking area. One-by-one she checked to see if doors and hatchbacks had been locked and if not, was there anything inside to help. She was determined not to give up. She'd made it this far and she would not be denied her freedom.

Popping the hatch on a Mazda CX-3 hybrid, Bryony hit the promised land. In the rear there was a pair of sweatpants, a tank top, and even a sports bra, as well as a Vera Bradley tote. She quickly shifted and put on the clothes. The tank and bra were a little tight, but thieves couldn't be choosy. She closed the hatch quietly and moved into the driver's seat. Damn, it had a pushbutton ignition, which meant she needed a key fob. She shook the tote and heard the sound of keys—probably why the vehicle had been unlocked. Sure enough, there was the key fob.

Starting the engine, she was happy to see the CX-3 had been set to electric. Almost silently, she backed out into the parking lot, keeping the headlights off as she headed toward the gated exit. As she approached, the gates lifted automatically, and she pulled out onto the road. Pulling up the navigation system, she punched in Lambert Field and drove swiftly to the long-term lot. Once again, she parked and then left the keys in the drop box.

She made her way back to the terminal. The leader board at the top of the escalator indicated she had less than thirty minutes to make her flight. There were more people milling around the terminal. Faking a limp, she waved down one of the security people in a little golfcart-like vehicle.

“Can I help you, miss?”

“Yes. I’m afraid after I bought my ticket, I thought I’d stretch my legs and I’ve twisted my ankle. I don’t think I can get to my Frankfurt flight and if I miss it, I could lose my new job. I’ve always wanted to work overseas. I have my passport and boarding pass...” She let the sentence dangle.

“Okay, I’ll take you to the security checkpoint. They can check you through and then I’ll run you down to the gate.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Don’t you have a bag?”

“No, I sent the things ahead that I’ll need until I’m sure I like it there, and then my mom will send me the rest when I have an apartment.”

The security agent nodded. “That’s good planning. Hop in; let’s see if we can’t get you to your flight.”

As she had thought would be the case, Bryony had to present her passport, identification, and boarding pass, as well as limp through the metal detectors. She was passed through, and they were making the last call for her flight as they arrived. One of the gate attendants helped her to her seat and as she was the last to board and was injured, they upgraded her to a seat in first class.

The large plane pulled away from the jetway and began to taxi out onto the runway. It had been years since she’d flown on anything other than a private jet and she was glad that the seat beside her was empty. Bryony felt a sense of guilt that the flight attendants seemed to want to pamper her. Her senses were on high alert until the plane seemed to pause for a few moments before the jet engines began to power up and they started down the runway. It wasn’t until they’d taken off and were climbing to their cruising altitude and headed for Germany that she allowed herself to relax.

She wasn’t home free yet, but she had managed to escape Jared, the cartel, and most likely Nolan Hamilton. Why Hamilton seemed so determined to find her was curious, but

he was. How could she fit into whatever he was planning? Why couldn't they just all go away and leave her alone?

Bryony might be entering Germany in sweatpants, a tank top, and flip flops, but she still had money and would be able to access her offshore accounts. The first thing she wanted to do when she landed was see if the airport had showers and clothing stores. If so, getting clean and refreshed would move to the top of her agenda. The next was to get the hell out of Germany. For one thing she didn't speak the language; for another, anyone trying to find her would most likely be able to find out that's where she had headed.

Closing her eyes, Bryony drifted off to sleep. Had she not been so exhausted, the sound of the lion's angry roar would have jolted her awake. Instead, sleep overtook her, and she saw her father standing alone as a group of men riddled his body with bullets.

CHAPTER 8



NOLAN

They reached the place where the land had given way when they shot out the tires and the SUV had tumbled into the Mississippi. The helicopter had barely landed when Nolan was out and charging down the hill with Heath in close pursuit. The three men from the cartel—easy to tell as they were cussing at each other in Spanish—climbed up out of the water with Bryony nowhere in sight.

“Secure them,” he shouted at Heath as he dove into the water.

He fought the current of the mighty river and managed to reach the vehicle, which was filled with water. Bryony was nowhere to be seen, but the back driver’s side window was smashed and looked as if it had been pushed out from the inside. As Nolan began to claw his way to the surface, he had to keep himself from smiling. It would seem his mate wasn’t easily intimidated. She’d been kidnapped, shot at, and survived a roll-over vehicle crash and had kept her wits around her—enough so that she had shifted and used the river to escape them.

Nolan trudged back onto the bank. His men had zip tied the three men’s arms behind their backs. “Make them kneel back-to-back, secure their ankles and then zip tie them together.”

“You have no idea who you are dealing with...” started the man who had put his hands on Bryony.

Nolan brought his gun up and rested it against the man's forehead. "Don't I? You're a part of the Gutierrez Cartel and you're in *my* territory. I've warned you bastards about encroaching on my business. You may have made some deal with Pettigrew, but you will only find death in St. Louis if I catch you here again."

"We did not mean to violate your boundaries," said one of the others. "We were in pursuit of the old don's daughter..."

"And you thought it would be okay to pursue her here?"

"To tell you the truth, we meant to be in and out with no one the wiser."

Nolan grabbed him by the front of his hair and jerked the man's head back. "Did you now? Let this be a lesson that I watch over what is mine. I have no idea what you want with the girl, but you can't have her."

"Riccardo means to marry her off to his son and secure East St. Louis," said the third man. "He wanted to approach you about a mutually beneficial business arrangement."

"Bullshit. He wants the girl to secure her father's territory all right, but he wants to use it as a launching pad to deliver his particular brand of death and destruction into what is mine. He got his ass kicked by Randall Beckett up in Chicago. You should tell your boss that the leopard in the Windy City is a far kinder and more tolerant man than I. The further south you go, the nastier we get. God help you if you ever have the misfortune to go up against Bodie Lambeau in New Orleans. El Tigre is even less tolerant than I. We'll leave you here. You and the police and the cartel can figure it out." He leaned down until there was barely a breath between them and patted his cheek in a patronizing manner. "But know this: Bryony Gates is mine and I will kill anyone who ever touches her again."

Nolan pushed the man's head away from him as he stood. "We need to get back in the chopper and see if we can't find her. She wasn't in the SUV. She must have shifted to get away." Without warning, he spun on his heel and backhanded the man who had grabbed her. "What flight?"

“I don’t know,” said the frightened man. “I swear it. But I know she was walking away from the Lufthansa ticket counter. I think she got a ticket there.”

Nolan nodded. “I should kill you for putting your hands on her, but you just bought yourself a one-time get-out-of-jail free card with me. If I see you again, I won’t be so forgiving.” He turned to his men. “Have them monitor the police, river patrol, and emergency scanners so we know what’s going on. Then have someone hack Lufthansa for a last-minute purchase that either just left or is leaving soon.”

“You sure you don’t want me to off these guys, Alpha?” said Heath in a tough guy voice.

“No. We’ll leave them for their boss. I understand Riccardo is not very understanding of failure.”

They climbed into the helicopter. “Off these guys? Really? Last time I checked we weren’t murderous thugs.”

“I know but did you see them all piss themselves?”

Nolan shook his head. “Let’s go see if we can’t find Bryony. If she managed to get a flight to Germany, we need to have the jet fueled and ready for takeoff.”

“No problem. I’ve got a search team headed to the airport to make sure she isn’t still there and to see what they can find.”

“Good thinking.”

“Do you think Pettigrew or the cartel will go after her?”

“It sounded like Pettigrew was going to use Bryony to take over her father’s territory. He may have bitten off more than he can chew with the cartel. Riccardo wanted her mated to his son to give him some legitimacy there. If Pettigrew has double-crossed him, I don’t like Pettigrew’s odds for survival once Riccardo finds out.”

“Do you really think Riccardo means to try and take over in St. Louis? He’s got to know that’s a losing proposition.”

“In a direct confrontation, yes, but the word is he’s got a new Ecstasy-like drug he wants to introduce here. If he can

secure Gates' territory and then make money peddling his drugs in ours, he could carve out a hefty market for himself."

"Why the Midwest? Wouldn't one of the coasts be better?"

"Not necessarily. There isn't as much competition here, especially if you're looking to bring in drugs. The borders are a bit more fluid, and they could use the port in New Orleans to enter the country. We aren't generally as secure as either coast, and they could use the Mississippi to transport their shit."

"So, you want Gates' daughter to secure that territory? Why not just let Pettigrew have her and control him?"

As they talked, he, Heath and their man in the co-pilot seat scanned the area with night vision binoculars, searching for Bryony in either her otter or human form.

"From the moment I heard Gates had been killed, I rejected the idea of allowing someone else to have his daughter. It wasn't until we headed up into the terminal that I knew why. That sexy, curvy little otter is my fated mate. You have no idea how much control I exerted to keep from killing that capybara goon who touched her. No. I will take her to mate, and we will run both territories and keep Riccardo and his death and drug squads out of what is ours. Which reminds me— I'm going to need you to call Beck and Bodie and bring them up to speed."

"What will you be doing?"

"If Bryony got on that plane to Germany, I'm headed there to find her and bring her home. I'm going to need Cosmo to tell me everything he knows about her."

"That's all fine and dandy, but what are you going to do about Sasha? Neither she nor her father will be pleased," Heath said.

"Are you kidding? Sasha will be almost as pleased as you are. She begged me to allow her to come to stay with us. She wanted out of Russia. I kept thinking one or both of you would quit circling each other and come to me."

"You know?" gulped Heath. "Well, there's not really anything to know. I've never touched her."

“Don’t you think I know that? I understand Sasha not thinking I would give you my blessing, but you and I grew up together.”

“Which is why I wouldn’t ask. It would be a great dynastic bonding...”

“Dynasties don’t keep a man warm and happy at night.” Nolan waited and Heath said nothing. “What are you waiting for now?”

“The timing is wrong...”

“If you wait for perfect timing, it’ll never happen. Take her to mate and be happy. Sasha is smart, courageous, and loyal.”

“Thank you, Alpha. I’ll talk to her in the morning.”

In the distance, Nolan could hear sirens both from the street and the river. Someone had spotted something, and the cops and river patrol were out. Once Gutierrez’s involvement was discovered, the DEA would take lead and that would take the pressure off Nolan.

It was an open secret that Nolan was the kingpin in St. Louis, but it was also known that he didn’t deal in drugs of any kind. He might not work *with* the DEA, but he sure as hell didn’t work *against* them and was notorious for his handling of those who tried to peddle pharmaceuticals in his territory. The DEA might arrest and prosecute drug runners, manufacturers and distributors; Nolan just killed them, destroyed their labs and distribution networks, and sent the drugs to the DEA for disposal. It was an uneasy alliance, but for the most part it worked.

“The cops have found Gutierrez’s men. The river patrol is searching the area, but so far there are no emergency calls for an injured or naked woman,” said the man in the co-pilot’s seat. “Our people have the manifests for Lufthansa and they’re pretty damn sure she got on the direct flight to Frankfurt.”

“Shit,” said Nolan under his breath before looking up. “It means we can’t be there to pick her up in Frankfurt.”

The other man grinned. “Cosmo says don’t worry. She doesn’t speak German. She does speak French but doesn’t like

Paris. His guess is she'll find a small place to hole up along the French/Swiss border.”

“For the long term—most likely, but she’s got to get a new identity, clothes, etc. That’s easier to do in a large city. Tell our other pilot to get the jet ready to go to Paris.”

“I can have the jet ready almost as soon as we land,” said the pilot. “I keep the choppers and the planes ready to leave on a moment’s notice with a minimal pre-flight checklist.”

“Danny, I have no intention of leaving you behind. But for once you can ride in the back. I want you on top of your game when we’re in France. I have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into. If the idea of doing nothing bothers you, find us a long-range chopper to buy in France. It’ll make getting in and out of places easier.”

The pilot grinned; Nolan turned to Heath. “I can’t stay for a proper bonding ceremony, but you and Sasha can have at each other until I return with my blessing. Just make sure you’ve got our people protected. Neither Gutierrez nor Pettigrew has enough sense to know when they’re beaten.”

Heath nodded. “How long will you be gone?”

“Just long enough to find my mate and bring her home.”

“You can’t go with just our two pilots. I want at least two of our security guys to go with you.”

“Not the worst idea you’ve had.”

“Are you worried about Gutierrez or Pettigrew trying to beat you to her or take her away?”

“Pettigrew doesn’t have the money or connections. Gutierrez might send his son to make his bones and get her back, but they don’t have a lot of connections over there. Besides, his son gambles, drinks and snorts too much cocaine to be much of a threat. No, we’ll be fine. In fact, why don’t you and Sasha throw a huge party—make everyone think I’m there. It won’t throw them off for long but might give us the head start we need for me to catch up with my mate.”

“You’re assuming Sasha is going to go along with this...”

“Listen, Heath, she was never interested in me. I was a means to an end. She figured I could protect her from her father. I’ve watched the two of you circle each other for the past two years. If Sasha decides to get on her high horse with you, deal with her. You have my blessing—spank her ass, fuck her hard, and call it a day.”

Heath laughed. “God, I’d forgotten what a romantic bastard you can be. Is that your plan with Bryony?”

“It’s a plan with a lot of merits, but I also need to get her transitioned. As a lioness she has a lot more ways to defend herself.”

They were back at the estate as the sky to the east began to lighten. As ordered, the plane was ready to go, as were the two security guards coming with him. Heath had called Sasha and asked her to pack a bag for Nolan. He and the helicopter pilot stepped off the chopper and jogged over to the jet.

As they taxied down the landing strip, the plane picked up speed and then lifted off the ground just as the first rays of the sun began to creep over the Eastern horizon. His last glimpse of those on the ground was Sasha throwing her arms around Heath and then waving madly at them. It would seem his beta was going to have a far easier time claiming his mate than Nolan.

He leaned back in his seat and let sleep claim him.

CHAPTER 9



NOLAN

Nolan had expected dark dreams of retribution and revenge to occupy his sleep, but he had been wrong. The plane moved through the clouds like some kind of pirate ship of old, heading toward a destiny that had been forged in the flames of time—past, present, and future.

And his dreams were anything but dark.

She was standing outside on the balcony, staring toward the Eiffel Tower.

“So, you found me.”

“It wasn’t that hard. I have to wonder if some part of you didn’t want me to.”

“Which part do you think that might be?” Bryony said, looking over her shoulder.

He chuckled as he joined her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into his embrace. “The scent of your arousal is beyond anything I could ever imagine and standing in the doorway like this, the sunlight leaves little to the imagination in that gown. Your curves, your breasts, the way your nipples tent the fabric. Nothing about you indicates you don’t want me here.”

Her body remained rigid as he purred to her, enticing her to relax and sag against him. Nolan didn’t allow her to move away, but he didn’t hold her tight, either. They both knew she was trapped, but he wanted it to be a trap partly of her own making.

“Does your kind not have a belief system that includes fated mates?”

“Not one that says I will be trapped by a lion who is also a gangster,” she said, dismissively.

“Then they must be very dull. Lionesses are not easily swayed...”

“Nor am I.”

Increasing the vibrato of his purr, he nuzzled her neck. “You are mine,” he said, slipping the straps of the sheer, diaphanous gown from her shoulders.

The few dreams he’d had of her had not prepared him for her incredible beauty. Her almost perfect hourglass figure with its well-formed breasts and hips that seemed made for a man to grasp as he pleased her. The alabaster skin that covered her breasts with dusky pink areolas and slightly darker nipples. Her red hair hung past her shoulders and was silken to the touch.

He let the gown fall to the floor and swept her up in his arms as he carried her back to the bed. Laying her gently upon it, he removed his own clothes before following her down, settling himself between her thighs as his long, hard cock pulsed between them and sought the opening to her core.

“You gave me quite the chase,” he murmured.

“I almost got away...”

“But you didn’t. I have to wonder if that wasn’t partly by design.”

He lowered his head to her breast and sucked the pebbled peak into his mouth, giving it the edge of his teeth before laving it with his tongue. “Mine.”

He took her other nipple in his mouth, making her moan instead of speaking as heat and arousal coursed through his system. Sucking rhythmically, he focused on her pleasure and forcing her to relax until he could feel her body respond.

“No,” she whispered, pushing ineffectively at him as she tried to stop the wave of desire he knew she could feel rolling

over her.

He slid his hand between them, capturing and palming her breast before squeezing it and strumming her stiff nipple before giving it a good tug, making her arch her back to push the breast deeper into his control.

With his other hand, he traced the outside of her leg from knee to hip and back again as he nibbled his way up her throat and captured her mouth with his, fusing his lips to hers. His tongue swept through her mouth, dancing with hers and inviting it to tangle with his.

Nolan bent her knees so that they were cradling his hips and his hands slipped beneath her, taking hold of her ass as the head of his cock began to breach the opening to her core. She gasped as he pushed through her tight opening and he hesitated, letting her body soften and accept his invasion, then pushed forward relentlessly into her wet heat, making her body tremble with need.

Her sheath was tight but stretched to accept him and allowed him to fill her to capacity. Her inner walls were snug and felt like a warm hug welcoming him home. The nubs along his cock rippled against her pussy and she hissed, but he wasn't sure if it was pleasure or pain. It didn't matter to him, as she would learn to embrace and accept his barbs. As he drew back, the barbs stiffened as they scored the walls of her tender flesh.

He began to rock forward and back, the barbs retreating as he pushed forward but becoming stiffer and longer as he drew back. He knew this was a totally new experience for her, but she would learn to accept and glory in his possession.

Bryony started to cry out; he silenced her by covering her mouth with his. "This is what it is to be a lioness. You will learn to revel in my possession."

"Stop, please," she whispered, pushing against him.

"You don't mean that. Your hips are undulating in rhythm to my thrusting and your pussy is pulsing along my length, not in rejection but in acceptance and need," he purred

seductively, driving forward again, latching onto her mouth when he pulled back.

He knew the friction created by the barbs was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Tension, arousal, and pleasure swirled together, making her cry out as she climaxed, clinging to him as the orgasm thundered through her body. He pulled out and then thrust back in, replacing discomfort and pain with wild longing and need. Her response was everything he wanted and more.

At first, he had stroked her gently, but her response made him become more feral until he was pounding into her, forcing her to become an active participant in his ruthless possession of her. He hammered her pussy without mercy, growling and groaning in supreme satisfaction and pleasure.

Bryony screamed into his mouth as her world exploded for a second time, and she came with a power and intensity she had never experienced. He'd fucked her through her first climax, not even allowing it to really register; other than how exquisitely her pussy shuddered around him as she came. He continued ramming into her—harder and deeper with each thrust until there was nothing but her and the intense pleasure he received from her.

His muscles coiled and her synapses fired as he fucked her in the way that primitive males had been claiming their mates for millennia. Bryony arched her back as he dragged his cock across her g-spot and she climaxed a third time as he drove deep, grinding his body against her sex and finding his release as a torrent of cum filled her pussy, soothing her fevered and tattered flesh.

Nolan collapsed on her as Bryony fell back on the sheets—spent and exhausted as he relaxed into the warmth and softness she offered.

“Mine. Enjoy what little freedom you have left. I will find you,” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

Nolan woke as the wheels touched down on a private landing strip outside of Paris. “This doesn't look like Orly.”

“I took the liberty of landing at a private airport that isn’t used all that often. I figured we would have more room to maneuver in whatever way we wanted.”

Nolan smiled. “Good thinking. It might prove somewhat problematic if I had Bryony slung over my shoulder and she was crying out and struggling to be free. And the SUV?” he said, nodding toward the BMW SUV parked not fifty yards away.

“You are going to need transportation other than an airplane or a helicopter,” said Rolf—one of the men Heath had assigned to his team. Rolf had been trained by the best as a pursuit driver. He was also skilled in most kinds of weapons and was a powerful warrior in his shifted form. There were few who could match his skills.

“I see now why Heath insisted you come.”

“It is my honor, Alpha,” Rolf said, inclining his head.

“From this point forward, your chief goal is to protect my mate and see that she is delivered back safely to St. Louis. Our entire pride is to treat her with the utmost respect and courtesy. It might be difficult at first for her. I hope Cosmo being there will make the transition a bit easier.”

“You will be with us.”

“That is my plan, but if we get separated or I should fall, Bryony’s safety is to be your first and only concern. Am I clear?”

As he looked at each of the four men who had accompanied him, they nodded and intoned, “Your will, my honor.”

“Good enough. Do we have anything else?”

“Our people back home have been busy. She travelled under the name of Genny Banks, landed in Frankfurt, and then immediately made reservations for a plane to Paris. She hasn’t had a chance to access her Swiss account.”

It was Nolan’s turn to look shocked. “She has a Swiss account?”

“Several—all of which are registered under numbers, not a name.”

Nolan smiled. “Clever girl. She was ready to run if she had to.”

“So far no reservations at any hotel, but that may be because she’s waiting to get here.”

“Has the plane landed?”

“Not yet.”

“Good. Let’s head for the airport. Rolf, you will stay with the vehicle.” Nolan turned to Danny, the helicopter pilot, “Danny, if you don’t have that chopper bought, get it done now. Get it to the landing field and stay with it. The rest of us will go to the airport and see if we can be waiting when she gets there. If we can spirit her out of there and into the SUV, we will. If not, we’ll stay with the plane until we have a plan. Danny, you may need to take the chopper to London. Joshua Knight holds sway there. We can leave it with him if we need to.”

“Do you want me to hold off on buying one? I have a couple lined up to see.”

“No. I want to have it ready if we need it,” said Nolan as he got into the SUV.

“Boss, no offense, but she’s an otter-shifter—how difficult do you think this will be?”

Nolan chuckled. “Even otter-shifters have teeth and claws. She’s managed to live on her own for more than five years and then proved her ability to adapt, change, and escape. I have no intention of underestimating my mate. I did that once and now look where we are.”

“You did?” asked Rolf as he adjusted the driver’s seat for his comfort.

“I did. I thought I’d let her be in East St. Louis under Pettigrew’s thumb for a day or two and then sweep in like a knight in shining armor on his white stallion. It would seem

my mate is far more interested in saving herself than waiting for someone else to do it for her.”

“Sounds to me like she is more in tune with being a lioness than an otter-shifter.”

“True. It would seem she has the heart and the soul of a lioness, but still, we shouldn’t underestimate what we are asking her to give up.”

Once they were settled in the SUV, Rolf started up the engine, programmed the SUV’s navigation unit and headed away from their plane. Nolan had no doubt his people would do as they were asked and if all went well, they’d be on their plane headed for home before they ever needed a hotel.

Arriving at Orly, Nolan dispatched his men, and they settled in to wait for the flight on which Bryony had a reservation. His cell buzzed and he answered. “What do you mean she didn’t get on the plane in Frankfurt. Is she still there?” growled Nolan, trying to rein in his temper.

“I doubt it. Your mate has shown a remarkable and dedicated determination to separate herself from her father’s organization and bevy. We’ve confirmed she was on the flight, and she went through customs in Frankfurt, but there is no record of any ticket being purchased from there to Paris within the specified time frame.”

“Damn. Any tickets purchased to anywhere in France, Switzerland, or Italy?”

“Not airline, but when I couldn’t find her on a plane, I started looking elsewhere. Seems your beloved took one of the high-speed trains to Paris. The records show her leaving Frankfurt and arriving in Paris.”

“Any record of where she’s gone?”

“We think she’s still in the City of Light. We’re monitoring planes, trains, buses, private transport, and so far, nothing.”

“What about a hotel? She can’t exactly stay on the streets.”

“She doesn’t seem to be at any of the big hotels, but Paris is full of small boutique ones that allow someone to live off

the grid, so to speak. There're also rooms to be let, hostels, and the like, but we're checking, Alpha."

"I know that," said Nolan, tamping down his concern. "Keep looking and we'll start checking the smaller places."

Bryony had proven herself to be elusive, clever, and fearless—not bad traits to have in a mate once she had been claimed. Until then, they could prove to be formidable. But that was fine with Nolan.

He'd always loved a good challenge.

CHAPTER 10



BRYONY

*B*ryony was awake as they circled Frankfurt and landed. After limping through customs, she made her way to the train station to catch the high-speed train to Paris, where at least she could speak the language. Flying would be faster, but the train was so much cheaper and the last-minute flight from St. Louis to Frankfurt had taken a big chunk out of the money she'd hidden away in her old bedroom. Once she could access her funds in her Swiss account, things would be better.

She could get a debit/credit card overnighted to her once she had an address to which it could be sent. She thought about going to Marseille, France, but she was more familiar with Paris and knew people she could contact in order to get a new identity. After taking time to grab food, water, a notebook, and pen, she barely made the train. In fact, if the kind conductor hadn't seen her running at breakneck speed for the train, she might have missed it.

"Thank you!" she said as he helped her on board the train.

"You almost missed us."

"The story of my life," she said with an apologetic smile as he showed her to her seat.

Exhausted, she pulled down the tray from the seat back in front of her and began to make a list of things she needed to buy and do, which she then prioritized as to which order she needed them and which she could afford before accessing her account in Switzerland. She needed a new disposable cell, as

she had chucked the one she had at Lambert Field and hadn't had time to get a new one in Frankfurt. Next was a small, out of the way place to stay, a shower, and new clothing.

Allowing herself to breathe and trying to relax, she focused on saving her energy and believing she had managed to make her escape. She worried about those of her bevy she had left behind, but staying would have done them no good whatsoever. Hamilton, the cartel, and Jared could have at each other. She'd opted out when she walked away from her father more than five years ago. She had no interest in being a mafia princess or a mafia bride.

Approximately four hours later, the train arrived in Paris, and Bryony hired a taxi to take her to the Paris bank affiliated with the one she utilized in Switzerland and then to a small boutique hotel run by the driver's sister.

"You'll love it there. The economy rooms are small, but still, they are comfortable and clean. If you'll be here more than a couple of days, or need to do some work, you might want to upgrade to one of the suites—they are more spacious and have a desk. There's one that has its own private garden."

"That sounds lovely. Can you call her and arrange for me to have one of those?"

As hotels went, it wasn't overly expensive and it was convenient if a little bit off the beaten path for a hotel. Armed with the address, she entered the bank and asked for the manager.

"I'm sure one of our tellers can accommodate you," said the bank's concierge.

"And I'm just as sure he can't, Franc," she said, looking at his name tag. "My business is actually with my bank in Switzerland and the nature of my transaction requires discretion, privacy, and personal attention. If your bank can't help me, I will go elsewhere, but will ensure my bank and everyone associated with it knows how you treated me."

Once she dropped the name of her bank in Switzerland, Franc fell all over himself to be courteous and helpful. A great

many bankers were officious little toads, and this fellow was no exception.

She was shown to the manager's office, where she was able to access her funds, withdraw some cash, and arrange for the overnight delivery of her new debit/credit card. Once her business was concluded, she retreated back to the taxi.

"Good news!" said Luc, the taxi driver. "The room I told you about is free, and as it is the off season, my sister is giving you a reduced rate."

"That is good news," said Bryony with a smile. "You don't know where I might be able to pick up a prepaid cell phone and laptop, do you?"

"But of course," he said, emphasizing his French accent.

He pulled out into Paris traffic and Bryony closed her eyes. It never ceased to amaze her those who drove in Paris, London, and Rome survived to tell the tale. The driver dodged in and out of traffic, all the while gesturing with his hands and often letting go of the steering wheel. He stopped outside a small, hole in the wall store.

"This is my friend Paul's store. He will give you a good deal."

Bryony ran into the store and was able to pay cash for an almost new laptop, tablet, and prepaid cell phone. The transaction was quick, easy, and surprisingly affordable. Next stop was the hotel belonging to Luc's sister. He idled by the sidewalk and made sure Bryony had his cell phone number and asked that she call him whenever she needed a ride. She tipped him generously, assured him she would do so, and headed inside.

"You must be Genny Banks. My brother said you would be staying with us for at least a few days. He thought you might enjoy the Toulouse Room. It is here on the ground floor, and it is a good size with nice amenities and a private garden."

"When he described it to me, it sounded ideal. I'll be here at least four or five days, depending on my work schedule."

After checking her in, the hotel owner, Celeste, showed her to the room. Neither Luc nor his sister had oversold it. The room was charming, clean, and Bryony loved the antiques. The floor to ceiling windows on either side of the French doors that led out into the garden filled the space with light and air.

“This is just perfect. I had such a rush getting here, and this is so peaceful and pretty.”

Celeste beamed. “Thank you. I am just outside at the desk; let me know if you need anything.”

Locking the door behind Celeste, Bryony took a deep breath and sank down onto the comfortable mattress. She looked at her list and at the time. Activating her cell phone and setting up her laptop could wait.

Using the landline phone included with her room, she dialed Marie Dumond. She was the second-best forger Bryony had ever known. The best was Nina Oletta, but she had retired from making illegal documents and now worked for the Cerberus Group in London.

“Oui?” Marie answered.

“Marie, it’s Bryony.”

“Bryony!” her voice brightened. “Where are you; how did you get a Paris exchange?”

“I’m here in France at a lovely little hotel. I’m in a spot of trouble only you can help me with.”

“I heard about your father. I am so sorry. I take it you had no interest in his beta or Riccardo Gutierrez’s son?”

“None whatsoever. I fear they might be looking for me, so I’ll understand if you say no.”

“Gutierrez and his goons don’t frighten me. They wouldn’t dare come to Paris. He will only bully and threaten those he knows are weaker. As for Pettigrew? He doesn’t have enough power to lick Gutierrez’s boots.”

Bryony laughed. “It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Shall we meet for lunch at my studio? I can take new headshots and we can go over what you need.”

“That sounds perfect. I’ll pick up lunch; you supply the wine.”

“See you at, say... eleven-thirty?”

“Perfect. Thanks, Marie.”

Grabbing her money pouch, she left small tells so she could be sure no one had entered her room and ventured back out to the small foyer of the hotel.

“You wouldn’t know of any good used clothing stores, would you? I left in such a rush that I brought nothing with me.”

“Are you looking for haute couture or just everyday living clothes?” Celeste asked.

“Definitely every day, comfortable, and good walking shoes. Maybe some place that even has accessories?”

Celeste brightened. “I have just the place. Opened by an American who came to be a great designer and found she preferred helping real people. She takes all kinds of clothing and makes them into something new. If you go out the front door, turn to the left and go two blocks, you can’t miss her. I’ll call to let her know you’re coming.”

“Thanks, Celeste,” Bryony said as she hurried out the door.

Three hours later she returned with a good start on her new wardrobe. Celeste’s friend was also making her some additional things that could be made ready in a day or two. Bryony had been able to find comfy shoes, earrings, and things for her hair. She’d even had a couple of bras that fit reasonably well. But her best buy was a wonderful vintage luggage set. She would now be able to take all of her new things with her.

She picked up a loaf of crusty bread, a good salami, butter, cheese, a six pack of French beer, and a decadent éclair for dinner. Armed for the rest of the night, she slipped into the hotel, waving at Celeste as she checked in a young couple on

their honeymoon. She checked the first tell which was a not easily discernible piece of tape stuck to the top of the door frame and the face of the door. It was still intact. She reached up and took it down before sliding her key into the lock and entering. She quickly made inventory of the lodging and felt reasonably secure that she was safe.

Bryony went to work setting up her new laptop, tablet, and prepaid phone. With each she used her new name: Belinda Garner. Within the next few days, she should be able to sort out her options. Where to go and what to do to support herself. She would miss creating covers for romance novels and the authors she worked with, but it was too dangerous. Best to start looking for jobs she could do remotely in the area of graphic design—advertising firms that developed logos and branding might be a good place to start.

She placed all her perishable objects in the small fridge that came with her room. She then stripped naked, opting to put everything she'd had on, with the exception of the red flip flops, in a small bag to be taken to the second-hand shop. She entered the bath and stepped into the walk-in shower and luxuriated in the hot, running water from the body sprays and rainfall showerhead. The soap was lovely with its gentle cleansing and scent of lavender. The shampoo smelled of vanilla and citrus—divine.

Once she was clean, she exited the shower, used some of the hotel's provided moisturizer, and pulled out a decadently sheer nightgown from her new purchases. It felt as though a cloud had settled around her as she let it slide down her arms and over her head. The cool, silky fabric was soft to the touch and felt like gossamer that had been woven by fairies. It had been a bit of an extravagance, but at this moment in time, it made her believe all things were possible and the best of her life was still ahead of her.

She left the bath, pulled out and opened a bottle of beer, leaving the rest in the fridge with her cheese and salami. Bryony tore off a chunk of the bread and slathered it with butter before walking out and sinking down on the free-standing, iron porch swing. There was something relaxing

about munching her bread, sipping her beer, and rocking to and fro. She realized after a few minutes that her swinging had developed a rhythm of its own and that it matched the sound of the purring she could hear in her head.

What the hell was that? What did it mean?

CHAPTER 11



BRYONY

*B*ryony had spent a blissfully peaceful night. She'd had a vividly erotic dream starring Nolan Hamilton, which had brought her to orgasm and left her feeling lethargic and sated. It was odd, as Hamilton had never featured in either her fantasies or her dreams before, and after last night she wondered why.

The man might be a gangster, but he was a certifiable hunk. Tall, dark and with the kind of muscular physique common to predator alphas. Male otters, including alphas, tended to be strong and sleek but without all of the dazzling pecs, gorgeous abs, and sexy hip notches that were so popular. There was a lot to like about Nolan Hamilton if one overlooked the fact that he was also the leader of a criminal organization.

Rolling off the bed, she stepped into the spacious, luxurious shower and tried to wash away the stress of the last several days. Standing under the hot water as it pelted down and pounded her muscles, she rolled her shoulders and allowed it to work its magic.

She grabbed her newly purchased chenille and paisley robe, wrapping it around her body and securing it with the sash. Taking some of the bread and cheese, she made a cup of coffee. Thank god, the French tended to prefer coffee over tea. Her room had a pod coffeemaker and several different brews to choose from. She chose the darkest roast and used a bit of the provided cream and honey infused—according to the label—with vanilla and cinnamon.

Bryony inhaled the aroma and smiled before taking a sip. “Heaven.”

She wandered outside and got comfortable while she used her laptop to catch up with the world. After searching the towns along the Swiss/French border, she had several she wanted to check out. Marie would need a few days to set up her new identity as Belinda Garner. Bryony had called her bank and given them the address of a postal shop close to her hotel where they could send her debit/credit card in the name of Belinda Garner.

Bryony marveled at the existence of such places. They allowed people like her to use their physical address to establish residencies for all kinds of reasons. She liked to think that most of those who used them were women on the run like her. She picked up the phone and called Marie, confirming their lunch and meeting at eleven-thirty. Once she did that, she went through the clothes she’d hung in the closet.

She pulled out a long, tiered skirt and bohemian sweater, belting it in at the waist and pulling on a pair of comfortable, flat boots. The used clothing store had yielded a great many separates that she could mix and match. Bryony thought she might check the open-air market for earrings and other casual jewelry.

She waved at Celeste as she headed out. It might be off season, but it seemed business was brisk. A young, honeymooning couple had checked in yesterday, and now today an attractive looking businessman seemed to be doing the same.

Trotting out onto the street, Bryony realized she hadn’t felt this refreshed and rejuvenated in a long time. She must have sensed there was trouble coming before Jared ever showed up on her doorstep. She’d been restless and had begun thinking perhaps five years was enough time to spend in any one spot. In fact, it had been an indulgence on her part. But she’d loved her little home by the river where she could come and go as she pleased as either otter or human. She wondered if she ought to limit the time she stayed anywhere—at least for a while.

Her plan for the day was to meet and have lunch with Marie, and then to hole up in her room and look for jobs for a freelance or remote graphic designer. She made her way through the open-air market that was between the hotel and Marie's home, stopping to purchase a few pairs of earrings, a lovely bangle bracelet, and a wonderful take away lunch for both of them.

She'd barely had time to knock on Marie's blue door when Marie flung it open and threw her arms around her, drawing her inside. The effusive greeting surprised her until Marie whispered in her ear, "You are a far hotter commodity than either of us believed. My home is being watched. I have a way out for you. Do you think you are secure at your hotel?"

She could feel the blood all but freezing in her veins. "I would think so. I have the paperwork I used to get out of the States and it's off the beaten path. My guess is their registrar system is self-contained, but I'd be better off getting out of Paris."

"We'll take the new headshot and I'll get your new papers ready. If I work through the night, I should have them ready no later than noon. I'll slip out the same way I send you and bring them to you."

Bryony went with Marie, who took her picture and had her sign the documents that she would need. When she was done, Bryony gave her the address of the hotel and Marie showed her through a small back alley that would allow her to leave unobserved.

"He saw you enter with the basket from the bistro, so he won't be expecting you for a while."

"Will you be safe? Do you know who it is?"

Marie smiled as she showed her back to her workroom. "I called in a few favors. I don't know specifically who he is, but I know he isn't with the cartel, and he didn't strike me as one of Pettigrew's men. There's something sort of feral and predatory about him. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say one of the men Hamilton brought with him."

“Nolan Hamilton is here?”

“Yes; he flew in yesterday. They say he’s taken up residence in a private penthouse in the Seventh Arrondissement. Very exclusive. There’s even a helicopter on the building’s private helipad. Is he here for you? Don’t tell me. If he is, you need to get away. Nolan Hamilton has a long reach, and they say if he’s got you in his crosshairs, you may as well surrender.”

Shit! Shit! Shit! The last thing I need is Nolan Hamilton deciding I’m the key to whatever it is he wants. Then again, I could always play him against the cartel and Jared. I may not have respected my father or his business, but I was his daughter, after all.

“I don’t know that he’s looking for me, but I don’t know that he isn’t. I’ll get back to my hotel and stay put until I see you tomorrow. Thanks, Marie.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll get it sorted and get you out of Paris.”

“Do you know where I could pay cash for a car?”

“I might. What are you looking for?”

“I want something that has an engine with some muscle, preferably something with a hatch back of some sort—a crossover or a small SUV.”

“Do you know the Renault Captur?”

“Yes. I’ve seen pictures.”

“I have a friend who’d like to get rid of his. It’s not hot, I promise, but he’s getting a divorce and would like to keep his soon-to-be ex in the dark about it. If you like, I’ll slip out and pick it up and drive it to you.”

“Sounds like a plan. Marie, if you’d rather not get involved...”

“*Mon Dieu!* My business is all behind the scenes and I hate guys like Hamilton flexing their muscle and getting whatever they want.”

“I owe you.”

“Don’t worry. You have yet to see my bill,” Marie said with a cheeky smile.

Bryony made her way back to the hotel, doubling back and using storefront windows to ensure she wasn’t being followed. Finally, she slipped into the hotel and breathed a sigh of relief. Celeste wasn’t at the desk, but there was no need for her to be.

Crossing the lobby, she knelt down as if to tie one of the laces on her boot, but in reality, she was checking to see if the part of the matchbook cover had fallen from being slipped in between the jam and the door above the lock, to the floor below. It was only the top cover of the matchbook—small and inconspicuous so as to not be seen, but that was the point. Whoever had gone through the door wouldn’t notice it, but it would let Bryony know someone had been there. Bryony had told Celeste not to worry about cleaning her room until after she left. Looking down, Bryony could see the telltale piece of the cover lying on the floor. She knew that in all likelihood, someone who didn’t belong had either searched her room or was waiting for her.

Bryony knew she should just turn to leave, but her new laptop, tablet, and wardrobe were all inside. She’d already had to leave the trappings of one life behind. She had no intention of leaving with nothing more than her ID, the prepaid cell phone, and some cash this time.

She made her way out the side entrance and slipped around the back to see if she could ascertain who and how many might be waiting for her. Bryony closed the door behind her. She felt a wave of dizziness wash over her as someone stepped behind her, wrapping a strong, muscular arm around her waist and clasping a hand over her mouth.

“Bryony,” said a deep, melodic voice from behind her. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Instead of struggling or trying to break free, Bryony stepped back into him, bringing her elbow sharply into his solar plexus and stomping on his instep. She heard the wind being knocked out of him as he reflexively released her and

spun around to give him a roundhouse kick, but he had recovered enough to knock her foot away, knocking her off balance.

Her would-be captor growled. Bryony threw a punch and landed it solidly into his face, changing the growl to a roar. She grabbed his shoulders and head butted him, knocking him hard enough that he fell backwards, and she made herself dizzy. Shaking off her momentary unsteadiness, she kicked again, this time catching him in the gut and sending him sprawling.

“You bitch,” he said with a heavy Spanish accent. “I told my father you’d head to Paris.” The accent, the reference to his father, meant she had to be dealing with Enrique Gutierrez, Riccardo’s son. “I know you attended LISAA, the school of graphic design. And there are few cities in the world better than Paris to craft a new identity.”

Bryony inched her way backward and away from him. “So, you’re the one who was watching Marie’s?”

“Marie Dumond? So that’s who you went to? I’ll see that she can never help anyone elude the cartel again.”

She had to get away and she had to warn Marie. How had he known she attended LISAA for her graduate degree? No one outside the bevy had ever known. No one from her father’s people—her people—would work with the cartel, no one... except perhaps Jared. And if she found out that he had betrayed her father and her to the cartel, she would end him—in more ways than one.

Spinning on her heel, Bryony tried to make a run for it, but Enrique managed to grasp the hem of her skirt, making her stumble and fall literally into the arms of Nolan Hamilton. Looking up into dark eyes filled with lust and anger, bordering on rage, she felt her knees begin to buckle, but was stopped from hitting the ground by his strong grasp hauling her up against his chest.

Kissing her nose, his hand ran down her spine until he filled his palm with one of her buttocks and gave it a squeeze. It was harder than she liked, but something about the man, his

dominant personality, and his very essence called to a dark part of her soul she had never had the courage to explore.

“Get away from me,” she whispered, not sure if she was frightened, angry, or highly aroused—most likely a combination of all three.

Hamilton smiled down at her. “We both know that’s not going to happen.” Keeping a firm grasp on her arm, Nolan walked over to her would-be assailant. “Go away, you toothless puppy. Tell your father Banks’ territory is not lacking a leader. Bryony is the true heir, not Pettigrew.”

“The territory belongs to whomever can take the bitch to mate. Pettigrew thinks it will be him, but my father wishes me to marry and begin siring my own progeny.”

“Siring your own progeny? If that’s how you put it to him, boy, I can see why you remain unmated.”

Enrique Gutierrez got to his feet. “How dare you?”

“How dare I? I dare because Bryony is my fated mate. I dare because I am Nolan Hamilton, alpha and leader of the Gateway Syndicate and Pride. I dare because I can, and no second-rate cartel out of South America that wants to peddle their drugs in the Midwest corridor is going to stop me.”

Nolan backhanded Enrique, making the younger man stagger back. “Go back to your father. Tell him I will hold what is mine—both the female and the territory.”

Gutierrez started to say something but thought better of it and beat a hasty retreat.

Bryony tugged against his grip. “Let go of me,” she hissed.

“Why? I finally just got my hands on you,” he said, reaching behind her to cup her ass. “Such a nice handful.”

“I’ll scream,” she threatened.

“Not likely. You’re going to need my help to protect Marie Dumond and the woman that runs this place. You and I are going to come to an agreement. I will take you to mate and extend my protection to those you care about or feel a sense of responsibility to.”

“And if I refuse?”

Nolan chuckled. “It was more of a statement of fact than a question.”

Before she could scream, think or anything else, Nolan covered her nose and mouth with a cloth smelling of a cross between nail polish remover and some kind of citrus, and Bryony’s world went dark.

CHAPTER 12



BRYONY

Consciousness stirred within Bryony just as the plane taxied down an unpaved runway, gathering speed and lifting off. She knew she was waking up, yet the feeling of disorientation and dizziness still persisted.

“Where am I? I mean I can tell I’m on a plane. Where is the plane going?” she asked as a glass containing cold water was lifted to her lips and strong, male arms held her close.

“Home. We’re going home. The hotel proprietress, her entire family, and Marie Dumond are all under my protection. They will be safe.”

“Cosmo. He’s...”

“I know who Cosmo is, he’s the man who’s been leasing you land. He is safe as well.”

“Let me go,” she demanded, knowing full well there was little she could do to stop him from doing anything he wanted. All she could do was bide her time until a chance to escape presented itself.

“That isn’t going to happen.”

“What?”

“You escaping me.”

How the hell had he known what she was thinking?

“So, what kind of deal are you offering me?” she asked, shrugging out of his embrace and sitting up. “I got the feeling marrying into the cartel would pretty much be a death sentence

after my father's territory was secure. And Jared's proposal wasn't much better."

"I'm not offering any deal whatsoever. It has recently come to my attention that somehow, inexplicably, you are my fated mate."

"I don't believe in fated mates, nor do most otters."

Nolan nodded. "I know. I find it fascinating that the more apex the predator species, the more fervent the belief in fated mates."

"Perhaps because they can enforce their will upon others, they can allow themselves to believe in fairytales."

"That's an interesting theory. You're saying that because of our status in the food chain, we have the time and ability to look beyond mere survival."

Bryony snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm not proposing some esoteric, holier-than-thou calling. I'm simply saying because your kind is stronger, it can impose its will on someone else."

"That seems to be rather pragmatic and does not embrace the possibility of a love that spans lifetimes."

Shaking her head, Bryony said, "Do you really believe the drivel you're spouting, or do you think we lesser species are just too stupid to recognize bullshit when we hear it?"

Nolan sat back, a self-satisfied smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I think there may be some validity in your theory. I do not consider my kind to be above any other, except that due to our size and strength we have to focus less on just surviving and can turn our hands and thoughts to other tasks."

Bryony rolled her eyes.

Before she could complete the motion, Nolan had leaned forward, taken her chin in his fingers and forced her to look at him. "Do not mistake my largesse in dealing with you for weakness. It will be interesting to see if what you believe as an otter changes when you become a lioness and take your place at my side."

“You cannot transition me from otter to lion without my consent. It is forbidden,” she said as the magnitude of her situation suddenly became very real.

She’d known she was in danger, but she thought it was as a pawn to control her father’s people and to be used as a tool by dangerous men. It hadn’t occurred to her that with the cartel or Hamilton that she would no longer be otter. Until that very moment, she had not considered what that might mean or how she felt about it.

“Who is to stop me? As you pointed out, lion-shifters are apex predators, and on top of that I am the head of one of the most successful criminal organizations in the country, although I like to think we do more good than harm.”

“I’m sure you do, but do you victims say the same thing?”

“I’d like to believe for the most part they would.”

“I’m sure you would, but if they had no fear of reprisal, what would they say?”

“Is it those who run criminal organizations, lion-shifters, or me in particular that you don’t care for?”

“All of the above,” she quipped, wondering why she felt comfortable verbally sparring with a man who could end her life with the swipe of his paw.

Nolan chuckled—the sound washing over her like a warm Spring rain, followed by a deep, throbbing sound. As no one else reacted, Bryony concluded that the sound was something only she could hear.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” she asked, the question bordering on accusation.

“Yes.” She had to give him the fact that he seemed inclined to answer her truthfully. “It occurs to me that otters do not possess the ability to purr as lion-shifters do. Without being accused of spouting romantic drivel, there is a bonding link between fated mates—a tether if you will. My instinct when I feel you are upset is to try and soothe you and bring you comfort.”

She searched his face for any sign of deception and found none. She didn't necessarily believe what he said, but it seemed that he did.

“The tether or bonding link runs both ways.”

“We aren't bonded.”

“Never doubt that we will be. Between fated mates, the tether exists even before the bonding. It is one of the ways fated mates recognize each other.”

“But I don't believe in fated mates,” she repeated as she leaned into his space.

Instead of drawing back, Nolan leaned forward until there was little to no space between them. “Until you do, I will believe enough for both of us.”

With no warning, his hand slipped behind her head, grasping the nape of her neck as his head swept down, capturing her mouth with his. Heat and arousal coursed through her system with a blinding intensity she had never experienced before. Nolan didn't seem to care that the plane continued to climb into the air, and they were surrounded by his men. He released her neck, fisting her hair and tugging her head back to angle it where it best suited him.

He whispered his lips across hers with confidence and skill. If nothing else, Bryony could testify that the man knew how to kiss. He ran his tongue along the seam of her lips, tempting her to allow him access and control. She felt helpless to deny him as his tongue swept through her mouth and slid along hers as if this was the thousandth time they'd kissed and not the first.

When his arm wrapped around her, drawing her onto his lap, she could feel his hard length throbbing beneath her. He held her close, purring to her as he kissed his way past all of her defenses. She relaxed into him, finding comfort and passion in the muscular planes of his torso.

As Nolan seduced her with his mouth, he held her in his embrace with one arm, while his other hand began to stroke

her body. He tightened the fist in her hair and the brief flare of pain caused her scalp to light up and her nipples to stiffen.

Bryony made one brief struggle before she acquiesced and accepted what he offered. She couldn't help it. In that instant he was everything she needed and wanted in this world. She snuggled into him, pressing her body against his as her arms wrapped around his neck. Everything in her responded to this man—to this lion—in a way she had never felt before.

Nolan released his hold on her hair and trailed the fingers of that hand down her spine until it rested on her backside. His other hand came up to cup her breast, strumming her hardened tips in a way that Bryony was sure was sending electrical jolts straight to her nether region.

She could feel his dick pulsing beneath her. It was big, hard, and seemed to be more than willing to come out to play. He continued to kiss her, exploring her mouth, and making her moan. She knew his men might be watching, but she didn't care. She turned in his arms, rubbing against him. Maybe she had more lioness in her than she thought.

Bryony unbuttoned his shirt and let her hand slip inside to trace the outline of his abs and rub his nipples, as well. Nolan had a chiseled face, with a sexy stubbled jaw. His neck was a strong column that led down to incredibly broad shoulders. When she looked in his eyes there was passion, lust, and something far more primitive than both. There was no doubt he was a predatory animal looking at her as prey. She should have been terrified, but she wasn't. No, something about the dominant way he had moved in to take control was sensual and completely arousing. Everything about him called to her and the feral part of her wanted nothing more than to answer.

There were a myriad of problems with that course of action. His taking her to mate was forbidden; she barely knew the man; and he might have caused her father's murder in one way or another.

Nolan stood with her and shifted her from being embraced in his lap to being cradled in his arms as he walked to the back of the jet. Bryony was no fool; the only place he would be

carrying her was to a bedroom in the back of the plane. She began to struggle, and he switched her position so that she was dangling over one of those broad shoulders. Not to be deterred, Bryony doubled her fists together and hit him in the small of his back—far enough away from his kidneys to not do permanent damage, but with enough force to make it hurt and force him to relinquish his hold.

When she felt him stumble, Bryony pushed off of his incredibly muscular ass to allow her to somersault over his shoulder and land on her feet. Before she could take another step, he had recovered and fisted her mane in his hand, hauling her back to him.

“You nasty little hellcat...” he snarled.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” she jeered as he dragged her back to him and kissed her savagely, then tossed her back over his shoulder before landing one hard smack dead center of her backside.

“No,” she wailed.

“Yes,” he growled, and he smacked her a second time on one of her buttocks before continuing to the back of the plane.

Instead of opening the door with his hand like any other ordinary man, he kicked it open and stalked through, setting her on the ground and closing the door. Nolan spun her around and shoved her toward the bed.

“Bend over and place your hands on the mattress, feet shoulder width apart,” he ordered.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she said, turning to face him.

Spinning her back around, he held her in place and landed a third blow to the other globe of her ass. “You will learn that when you are acting out and in need of my discipline that it is best to do as you’re told. You heard me. If you aren’t in position in the next few seconds, I’ll sit down and take you over my knee—and trust me you will like that position even less.”

Looking into his eyes, Bryony could feel nothing but serious intent. She hadn’t ever been spanked. She’d done some

sexual role-playing that involved spanking, but she was of the opinion that what Nolan had in mind was on a whole different level. More than one boyfriend had played at spanking her, and she'd found pleasure in it. The look on his face said this was going to be a whole lot different than her past experiences.

“Now, Bryony,” he growled and that same tether he'd talked about that could soothe and comfort her jangled her nerves as she was reminded Nolan Hamilton was a man used to being obeyed.

Bryony turned away from him—her emotions rattling between wild arousal and concern about how much this was going to hurt and how she would feel afterwards. Once she was in position, Nolan tossed her skirt up over her back and slid his hand across the delicate silk that covered her ass before jerking off her panties.

“This is the last time I should ever find you wearing panties.”

“I don't...”

Before she could even finish the thought, his hand struck again, rocking her up onto her toes as heat and pain flared across her flesh. Again and again, he rained fire all across her backside as he spanked her. She could feel tears welling behind her closed lids. No, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry—especially when she wasn't sure what or even who the tears were for.

He spanked her several more times. “You are my mate, Bryony, and you will not strike out at me or any of the members of our pride. Am I clear?”

“Yes...” Another smack.

“Sir. Yes, Sir. Am-I-clear?”

“Yes. Sir,” she added after the slightest hesitation.

Bryony felt her knees beginning to buckle. This sonofabitch not only knew how to kiss, but he knew how to spank. She could feel the incendiary sparks arcing between them. Her skin was hot, her pussy hotter and she ached for

something more than she dared not give name to. All the emotions and physical sensations were practically overwhelming. It was pleasure and pain, disapproval and arousal all wrapped up into one.

His hand slipped between her legs, and she shuddered as he stroked her.

“You belong to me, mate—now and forever,” he purred darkly.

Bryony believed him but wasn't sure if his words were a promise or a threat.

CHAPTER 13



BRYONY

*B*ryony knew that most of the predator species used corporal punishment as a way to keep their females in line. She had always been outraged by the thought, but having now experienced it, she was confused as to how she felt. She felt chagrined, chastised, humiliated, and wildly aroused on a myriad of levels.

Nolan smacked her ass again, slower and with a lingering touch as if he wanted to hold the heat in before he traced either the seam of her ass, or the one that led to her clit before spanking her again. He struck the sweet spot on the underside of her ass, leaving her needy. Her entire body responded to his dominance and primitive method of discipline. She could feel her body trembling, softening, and readying itself for his possession.

Bryony bit her lip, determined not to even hint that she had never been more turned on in her life. She was on the razor's edge between rational thought and hedonistic need. Each time his hand connected with her ass, she was propelled forward toward a kind of precipice where she would have to make a choice between clinging to some kind of half-life where she lived and struggled alone, or giving in to his seduction and embracing a life she had never imagined—that of a lioness and the fated mate to the Alpha of the Gateway Pride and Syndicate.

A single tear followed by a small sob escaped her and Nolan's arms went around her, hauling her up and into his body—balancing and surrounding her with his strong arms

and the sensual purr she was beginning to believe would always be there for her.

“It’s all right, Bryony, I understand.”

“You couldn’t possibly. You are a predator, not prey. Your father never tried to sell you off to the highest bidder.” The mention of her father made her catch her breath before the tears started to flow. “I don’t know why I’m crying. I haven’t even talked to him in more than five years.”

“He didn’t treat you well. I think you’re crying for the loss of what might have been.”

“I’m not normally weepy at all. I don’t cry. My father considered it a sign of feminine weakness. I’m not weak.”

“Of course, you aren’t,” he crooned. How could he understand? “You are strong and brave. You had the courage to strike out on your own and make a life for yourself.”

Bryony crumpled into his arms and followed him down as he sat on the bed and pulled her into his lap. She cried for the first time since she’d made the decision that she wouldn’t follow the path her father had laid out for her. His death, her fear as she made her escape from Jared, being captured by Nolan Hamilton, and having him declare her his fated mate and assert his authority over her by disciplining her all combined to make her cry, not only for the pain in her backside, but the one in her soul.

The emotion rolled over her like a tsunami—at first fierce and frightening and then soothing and healing. Nolan wrapped his arms around her as he cradled her to his chest. Bryony burrowed into him, taking the solace he seemed to offer. No one had ever cared enough to discipline her. What he had done was far more intimate than most of the sexual encounters she’d ever had. She’d never allowed the walls around her heart to drop. No one had ever seen her so raw and vulnerable. It should have scared her to death, and yet, it didn’t.

Nolan stroked her hair from the top of her head down to its tips before tracing her spine. She could still feel how hard he was, and yet he seemed in no hurry to fix that.

“You’re all right, Bryony. You don’t always have to be tough and strong. You can trust me to take care of you in all ways.”

“I’m so confused,” she admitted. “You hunted me down, kidnapped me, and now just spanked me, and yet there’s something growing between us that I can’t deny. Please tell me you didn’t kill my father or even arrange or approve of his murder.”

When he set her on her feet and stood before her, she could feel her heart break like a brittle twig. He caught her chin in his hand. “Look at me,” he commanded. She did. “I had nothing to do with the death of your father. Nothing good for me or mine comes from it. It has left us vulnerable on our flank with two parties—Gutierrez and Pettigrew—with either, I’m left with some kind of unholy alliance or at each other’s throats. Neither situation is good for me, you, our pride, or those who reside in our territories.”

“You’re pretty quick with the use of the word ‘our,’” she said skeptically.

“I didn’t hear you deny it?” he said, grinning not like a Cheshire Cat, but like some evil cartoon villain cat.

There was something primal and rapacious in Nolan’s every gesture, expression, and movement. He was graceful and lethal; seductive and deadly, and it all combined to cause her arousal and passion to soar.

Nolan wrapped his hand around her belt, unbuckling it, and tossing it aside. He waited and when she didn’t stay his hand, his fingers slowly gripped the hem of her sweater. Bryony placed her hands over Nolan’s, lightly encouraging his as he raised it, drawing it up over her torso and then over and above her head and arms. Grasping the waist of her skirt, he sank slowly to his knees, pulling the skirt down with him as he kissed and nibbled down her body, starting at the valley of her breasts and making his way to her navel where he swirled his tongue around her bellybutton.

Bryony rested her hands on his broad shoulders as she moaned and swayed in rhythm to the deep resonant purring

that enveloped her in its sensual song. Using his fingers to part the petals of her sex, he tongued her swollen clit and she groaned, biting her lip as she tried to stave off the orgasm she could feel rising within her.

“You’re mine, Bryony,” he whispered. “Let me show you what it is to be a lioness—what it is to be my mate.”

“No,” she moaned, knowing he didn’t believe her protest any more than she did.

“Yes,” he purred. “Surrender to me. Let me make you mine and together we will rule a dynasty second to none.”

God, but he was a seductive sonofabitch. He was everything her father had been, only far more successful and if the rumors were to be believed, far more deadly. She’d left her father and his world behind five years ago. Was she truly now thinking about throwing her freedom and everything she had accomplished away to return to a life she had always professed to despise? Would she give up the one thing that had linked her to her past—the fact that she was an otter shifter? Could she leave behind her playful essence in exchange for a deadly one? She’d left to find another way... was she really considering returning, only to become something she had rejected?

Maybe. Her father’s world had no place for a female except as a breeding receptacle. Was Nolan Hamilton and his pride so very different? He talked about their people and their territories and ruling together. Was that what he really wanted, or were they just words designed to lull her into doing what he wanted?

Again, maybe. But the one thing she did believe was that he had nothing to do with her father’s murder. For one thing, her father’s death benefitted him in no way. As he said, her father wasn’t strong enough, bold enough or foolish enough to challenge the Lion of St. Louis. But the same could not be said about Riccardo Gutierrez or Jared Pettigrew.

Bryony moaned but pushed him away. “Taking me to mate could ensure that my bevy would back you as their new leader.”

Disappointment flashed across Nolan's face, but he masked it quickly as he rocked back on his heels and stood. "That's true—if I'd ever wanted your father's territory, which I don't. It's problematic for me. Forgive me, but your father was weak. He allowed Pettigrew to begin to develop his own internal security loyal to him. While I don't doubt that he was capable of killing your father, I don't think it was essential to his plans."

"If he was planning to take over, then why not kill my father?"

"You do know that all this talk of murder and mayhem is kind of killing my seductive mate vibe?"

"That's kind of why I need to do it. I need to keep my wits about me. So, was I essential to Jared's master plan?"

With a resigned sigh, Nolan took a seat in one of the chairs in the plane's bedroom. "No. Taking you to mate would have given a certain credibility and finesse to deposing your father, though. Besides, you're a beautiful woman. Any man or shifter would be proud to claim you as his own."

"Jared told me he thought I'd let myself go and gained too much weight. Otters tend to like sleek and sinewy."

"Jared is an idiot. Your curves call to me like a siren's song. Your body was built to bring any man or lion inordinate amounts of pleasure. You are gorgeous and I intend to spend the rest of my life seeing just how many times I can hear you yowl and call my name."

Bryony could feel color creeping up her cheeks. Nolan Hamilton had a way of keeping her off balance. One minute he was speaking to her as if he considered her his equal, and the next everything he said had an underlying seductive purr, which spoke to how much he desired her. The fact that his cock was literally fighting against his fly to get out and, she suspected, into her, reinforced that idea. The thing that sent tingles down her spine was that she really hoped his fly would lose the battle.

“Since I’m answering your questions and not pressing my suit, so to speak, how about you give me something in return?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Precisely what you think. But I’ll settle for you taking off the rest of your clothes and coming to sit in my lap.”

“How strong is the denim of your jeans?” she teased.

“How strong do you want it to be?”

Without looking in a mirror, Bryony was pretty sure the blush in her cheeks deepened. She backed away and sat on the edge of the bed, pulling off her boots and then removing her bra, sitting so that he could see her swollen and glistening sex. It wouldn’t be any kind of surprise, as she was sure his elevated sense of smell told him she was ripe and more than ready for him.

“Then you think Gutierrez killed him?”

Nolan nodded. “I do.”

“Then why pull me into it?”

“Like with Pettigrew, it would give his claim a kind of legitimacy it wouldn’t have without you. But here’s the interesting thing,” Nolan said, leaning forward with his arms resting on his muscular thighs. “I’m fairly sure Riccardo meant to take you for himself. I think that pup he spawned was making a play that papa hadn’t planned. If he came home with you claimed as his mate, I think Enrique hoped his father would see him as the new alpha of your people.”

“You don’t think he would?”

“Not likely. Capybaras are normally raised communally in the wild. The shifters follow a slightly more humanized version where males take two to three females to mate. Enrique is his only son, but he was not born of Riccardo’s favorite wife, and there is some speculation that Enrique’s mother killed his father’s favorite and was executed for it.”

“Sheesh, and I thought my parents had a bad relationship.”

“Capybara-shifters don’t really have relationships. They have bonded pairs, and the males breed their females as often as possible.”

“What if a woman can’t conceive?”

“The story the capybara put out is that they are set aside and live in their own sequestered communities. But as no one has ever found evidence of those communities, conventional wisdom says they’re put to death. I can tell you that I’ve heard some pretty gruesome tales about Riccardo’s herd.”

“I guess I should thank you for saving me.”

Nolan laughed and leaned back in his chair. “Much as I’d like you to think you owe me and use that gratitude to take you to my bed, I won’t. I’m not all that sure you couldn’t have taken down Enrique on your own. If his father or his father’s men figure that out, I don’t like Enrique’s chances of survival.”

“You think Gutierrez would kill his own son?”

“You’d better believe it. First, Enrique was sent to bring you back to his father. Instead, he made a play to take you for his own—and then he failed. Not only did he fail, but you ended up in my hands. All in all, I think Enrique’s probably had a pretty shitty day.”

“So, you’re telling me all of this because you want to convince me you’re the better bet and I’ll come meekly to your bed?”

“God, I hope not. Meek isn’t what I’m looking for in my mate. I want fire, passion, and a profound connection. Don’t get me wrong, though, if you won’t come willingly, I’m not above taking what I consider mine, and damn the consequences.”

Up until now, Bryony had convinced herself that she might be able to strike some kind of deal with Hamilton, but now she wasn’t so sure.

“You are my fated mate, Bryony, and one way or another I will claim you. I can give you a day—two at the most—to reconcile yourself to the understanding that your fate is with

me. But events are moving too quickly for anything longer. Gutierrez made a bold move murdering your father. If the stakes weren't high enough, he wouldn't have done so. That means I need to figure out his whole plan and shut him down. That would be easier with you as my willing bride, but I'm not opposed to taking what's mine by force. Male alpha lions have been bringing their reluctant mates to heel for a long time. You won't be the first lioness brought to her mate's bed kicking and screaming. And chances are, you won't be the last. Think it over. I'll expect your answer tomorrow."

He stood and crossed the room to her, stopping before her to trail a finger along her jawline. "You are truly exquisite. Why don't you get some sleep? I'll wake you in plenty enough time for you to get dressed."

Leaning down, he fused his lips to hers in a searing kiss before cupping her breast and giving one distended nipple a sharp tug. He left the room without another word.

Nolan Hamilton was everything she'd ever feared and everything she'd never known she wanted. Now what the hell was she supposed to do?

CHAPTER 14



NOLAN

In many ways Bryony's response had been the stuff of dreams, and yet he had left her to sleep alone. There were things he needed to do, and he didn't trust himself to be with her and not claim her. *That* he wasn't going to do hastily and on board an airplane. He would have her in their bed where he could see to her every need.

In some ways, transitioning a human to a shifter was far easier than transitioning one species of shifter to another. Shifter DNA tended to be more dynamic and dominant than that of a human, so when two shifter DNA profiles collided, the resulting battle for supremacy could be devastating. It was rarely fatal, but more often than not, it could take the recipient a few days to recover. It wasn't always that way as other factors came into play: the two different kinds of shifters, the desire of the recipient to transition, the health of the recipient and the like. What was never in question was that a shifter could only be transitioned once. To try again would prove fatal to the recipient.

Nolan smiled as he felt her wake. The bonding link was already expanding and becoming deeper, and he had yet to claim her, which indicated it would be strong, indeed, once he did.

It wasn't long before she wandered out of the bedroom.

"I've never showered on a plane before," she said as she slid into the window seat beside him. "That was amazing."

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Did you sleep well?” he asked, taking her hand in his and bringing it to his lips to kiss.

“Surprisingly so. I suspect that purring thing you did helped a great deal. But how did my things from Paris get here?”

“I had your things removed from your room and settled your bill.”

“Thank you. Then paying Celeste is one thing I can remove from my list of things to do. I need access to my laptop. I had made arrangements...”

“Marie Dumond has also been paid in full for her efforts on your behalf but would appreciate a call from you confirming that you are not being held under duress.”

“Aren’t I?”

Nolan studied her face, trying to ascertain her mood. The emotion flowing down the link was calm and not unhappy, but her words and tone were a bit provocative and seemed in contrast to what he was feeling from her.

“I will admit that your being removed from Paris was less than ideal...”

“Less than ideal?” You do have a way of absolving yourself of doing whatever you need to get your own way.”

There it was: a faint note of teasing in her voice. She was taunting him to gauge his reactions.

“I do. It is a trait shared by alpha males the world over, be they shifter or human. But to be fair, you left me little choice in the matter. However, I wanted you to be able to focus on us, your role as my mate and as first lady of our pride.” He held up his hand to forestall her argument. “I do think your assessment of Pettigrew in particular and your bevy in general will be invaluable to me, and I meant what I said. I expect you to rule at my side. The best alphas I know all have strong, fearless, capable mates.”

“I’m not sure how much help I will be. Jared tipped his hand to me when he abducted me from Utah. But it’s been

almost a decade since I was integrally involved with the bevy—five years on my own and before that I was at college and working in New York.”

“I understand that, but the people we have inserted in the bevy—”

“You have spies?” she asked, incredulously.

He chuckled. “Sweetheart, almost everyone has spies in their enemies’ organizations.”

“Do you see those in East St. Louis as your enemies?”

“Pettigrew? Definitely. I never trusted him. Your father was too smart to want to try and take me on. The information I have on the rest of the bevy is that there is a definite division between those who support Pettigrew and those who don’t. The latter, by the way, hoped that your return might be the beginning of a new era. I mean to make that a reality for them. We’ll need their support, and if they believe you are happy with me, that support will be easier to come by.”

“Will you force all of them to transition?”

“No. But I will afford them the opportunity to do so if they wish. Before you ask, you will not have a choice in the matter. You are my fated mate and will be one with me in all ways.”

“Milady,” said Rolf.

“He means you,” added Nolan with a grin.

“Don’t be an ass,” she chided Nolan before turning to Rolf. Nolan couldn’t help but smile. Bryony might have walked away from her bevy and her father’s intended future for her, but she had been born and raised to take her rightful place at his side. “Please call me Bryony. I know that lions have a more structured hierarchy than otters, but I would prefer to be addressed less formally.”

Rolf nodded. “Bryony, it is. I just wanted to say that prides tend to be fairly dynamic in their leadership as young males grow up and have delusions of grandeur.”

Bryony smiled. “In that, then, prides are like be vies.”

“My point was that unlike most, your new pride is united in support and respect for your mate. Nolan is a more than capable alpha and sees to our needs before he tends to his own. There is not a one of us who wouldn’t give our lives in his service or to protect him or you.”

“In other words, he’s not nearly as much of a sonofabitch as I might think him to be,” said Bryony with a grin.

Rolf chuckled. “I suppose that would be the most succinct way to put it.”

For the rest of the flight Nolan found himself relaxing and enjoying her company. She charmed all of the men with him and made a point of talking to each of them individually. Watching her allowed him to become more familiar with who she was at her core and to reach her more easily down the tether. She was not a mafia ‘princess,’ by any stretch of the imagination. His mate was kind and compassionate and he had no doubt in his mind that both he and their pride would benefit from her joining with them.

She was returning to their seats with two cups of coffee—one for him and one for herself.

“You seem somewhat settled with the idea of being my mate.”

“Do I have a choice? No, scratch that. In case you missed it, I have a tendency toward snark if I’m not sure of something, or if I feel like I’m not being given a choice. I don’t like that the choice to return to my origin bevy or to get involved in all of this wasn’t mine. But I also don’t think it was all yours, either.”

“Of course, it was...”

“Were there other options? Probably, but I can’t see one of them that didn’t put others—including the bevy—at greater risk, including me. When I think about it, the idea that I might be accepted as the leader of my father’s bevy or his criminal organization is naive at best. Of the three *suitors* available, you are by far the superior choice.”

“Thank you, although I’m not sure how much of a compliment that was.”

“Let’s make a deal: regardless of what happens, you and I will not lie to each other. The more I can trust that you will be honest and open with me, the better.”

Nolan nodded. “Agreed.”

“When I sat with Jared at dinner and saw the changes that he had brought about, it was upsetting to say the least. It was distressing. People weren’t happy. They were cowed. No one laughed; no one seemed connected to one another. Your men seem to be—on very short acquaintance—loyal and unafraid of you. They trust that you will do what is best for the pride and not just for you personally.”

“I like to think so. You should know that trust extends to my choice of mate and those who have already met you are sure to report how you treated them, and how you seem to have made both the best of the situation and made them feel as though you’d always belonged.”

“I’m not so sure your take or that of your men on my behavior is completely justified. I haven’t been a raving bitch because it would do me no good at thirty thousand feet.”

Nolan sat back and regarded her with interest and amusement. “Is that the only reason?”

“No. I’m beginning to believe that at the moment, it’s not safe for me to be on my own. Given the three people who are the biggest threat to me—you, Gutierrez, and Jared—you are the best of the lot, or at least, the least detestable.”

“Well, thank you for that, I think.”

The cockpit of the plane opened, and the pilot swiveled in his seat to look back. “We’re approaching the estate, Alpha. Everyone buckle up. It should be a nice soft landing.”

As the plane touched down, Bryony looked at him and said quietly, “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“You don’t have a choice about forging an alliance to protect yourself and your bevy...”

“They’re not really my bevy. I haven’t seen any of them for more than five years and the five years before that, I only saw them when I visited once or twice a year.”

“Physical presence doesn’t mean that you weren’t a part of them. The people we have inserted there say people always spoke well of you and hoped you’d return. And I’m sure you noticed the pall that Pettigrew’s rise in the wake of your father’s death had cast. As for Gutierrez—he runs a particularly violent cartel and sells death on a daily basis. In all honesty, I can’t see him letting his son have you. I think the grab junior tried to make in Paris was meant to be preemptive. I think Riccardo meant to take you for himself.”

“All of you are gangsters; two of you aren’t otters; and all three of you want me for what I can do for you.”

“Not true,” said Nolan. “I told you; you are my fated mate. I want you for who you are to me.”

“You have to admit that’s a bit convenient for you, don’t you think?”

“Just because something is convenient, doesn’t make it a lie. You have felt and heard it when I call to you. You’re as attracted to me as I am to you. If I didn’t care about you and your feelings, and want you to be in this for the long haul, why didn’t I claim you back in the bedroom? There’s no one here who would have stopped me. You might have resented it, but it would have been a done deal.”

“Am I supposed to thank you for not taking me by force?”

Nolan shook his head, smiling. “No, but you are pragmatic enough to realize that, as I said, the only choice you have is in *who* you take to mate. For the reasons I outlined, I am the superior choice.” He said the last in a lightly teasing tone of voice, which provoked a smile from her.

Bryony was beautiful in any mood, but when she smiled and the fear receded from her eyes, she had the ability to drive him to his knees and break his heart. The realization should have surprised him or at least provoked some concern on his part, but it didn’t. Instead, somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean,

he had realized that in order to take this woman truly to mate, he had to be willing to risk himself, and his own feelings. As he looked at her sitting in the seat next to him, gazing out the window, he knew she was worth whatever it took to secure her love, loyalty and future.

“You make a persuasive argument. You might not be who I would have chosen for myself, but my father’s murder has left me and the bevy he should have been looking to protect with few choices. You do realize you would have been his last choice, don’t you?”

“I do,” said Nolan. “But your father was not always the best alpha for your bevy and was often shortsighted.”

“Speaking ill of the dead is considered bad form in polite circles.”

“Truth is truth. I didn’t dislike your father and certainly bore him no ill will, but a good alpha provides for the future of those he rules over.”

“I’m a part of your pride’s future?”

She seemed surprised. “Did I see you as that before your father died and I realized you are my fated mate...”

“You place a lot of importance on that.”

“I do. I realize that fated mates are not a part of otter-shifter lore, but it is a powerful part of the lion-shifter mythos. Again, at the risk of repeating myself, I can believe enough for both of us until you realize your mate knew what he was doing all the time.”

The plane rolled to a stop and Nolan led Bryony down the steps and toward one of the waiting golf carts, where he helped her in. They had landed during the blue hour—the moments before dawn when the darkness began to lift and before the sun began to cast its rays over the land. He wondered if the new day would bring sorrow or joy.

The decision wasn’t really hers to make, but she could make the most of it and be happy if she truly did have the heart and soul of a lioness. The question was, did she?

CHAPTER 15



NOLAN

As the main house and compound came into view, Bryony leaned closer to him and said softly, “Your home is beautiful.”

“Our home, Bryony. I do not just want to take you to mate to secure both your father’s and my organizations, and the territories and people we rule. I believe we are fated mates and we were destined to be together and keep our people and our futures safe. I wish I could give you time enough to court you and persuade you to see that I am right.”

“How much time do I have to decide if I want to do this?”

“None. Search your heart, Bryony. Listen to your soul.”

“And if they tell me to hit you over the head and run like hell?”

“I wouldn’t listen to bad advice. You will not escape me, and you will be mine.”

The golf cart rolled to a stop, and they were greeted by Heath, Sasha, and several members of the household staff.

Heath embraced him. “Welcome home, Alpha. Milady, it’s good to see you are safe.”

“Bryony prefers informality. Bryony, this is Heath, my second in command.”

Cosmo came trotting down the stairs, his arms stretched open wide. “Brittany, Bryony, Milady—it’s all the same to me. It’s good to see you.”

Bryony embraced him. “Cosmo? What are you doing here?”

“It was time for me to come home. I was a lion-shifter who wanted to see the Grand Canyon and fell in love with a beautiful coyote-shifter...”

“But your son...”

“Was eighteen months old when I married his mother,” he inclined his head towards Nolan, “with my alpha’s blessing. When you showed up in Moab, I recognized you from a picture Nolan had circulated when you left.”

“So, you lied to me?”

“No. You were looking for a place off the beaten path to park your tiny house. I had the perfect piece of property. The fact that I could offer you that, plus some added protection led to a friendship that I have cherished over the past five years.”

She turned on Nolan. “You knew all along where I was?”

“Yes, but not that you were my fated mate. Trust me, had I known, I would have claimed you long ago. I have been waiting for you my whole life. The tricky part is that knowing you have a fated mate, and knowing who that fated mate is, are two entirely separate issues.”

“I don’t like this. I don’t like any of it.”

Nolan laid his hand gently at the small of her back. “You don’t have to like it. If you can’t trust me, then trust that part of you that wants to believe.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Not nearly as easy to do, and I know that. But we can be a power to be reckoned with. You admitted that of your limited choices, I am the best. I am the only one who can and will promise to find those responsible for your father’s death and hold them accountable. And I will deliver on that promise.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to think. I need time.”

“Time is the one thing I cannot give you. We will be bonded and married, and we will celebrate with our people today. Although not necessarily in that order. This weekend, we will hold a reception and celebration for prying eyes and invite the other interested parties to another reception and celebration at our estate in East St. Louis.”

“They will try to kill me, you, or the both of us.”

“Never fear, Bryony, they will fail. By the time we go north into Illinois, you will be a lioness in body as well as in spirit.”

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her up the stairs, through the front doors and into a life she had never expected.



His announcement at dinner had been met with cheering and applause. His pride’s easy acceptance of Bryony as his mate seemed to go a long way to restoring her equilibrium. She and Sasha seemed to form a bond almost immediately and Bryony’s charm and loving nature were easy to see.

Knowing their alpha was returning with his fated mate, Heath had arranged for an officiant and a small celebration for just the pride. Bryony had eschewed changing from her outfit for the ceremony. When the officiant asked her to take her vows, Nolan held his breath. This was one of those moments in life where you knew you were standing at a fork in the road, and whichever one you chose would have a profound effect on your life.

“I, Nolan Hamilton, of the Gateway Pride, take you, Bryony Gates, as my fated mate and first lady of our pride. I will claim you this night and transition you from otter to lion. From now until the end of time, my first allegiance will be to you and then our pride. No other will ever come before you, and we will be together for this life and all the lives to come.”

“I, Bryony Gates, formerly of the Rust Belt Bevy, do formally renounce my allegiance and being as an otter-shifter.

From this point forward, I will be the fated mate of Nolan Hamilton and my allegiance will be to him and our pride. I will not put another above him.”

He placed one hand on the nape of her neck and the other on the small of her back and pulled her into his body, his mouth hovering over hers. “You won’t regret this, Bryony, I swear it.”

“I think I already do.”

“No, you don’t,” he said in a confident, sensual whisper before he brought his mouth down on hers, his lips forcing hers to surrender to his dominance.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her fully into his embrace. Bryony sagged into him, her tongue tangling with his in a silky dance that felt as though they’d been doing this for years. He felt as though he’d been waiting for her his entire life. Heat and arousal surged through his system as thoughts of their bonding and his claiming her as his own played through his mind.

Surrender, trust, and the beginnings of something so much sweeter were in that kiss. He felt the moment her heart and soul acquiesced to what he’d known from the moment he saw her. He planned to spend the rest of his life kissing her leisurely and for hours, not always as a prelude to something else, but just communicating on the deepest possible level his feelings for her. She wasn’t ready to hear them, but she would come to believe.

Nolan used his seductive prowess to intoxicate her with his kisses, chasing her fears and doubts away and replacing them with certainty and courage. No one would be able to stand against them. They would rule an empire that spanned the mighty Mississippi and two different types of shifters. Nolan meant to combine their people and use each of their unique skills and abilities to make them so strong they would be invincible.

Plans for domination in the Midwest would have to wait. Tonight, he would claim his mate and through her, he would grasp his own immortality. Nolan swept her up in his arms and

carried her to their chambers. The room was huge, with an attached spa-like bath as well as a walk-in closet. The entire back of the room and one side was glass—a combination of French doors and windows that led to a wraparound balcony.

He set her down once they were inside the room. “I know I didn’t give you a choice...”

“Only because you couldn’t,” she said, reaching up to touch his face. It was the first time she had initiated anything physical between them.

“No, for the sake of us all, you need to be with me. But there are still choices you have within your power to make. You can choose me without reservation—choose to fight with me; choose to make your life with me and our people; choose to face whatever is coming at my side as my equal.”

They’d taken vows. Her father was dead. There was no one to dispute his claim to her. He knew what he was doing and the challenges they would face, but he also knew that together they were undefeatable.

She nodded—her decision made. “I choose you. Live or die, rise or fall, I choose you.”

“You’ve had a long day. Why don’t you take a shower while I meet with Heath for a few minutes.” She smiled, wryly, questioning the timeline. “Seriously, I haven’t been gone long enough and Heath is too good as my second-in-command for there to be anything that will require much of my attention.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I mean to claim you.”

“Yes, and as you pointed out you could have done that at any time between when we first met in Paris and now. You’re giving me time to get clean, to boost my confidence in my attractiveness, maybe let the shower work its magic on my muscles...”

Nolan chuckled. “Couldn’t you just take a little leap of faith that I want to make this as easy and as good for you as I can? As for your attractiveness, you don’t even have to be in

the room, and I get hard. Every time you are near, I feel your presence and all I can think about is being with you. You are more spectacularly beautiful than a September sunset.” He inclined his head toward the bath. “Go ahead. Your things have been unpacked and put away.” He kissed her lightly but allowed his growing feelings for her to travel down the link.

“Am I going to be able to do that once I’m a lioness?”

“That and so much more, including purring.”

“Hmm. This lioness thing might not be all that bad.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I promise. Come tomorrow you’ll wonder why you ever doubted me.”

Nolan headed downstairs to check-in with Heath and to take a shower in the bath attached to his office. He wanted to give her time and allow her to feel as though she had some control. She didn’t, and she probably knew that, but the more he made her understand he wanted a true partner, the better things would be for them. Besides, she had proven herself to be intelligent and able to grasp not only the big picture about events taking place around her, but to grasp the nuances as well.

Once he’d met with Heath, who had kept everything under control just as Nolan had known he would, he took a shower and pulled on a pair of clean jeans, tucking his stiff cock behind the button-fly. Ensuring they would not be disturbed, but that the food would be left outside their bedroom door, Nolan returned to Bryony. When he opened the door, the sight that greeted him would be indelibly etched in his memory, and he knew that she had chosen the path that led to a shared destiny with him.

CHAPTER 16



NOLAN

*B*ryony stood leaning against the railing, the gossamer nightgown hanging from thin spaghetti straps, its billowy shape doing nothing to even hint at the voluptuous figure that lay beneath, but the material and the sun's rays shining through it left nothing to the imagination. He inhaled deeply and growled low, and she trembled and turned to face him. The scent of her arousal permeated the room.

"It's gorgeous here," she said, a bit nervously.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you."

She crooked her head to one side, searched his face, and smiled. "You really believe that."

"There is no belief involved. I need nothing more than the empirical evidence standing before me. You do know that nightgown does nothing to disguise how beautiful you are."

She shook her head and began to prowl towards him. "I'm beginning to believe you."

"Believe," he said in a deep rumble that was a seductive combination of purr and growl.

Nothing had ever called to him the way that she did—her stiffened nipples, her flushed skin, the scent of her arousal—it was a siren song he had no interest in ignoring. There was nothing in anything about her that didn't speak of her willingness and readiness to become one with him.

When she reached him, he slid the straps of the nightgown off her shoulders so that it flowed down her body and puddled

on the floor. Nolan swept her naked body into his arms and carried her to their bed, laying her down in the middle of it. He walked back to the French doors and closed them. There would come a time their pride hearing her yowl in pleasure as he drove his barbed cock in and out of her wouldn't bother him, but this first time, her cries of ecstasy were only for him.

Returning to her, he unbuttoned his jeans and shucked out of them, kicking them away and standing naked before her. Her pupils dilated with increased arousal and interest.

“See something you like, Bryony?”

She nodded. “Don't screw this up by being an arrogant jackass.”

Running his hand down her body, he admired the casual confidence she displayed as she lay on her back, her nipples pebbled like red raspberries, her legs slightly spread so that he could see the entrance to her pussy, glistening with desire. He tugged gently on her nipple before grasping her hip and flipping her over onto her belly. Crawling up on the mattress behind her, he lined up his cock with the opening to her core.

Nolan rubbed his hand down her spine, pressing her down so that she was no longer on her hands and knees, but her forearms and knees. Bringing his hand back to her other hip, he grasped her tightly and then thrust deep, burying himself to his hilt and groaning with exquisite pleasure.

Her body shook and she cried out when a powerful orgasm seized her. The only thing that kept her from collapsing was the intensity of the hold he had to keep her close. As intense as it was, he wanted so much more from her.

Nolan's cock swelled even further and the barbs all along its length flared. He dragged himself back, the barbs plowing shallow furrows that would trap his seed in her tender flesh. Bryony cried out again, but this time, the sound was laced with discomfort. He drove forward, the barbs receding and softening to gentle nubs along his hard member, providing a sensual friction that made her moan in pleasure. When he drew back, the barbs became longer and more rigid as they grated

against her sensitive flesh. She moaned and pushed back against his surging cock.

He pulled back, allowing the barbs to rake her inner walls, pausing for a moment before he thrust back into her. Again and again, he repeated the rhythmic motion, his hips slamming into her as Bryony arched her back and called his name.

Holding her steady, Nolan pounded into her with a ruthless need that ignited an answering fiery frenzy in her. Tightening his hold on her hip with one hand, he used the other to arrange her hair so it fell in front of her shoulders, exposing the nape of her neck—the place he would sink his fangs in a claiming bite. Nolan stretched out along her back, covering her body with his own. He nuzzled and nipped at her shoulders and neck, whispering kisses before giving her the edge of his teeth. He began to purr loudly, allowing his lust, passion, and something far more intimate and lasting to travel down the link.

His fangs elongated, and he sank them into her exposed flesh. Claiming bites were, by their very nature and intent, savage and Nolan's was no different. He tightened his hold in anticipation of some kind of resistance, but it never came. Instead, Bryony arched her back, pushing against him, taking him deeper, and moaning in complete and utter surrender and submission. Even as the bite became ferocious, Bryony reveled in his embrace with a furious ecstasy that was intoxicating. Her response to his primitive possession was as fierce and feral as his own.

Bryony's pussy convulsed along his length for a second time, as another orgasm seized her. Nolan didn't let up; he continued to pound into her over and over again, his cock slamming into her repeatedly as she writhed in his grasp.

Nolan fucked her with a primal and ruthless passion, and Bryony softened and mewled her capitulation to his dominance. The harder he hammered her pussy, the more she surrendered herself to him. He knew it wasn't just physical, as the bonding link had blossomed into a tether that flowed between them, expanding and strengthening their connection.

Nolan allowed his emotions to flow freely down to her to wrap her in his sensual spell.

Trapped in a maelstrom of passion, Nolan tried to push away the knowledge that he was ravaging her pussy. She would most likely be sore and exhausted when he was through, and even knowing that, he didn't care and didn't relent. He would allow no one else to take care of her. He wanted to ensure all she remembered of their coming together for the first time was the depth of feeling and passion he had for her. He thrust into her at a frantic, almost violent, pace. His barbs scored her pussy in ever-deepening furrows and made her cry out as she sailed off the edge of eternity into a rapturous and endless freefall.

Nolan had envisioned being tender and loving their first time together. But the feelings had been too intense and her surrender too sweet for it to be anything other than raw and primal. He fucked her with a rough, furious, possessive passion that encompassed both beast and man. Bryony, it seemed, embraced both.

He dragged himself until he was barely inside her, thrusting into her and pulling back, the barbs taking hold, locking her body to his as his fangs embedded even more deeply in the nape of her neck. Bryony cried out as he held her hard against him and pumped her full of his seed; its warmth soothing her ravaged flesh. Her sheath convulsed up and down his length as she shuddered beneath him, her body milking the last drops of his cum from his cock.

Nolan took some of his weight from her body, so she didn't need to bear it all. He held himself still until the throbbing of his staff began to slow and the barbs receded, then eased himself from her body, trailing his fingers along her skin, purring to her all the while. Nolan quieted her body and soul with his caresses, banking the wildfire that had consumed them so the smoking embers could be reignited into the flames that would keep them warm in all the lives to come.

She melted onto her belly on the bed next to him. Propping himself up on his elbow, he ran his fingers lightly over her skin, interspersing kisses here and there as he did so.

“That feels nice,” she said lazily.

“If all you felt was nice, I’m going to have to brush up on my technique.”

“Again, don’t wreck this by being an arrogant jackass.”

He chuckled. “I want to make you happy.”

She turned her head to the side so she could regard him openly. “I want us to be happy together. What’s the transition like for a lioness?”

“Usually, it’s fairly dull. Your otter DNA might put up more of a fight than a human’s, but the lioness will prevail.”

“Does the lioness DNA mean I’ll get that swaggering confidence and belief I can triumph over anything?”

“Absolutely. You were almost there; the transition will give you the nudge you need to become as arrogant as I am and believe in us as much as I do.”

“I was pretty much almost there before you bit me. That, by the way, hurt.”

“And yet, you seemed to embrace the barbs. Most females come to revel in the feelings—both physical and emotional—but it usually takes time.”

“Trust me, I’m as surprised as you are. They kind of tickle when you push forward, but they stiffen and really dig in when you pull back.”

He continued to touch her, stroking her body with his hand. “I’ve been told it is a unique sensation, singular to felines of all shapes and sizes.”

“What’s it like to be a lioness?”

“As opposed to an otter? You’re bigger, stronger, and have a higher prey drive. You can’t swim as well, but you can climb trees better.”

She laughed—a light and airy sound that reminded him of the fireflies that danced in the fields. He smiled.

“What were you thinking just then?”

“I was thinking that your laughter reminded me of fireflies in the summer. One of my favorite things to do after a long, hard day...”

“Smuggling, selling arms...”

It was his turn to chuckle. “As I was saying, I like to come up here with a glass of bourbon and watch the fireflies light up the night sky.” There was a discreet knock on the door. “That will be food.”

Bryony rolled over and sat up, arranging the pillows so they both had something comfortable to lean against. Nolan had something far more intimate in mind. He opened the door and retrieved a tray filled with food you’d expect to see at a fancy brunch—some things more breakfast-y and others more lunch-y.

He set the tray on the bedside table next to her, gently pulling her forward and moving the pillows from behind her and arranging them to suit himself.

“I don’t get pillows?” she asked with a lilting laugh.

He handed the tray to her and then walked around the end of the bed to join her in bed. She watched him with open curiosity and intimate interest as his cock began to stir. He slid into bed and removed the tray from her grasp, setting it beside him and then pulling her over his thigh so that she was ensconced between his legs with her back to his chest. Maneuvering the tray so they could both reach it, he snagged a piece of bacon and offered her a bite.

She nipped off the end of the slice and moaned in pleasure. “Okay. First, you are now in charge of seating arrangements. You make a much nicer backrest than the pillows against the headboard. And two, this bacon is delicious.”

“We raise most of our own food. We have pastures for horses, cattle, pigs, and sheep, as well as fields beyond for hay and grains and a large vegetable garden.”

“Worried someone will try to poison you?”

“Not really. More interested in how things are raised and what goes into them—both animal and vegetable.”

“I’m not a vegetarian by any means, but I don’t want to know the name of anything I’m eating.”

Nolan chuckled, which he found he did a lot more now that she was at his side and seemed committed to making things between them work, not only for the short term but the long term, as well. He was beginning to believe that Bryony might not have been brought up to believe in a fated mate, but she seemed to want to believe. That was an enormous step in the right direction.

“I’m a little surprised that you didn’t haul me downstairs to show your pride your trophy mate.”

Perhaps he had been too quick to think she had accepted him, their pride, and their destiny together.

“That is not our way in our pride. I’ve never understood how treating your mate as an object would make her desirous of staying. I won’t deny the pleasure I will take in showing you off at the upcoming celebrations. I am particularly looking forward to Gutierrez and Pettigrew’s reactions.”

Laughter bubbled forth from her lips. “I don’t know Gutierrez except by reputation, but no one is going to enjoy Jared’s reaction more than I. I intend to appear the completely besotted mate, so enraptured by her mate’s claiming that all she can do is cling to him and coo.”

Nolan laughed as well. “Feel free to cling to your heart’s content. Actually, making them think you are nothing more than a bauble to be dangled from my arm might well work in our favor.”

“In all seriousness, you might well be right about that.”

“I am. But I won’t put you, or allow you to put yourself, in danger. You seemed to hit it off with Rolf.”

“He was very kind to me.”

“He is quite smitten with you in a perfectly acceptable *‘that is my alpha’s fated mate’* kind of way. I am going to assign him as your bodyguard.”

“You should know, I have a black belt in Krav Maga.”

“Do I even want to know what prompted that?” he asked.

“I lived alone in New York City. Given the crime statistics especially against women, it seemed prudent. What if Rolf would prefer a different assignment?”

“He won’t.”

“But what if he does?”

“I will find out why—only to assure myself something nefarious isn’t going on.”

“You’re a suspicious, paranoid sonofabitch, aren’t you?” she teased.

“Yes, especially where the safety of my mate is concerned.”

She raised her face to his, inviting him to kiss her, which he did. Nolan was finding he enjoyed kissing Bryony. He could get lost in her and find a solace he had never known before.

“Thank you for saying all of that. I know you’re exerting control, but you do it so seductively and so subtly that I don’t really mind.”

She snuggled against him, and they began to speak of the time they had spent apart. It no longer felt as though she thought of the time before he’d kidnapped her as something other than time spent waiting for each other.

A knock on the door preceded Heath cracking it open. “Alpha? A word?”

“Come on in, Heath, I’m just using your alpha for a backrest. He’s pretty comfortable except for this hard length throbbing between us.”

Heath entered with a smile on his face and a worried look. “I’m not sure that the idea of you and Sasha becoming good friends is the best idea Nolan and I ever came up with.”

“Too late,” she quipped.

“If you two are through squabbling, want to tell me why you’re standing in my bedroom while my dick is making its

thoughts known on having my naked mate in a position where it can't get what it wants?"

Both Heath and Bryony shared a grin before Heath sobered. "Word of your bonding has already reached the ears of Pettigrew, and I suspect Gutierrez, as well. Pettigrew has filed a protest with the Council. He's demanding that the Council convene and that you be called before them to explain this egregious insult."

Bryony looked over her shoulder. "Can't we just shoot him and all his minions, join our two territories, make our people understand we are now one—two species, but one family, so to speak?"

"Bloodthirsty little thing isn't she?" chortled Heath.

"And that's before she's transitioned to a lioness. Give us a few minutes and we'll reconvene to figure out our next step."

"As you will, Alpha, and I do apologize for the intrusion." Heath withdrew.

"So much for my plan to spend the day convincing you that having my barbs rake your flesh is something you enjoy."

"I'm not sure that would have needed a whole day."

He laughed again, kissing her thoroughly and chiding himself for being so happy. It didn't make sense: Gutierrez was deadly and by killing Bryony's father, he had proven he was not opposed to murder; Pettigrew was making an ass of himself; and now the Council wanted to interfere in his business. Before the end of the day, he vowed, at least two of the three issues would be resolved.

CHAPTER 17



BRYONY

Bryony had showered before Nolan and was once again standing on the balcony looking toward the river. He was right about the tether. She could feel his presence before any of her normal senses could detect him. He embraced her from behind, pulling her back close to his front.

“Should I worry that I often find you out here, looking toward the river and East St. Louis?” he asked softly.

“I’m not a lioness yet. Otters are water creatures. We are drawn to it, almost like a moth to a flame. Purebred otters spend the majority of their time in the water and the need to be close to water or in it is a residual trait that shifters share with them.”

“Even though you aren’t drawn to it, you will certainly be able to be near the water. The estate has a large pool. And while I don’t recommend swimming in the Mississippi, we have several boats large enough to take on it.”

Bryony smiled and looked over her shoulder at him. He wasn’t an unkind man and seemed to want to make her happy. Certainly, she’d enjoyed the time they’d spent together in bed, and he was interesting and good company. But it was hard to forget that he had forced her into the situation in which she now found herself—mate to the Lion of St. Louis and her DNA already transforming on a cellular level.

“I wouldn’t like what you’re thinking, would I?”

“Probably not, but I’m not sure I like it, either.”

“Care to share and see if we can’t tease it out together?”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that—mostly because what I’m feeling is all jumbled in a chaotic mishmash.”

“I have some things to go over with Heath. I am not trying to keep you isolated or out of the plans we’re making, but one of the things we need to deal with first is the protest lodged by Pettigrew.”

“Don’t worry about that; I’ll flay the bastard alive. How dare he accuse you of doing exactly what he did?”

“He isn’t wrong, Bryony. I, too, kidnapped you and brought you to my estate.”

“That’s true and part of my confused ball of emotions. I keep telling myself that I only have your word for it that you weren’t responsible for my father’s death and if you were, how the hell could I enjoy being with you. You didn’t give me a choice about whether or not I would speak vows that bind me to you. I should resent the hell out of that, but for some weird reason, I don’t.” She shook her head. “Am I making any sense at all?”

“Yes and no. I can feel a lot of what you’re feeling through the link, and it is a bit messy,” he said, tightening his embrace. “But I don’t know if the situation was reversed, I’d feel all that different. The fact that you aren’t trying to fight the link and seem to have thrown in with our side is important and gratifying to me. I know you have no real reason to believe me about your father...”

“That’s the hell of it; I do believe you. Partly because your assessment of who had the most to gain coincides with my thinking as well. But partly because instinctively I trust you. I guess I’m choosing not to believe that you would murder a man by luring him out to a lonely stretch of the Mississippi and ambushing him.” She wagged her head gently, smiling to herself. “It’s funny; if someone told me you’d called him and challenged him to a duel, I’d believe that. I guess I just see you as far more honorable than that.”

Releasing her, Nolan moved alongside her. “Given the way you were raised and everything that’s happened, that’s far from the worst way you can think of me.”

“I just never saw myself as living within the shifter community. I never wanted to be mated and I only shifted when I wanted to go and play in the water. Other than that, I was perfectly content just living my little life without any involvement with other shifters. In fact, I spent most of my life alone and loved it.”

He nodded. “It’s a big change, becoming part of a pride. I don’t know all the details of how a bevy’s hierarchy works, but with a pride, our lives are closely intertwined. Each of us has a job to do, a role to play, so to speak. And we do it not only because we want to, but because if we don’t it often has negative consequences for our pride. At the very least, someone else has to pick up the slack.”

“And with otters, it’s all about trying to get the other guy to do all the work so you can have more time to play. You have no idea how much time we spend playing. That probably has a lot to do with the fact that most of the big shakers and movers aren’t otters.”

“Lions make plenty of time for playing not only as a group, but intimately with our mates. We are part of a larger family—the pride, but it doesn’t mean we neglect those closest to us or don’t put our personal family members ahead of everything.”

“I get it, I do. I know for you and the pride, I have a role to play. It’s just not a role I ever saw myself playing or even aspiring to. There’s a small part of me that resents that I was just living in Utah, minding my own business and this whole thing just blew up and suddenly I’m everybody’s pawn in a deadly game I never wanted any part of.”

“You have every reason to feel that way. I can even understand if you wanted to run and go back to the life you had created for yourself, but you can’t. You’re my fated mate, which means not only do I want you alive and happy with me, but you could easily become a tool for my enemies to destroy

me. You are no longer otter. My claiming bite last night meant that you are becoming a lioness whether you like it or not. You want to know who killed your father and see that person or persons held accountable... this will help you do so.”

“I don’t know that I really want revenge...”

“Revenge and justice are two completely different entities. Revenge is easy; justice can be a bit trickier, but it is so much sweeter.”

“And if I don’t care about justice and just want the revenge?” she asked, provocatively.

“Then once we know all of those responsible, if it’s what you want, I will bring you their heads, on a silver platter or mounted on spikes, your choice.”

“Just like that?”

He nodded. “Just like that. Why don’t you work on crafting that response to the Council. I’ll have Pettigrew’s protest brought up to you. If you want to join us afterwards, you are more than welcome. It would probably do the pride some good to see you at dinner.”

As Nolan turned to leave her, she was seized with an inexplicable longing to reach out to him. Taking his face in her hands, she fused her lips to his, aggressively thrusting her tongue into his mouth to slide along his and try to communicate the chaos of her heart, mind, body, and soul. He allowed her to control the kiss, but only for a moment before he fisted her hair, drawing her head back and ravaging her mouth before kissing and nipping his way down the column of her throat.

When he lifted his head, his grin was positively feral. “I mean to hold you to the promise contained in that kiss, mate.”

Heat, arousal, passion, and ferocity all rolled down the link to her, threatening to overwhelm her. She stumbled back and Nolan was quick to catch and steady her. Her eyes were dilated, and she blinked at him. The magnetism toward him she felt whenever in his presence reminded her that he was offering her a real future—one she had never even dreamed of

for herself but was nonetheless a future she could want, if she gave herself time.

She held up her hand as she backed away from his embrace.

“It will be all right, Bryony,” he assured her.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I am alpha of the Gateway Pride, and you are my mate; there is nothing that I can’t or won’t do for you.”

“But what if I don’t want the life you’re offering me?”

“It’s a bit late for that,” he chuckled. “Even if you’re feeling perfectly fine, the transition has already begun. It will not be long before you are lion and not otter. Work on the reply to the Council. Perhaps that will help to clarify and calm your mind.”

Bryon watched the door close behind him as he left her in the sumptuous room where he intended they spend the rest of their lives. His estate was enormous. It dwarfed the one on which she’d been brought up. Hell, her entire tiny house wasn’t as large as Nolan’s suite. The nice thing was, though, that the entire mansion had a casually elegant feel.

She didn’t want to pick a fight with him or point out all the errors in his thinking, but she had been kidnapped and brought to St. Louis under duress. She would give him that he hadn’t forced her physically, and she would even admit that she had given herself to him and enjoyed the time she’d spent with him.

As she’d looked out onto the rolling hills of the estate and to the Mississippi that formed one boundary, she was reminded of all that had been taken from her: her name, her home—both in East St. Louis and in Utah—perhaps even her career, and as of this morning the very essence of who she was. The unanswered question was: was it who she wanted to be or even who she’d been destined to be?

Bryony felt the walls of the room and the entire situation beginning to close in on her. None of this was what she had wanted or even really chosen for herself. Her father’s murder,

while sad and regrettable, really had nothing to do with her. Her father had chosen his path, as had Nolan, Jared, and even Gutierrez. Was it fair that they deny her the right to choose her own?

She ran to the closet and found that although she had been unpacked, her vintage Coach bag still had her wallet and her identification. There was nothing to stop her from walking away until she could figure out what it was that she wanted. Security would be on high alert, but that had never stopped her before.

Maybe if she moved quickly enough, she could get back to Utah, get her truck and hitch up her tiny home—after getting new titles and license plates for them—and fade into the mountains of the southwest until she knew what it was she wanted. How to get there, though? It was broad daylight, and she couldn't shift. That added a degree of difficulty she wasn't sure she could overcome. Bryony swore as she realized the option of shifting to an otter and finding a lazy river to take her away was no longer an option available to her.

On the other hand, as Nolan had pointed out, as a lioness she would be far more powerful and capable of ensuring her needs and desires would be met. She was no expert, but shifters were raised knowing that shifting during a transition was dangerous and could be fatal. Gutierrez and Jared might be formidable as gangsters, but as a capybara and otter respectively, they were no match for the lioness that she was becoming. She was not yet a lioness, though. Perhaps the best option was to hole up until she was, and then decide what it was she wanted.

For the first time since hearing of her father's murder and having Nolan mark her with his claiming bite, Bryony felt she had some control of her future. She needed time and space to decide where she wanted fate to lead her. The urge to run, to see if she could get to her truck and her tiny home was strong, but it wasn't practical, and in all likelihood, would be a complete and utter failure.

Bryony knew there were two options available. The first was to wait for the transition to be complete. That was

probably the most sensible choice, but she didn't feel time was on her side. The more time she spent with Nolan, the more she feared she would simply fall into the role everyone expected of her, but one she wasn't sure she wanted. The second option would be to make a break for it and see if she couldn't get back to Utah, but that was just foolish. For one thing, it was doubtful her truck and tiny home were still where she'd left them, and if the transition from otter to lioness proved difficult or hazardous, being on her own could be downright dangerous.

There were flaws inherent regardless of her choice, and the very real possibility of ending up with no choice at all. Time to create a third option.

CHAPTER 18



BRYONY

*B*ryony worked on the statement that would be read to the Council regarding Jared's ridiculous protest. Did he really think she would back him before the Council? That she would prefer his company to Nolan's? She could understand, however, why the Council might believe him. After all, it was uncommon for someone to give up their origin species. There were all kinds of rules forbidding it and hoops a person would have to go through in order to do it. It wasn't completely unheard of, though.

Nolan was most likely right—a well-crafted statement from her combined with Nolan's stature and power within the shifter community would all but ensure their coming out on top in a fight with Jared. Bryony ran her fingers through her hair. She'd never been fond of Jared, but she'd never thought him stupid. There had to be more to it.

It turned out writing something she thought would suffice in light of her absence was not as quick an endeavor as she might have originally planned. When she was finished with the statement, she placed it in an envelope with Nolan's name and then made her way out into the hall and down the stairs. Several people stopped to talk to her, including Sasha.

"Are you sure you should be up and around?" Sasha asked solicitously.

"I'm fine. A bit wobbly in the legs, but nothing a little time and some of Nolan's TLC won't be able to put right. How about you and Heath?"

“We have Nolan’s blessing and after all this has calmed down, we will have our own bonding ceremony, but I doubt it will rival yours.”

Bryony linked her arm through Sasha’s. “I don’t think there should be a competition...”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Milady...”

“I thought we agreed I wasn’t going to put up with that formal bullshit. And seriously, you and Heath are both well liked. Why not throw a huge blowout to celebrate both bondings? We’ll do it here and over in East St. Louis. We’ll be the talk of the shifter and gangster communities.”

“You do know Nolan doesn’t do drugs or contract killings or anything like that.”

“He is still a gangster.” Bryony smiled. “But yes, an honorable one. Do you think he had anything to do with my father’s death?”

“Absolutely not,” Sasha said without hesitation. “Nothing good for Nolan or this pride comes from your father being murdered. Heath and Nolan both think Gutierrez did it. You’re not mad at Cosmo, are you?”

“Not at all. There were times in the last five years that he was the only person who brought a little light... a little kindness to my life.”

“Don’t worry about that. You’ll never be lonely again. Lions are close-knit. We have strong family ties and you’re one of us now.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

They walked around the perimeter of the gardens surrounding the house, exchanging pleasantries while Bryony surreptitiously noted the comings and goings of not only the security personnel, but those who came and went on pride business.

As she watched a food delivery truck pull up to the entrance to the kitchen on the back of the house, she said, “I thought we grew all our own food.”

“We do—well most of it anyway. There are things that either won’t grow here in Missouri or that are quicker, easier or less expensive to buy than to try and produce here. A lot of the pantry staples—flour, sugar, et cetera.”

Bryony nodded. “That makes sense.” She pulled the envelope out of her pocket. “Can you do me a favor and go up to the house and give this to Nolan? It’s the repudiation of Jared’s bullshit. I haven’t been home to this area in a very long time, I’d just like to take the time to breathe it in.”

“I think Nolan would prefer one of the guys stay with you.”

“Probably, but seriously who is going to get to me, or any of us here?”

Sasha took the envelope. “You have a point.”

Their paths diverged as Sasha headed up to the house, and Bryony walked toward the food delivery truck. The man had been unloading for a while. If she could find a place to hide, she might be able to just leave the estate with very little need to do much of anything else. Everything that she was beginning to feel was threatening to overwhelm her and she needed some time and space to sort out her feelings—preferably without her mate’s hunky and seductive presence.

Slowly she approached the truck, several times diverting to talk with someone. She needed to get to the truck and needed to get off the estate, but she needed to do so subtly. Bryony tried to maintain a casual and relaxed approach as she made her way determinedly to the truck and what looked to be her best chance of escape. She stopped to examine flowers and to kneel down to tie a non-existent shoelace.

Finally, she was alone with the truck. The delivery man was up at the house and there seemed to be no one around. Fate seemed to be smiling down on her. Stepping up into the truck, she glanced around. The cargo portion was neatly organized. The old adage of *a place for everything and everything in its place* immediately leapt to mind. Unfortunately, none of those places were going to easily provide a hiding place for an adult lion-shifter trying to escape

a beautiful mansion filled with people who wanted to accept her into their midst, and a man who professed to be her fated mate.

Bryony could hear voices approaching and had to rein in her inclination to panic. Looking around the truck's interior, she saw a bin. She had no idea what was in the bin, she just knew that while some small, diminutive person or a child might fit into it, she had no way of doing so. But there in the corner were sacks and sacks of something. If she gave them a little nudge, she might just be able to fit.

Shoving the stacks of what turned out to be flour sacks to the side as the voices became louder and more distinct, she was able to wriggle her way into what she hoped would be a hidden spot amongst the deliverables. She just needed to get past the gates of the estate and hopefully far enough down the road as to not be discovered. It wasn't that she didn't have feelings for Nolan; she just needed room to breathe, and the man definitely took her breath away.

The driver stepped into the van, putting things away and checking to see everything was in its place before rolling down the cargo hold door. The crunch of his boots on the gravel told her he was alone and headed for the driver's side of the truck's cab. The engine turned over and the entire vehicle shuddered as he put it into gear, and it began to rumble toward the edge of the estate, the gate, and freedom.

Bryony didn't try to make herself believe that this was a true escape from a situation she was no longer sure she wanted to escape. It was simply an exercise to buy herself some breathing room. She pushed down the nausea that had plagued her for the past hour. Unless she was mistaken, the transformation from otter to lioness had begun more quickly than she'd planned on.

As she was jostled to and fro in the back of the truck, Bryony decided that parting company with her escape vehicle as soon as possible made more sense than not. For one thing, the truck's rough ride did nothing to alleviate her unsettled stomach and the general feeling of malaise that was rapidly progressing. When the truck began to pick up speed as it made

a slight incline, Bryony feared they were headed up an onramp to one of the main interstates.

As music blared from the cab of the truck, Bryony hunkered down and was grateful she was not in the passenger seat. If she had been, she would have worried about going deaf, so loud was the music. After about ninety minutes, the truck exited whatever highway it had been on and seemed to be on some kind of backroad. When the truck finally rolled to a stop, Bryony waited until the driver came to open the back.

The smell of a woodsy outdoors breezed in, combined with the fragrance of a fast-moving river and not even a hint of pollution other than that the diesel-fueled truck brought with it. The driver whistled as he off-loaded his supplies and while he was away from the truck, Bryony was able to slip out and head into the woods.

Following her senses of smell and hearing, Bryony made her way to the river. It was far too clean and not nearly deep enough to be the Mississippi. The nausea and overall feeling of unwellness was increasing so she went down to the river, removed her shoes, and pulled up her leggings to expose her feet and lower limbs.

Fearing she would succumb to the allure of shifting into her otter form and sinking into the cooling current of the fast-flowing river, she perched on a rock overhang and dangled her feet and legs up past her ankles.

“Ahh,” she moaned.

There must be something to this whole reflexology thing. Her feet and lower legs were the only parts of her body that weren't aching, threatening to vomit, or feeling like she was about to become a victim of spontaneous combustion. The immersion in the cold water as it rushed by provided immediate relief. She wasn't one hundred percent, but she was a damn sight better than she'd been in the back of that truck.

When she heard the motor of the truck start-up and begin to make its way back toward whatever passed for the main road, Bryony breathed a sigh of relief. Rolling down her leggings and putting her feet back into her shoes, she

scrambled back up the side of the fern-covered hill. It wasn't hard to discern her location—there was a big sign proclaiming the place to be 'Fern Hill.'

Well, duh.

She walked up the drive, spotting small cabins, tiny homes, and treehouses disbursed around a central building. The sign over the double doors said, 'Welcome! Come On In,' which sounded like an excellent suggestion. A woman with a friendly face, short carrot-topped hair, and freckles looked up from behind the desk.

"Hi there! You lost?"

"Do I look lost?" asked Bryony.

"Not really, but I didn't hear a car and you don't have any bags."

"Bad breakup with the ex-boyfriend on a road trip," Bryony replied.

"The sonofabitch just left you stranded?" she asked, coming from behind what appeared to be an antique front desk.

"Yes. Fortunately, I just followed the river until I heard a truck leaving. I thought there had to be some kind of civilization. It looks like you rent places. Any chance you have a vacancy?"

"I do. It's off season. I don't have a lot of bookings and you look like you could use a break. If you don't mind not having daily housekeeping, I've got just the cottage for you. It sits on a little island in the middle of the river. The only way you get to it is a suspension bridge that can feel a little dicey. It's safe, but if you're not used to something moving beneath your feet, it can be disconcerting. I'm Mandy, by the way."

"And the river flows all around it?" Mandy nodded. "I'll take it. I can have funds wired directly from my bank if you'd like."

"That will work. I also do cash, Zelle, and PayPal. I provide breakfast, a packed lunch, and snacks. Dinner is on

your own. There's a double infrared cooktop, toaster oven, and small fridge, and you can't beat the view."

"It sounds perfect. Any chance I can order some groceries?"

Mandy went back behind her reception desk. "Absolutely. I was just putting in an order for delivery. I can give you their shopping list and have your order added to mine and you can pay me."

Bryony and Mandy exchanged glances in the way that only women who have walked through fire, or who have seen enough women who had, could do. Mandy knew Bryony wanted to be low profile and was willing to help.

"That would be great. Do you have Wi-Fi?"

"We do," Mandy said, handing her a key, a map to the cottage, and the list of groceries available.

"If you get me your vendor info, I'll get you paid. I'd like to pay a week in advance. I'll let you know a couple of days before that if I'm going to be longer."

"You stay as long as you like. There's an alarm you can set on the end of the bridge that takes you to the cottage. The porch wraps all the way around and there's a small boat with an outboard motor tied up off the deck in the back. There's also a bolt hole in the bedroom floor and a kayak and paddle at the bottom of the ladder."

"This is not your first rodeo."

"No ma'am, it isn't. And you're welcome to stay as long as you like. Keep my payment info and pay me after you leave. Tracking software gets more sophisticated by the day. No need to give them a heads up."

Bryony smiled. "No need at all."

"Let's get you some groceries to see you through until tomorrow. I've got some leftover lasagna I can give you for tonight. I'll walk down with you and show you where the alarm is and how to set it."

"Thanks, Mandy. I owe you."

“No, you don’t. Twenty years ago, someone helped me leave the hospital before my husband could finish the job he’d started. I got out and never looked back. Once I felt safe enough to stop, I found this place and swore I’d always have an outstretched hand to help those who needed it.”

They walked down to the cottage, with Mandy showing her various trails and giving her places where she could find help in case of emergency. She was surprised to hear Nolan’s estate as being one of them.

“Oh, I know,” said Mandy in response to her expression as they stepped onto the small suspension bridge that had more than a little swing to it. “Nolan Hamilton, the big-time gangster. He’s not a bad guy and he takes care of a lot of things the cops can’t. I don’t know if he knows he’s assisting, but he’s got some women down there that have been of enormous help in the past. Further down the Mississippi, we’ve had a lot of support from Bodie Lambeau’s people. If you have to, tell them ‘Freckles of Fern Hill’ sent you.”

That was interesting, the Lion of St. Louis and El Tigre out of New Orleans were both helping women escape bad situations. Bryony wondered if they knew, and if they did, to what end?

“That’s not much of a code word.”

“No, but if you aren’t who you say you are, we can usually ferret that out pretty quickly.”

“You won’t get any trouble from me, and somewhere down the line, I’ll be a part of your support system one way or another.”

“Good enough,” Mandy said, opening the door and showing Bryony in. “There are two panic buttons by the bed. The red one will set off all kinds of alarms and alert the police. The second is a silent alarm up here to me.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think anyone is actively pursuing me, and if they even know I’m gone, I don’t think they can trace me here. I’ll try not to bring any trouble to your door.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Mandy said as she turned to leave. “Here in these parts, ‘trouble’ is what people call my granddaddy’s double-barrel shotgun. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Bryony stood in the doorway, watching Mandy traverse the narrow bridge. Like a lot of things, the bridge was deceptive. It looked thrown together and it had more than a little swing to it, but it was cleverly engineered and extremely safe. Bryony checked out the bolt hole and smiled. The little river cottage had been designed and built to ensure that it would be difficult to trap all those who stayed there.

When Mandy reached the other side, she looked back and Bryony waved to her, smiling as Mandy did the same and then headed back up the hill. Bryony didn’t believe she’d be safe for long. Nolan was skilled at tracking those he wanted, and he’d made no secret of the fact he wanted her. A wave of nausea washed over her as her body trembled. She wasn’t so sure she didn’t want the same. *And what the hell am I supposed to do about that?*

CHAPTER 19



BRYONY

*B*ryony put away the groceries and changed out of her clothes, grateful for the complimentary robe that was provided with the cottage. She washed her clothes out by hand in the copper kitchen sink and then hung them to dry over the bathroom shower curtain rod. She hopped into the shower and rinsed the road dust from her body and hair.

She missed Nolan in a way she hadn't ever missed anyone. Bryony stood under the rainfall shower head, letting the water cascade over her body as she allowed her hand to slide along her skin, closing her eyes and imagining it was his strong, sensual hands. It was easy to remember how it had felt to have his hands cupping her breasts, squeezing them, strumming her nipples before he plucked at them like he would a guitar string—hard enough to provoke a response, but in a way that made the recipient want to sing instead of break.

As her hand reached her clit, she thought, *No! No! No! This is not helpful.* Thinking about how Nolan had played her body like a fine musical instrument was not germane to the issues. Bryony reached for the water temperature control and flipped it to cold. The effect was dramatic and instantaneous.

She turned off the water, stepped out, dried herself, and slipped on the robe. She sank into the enormous wingback recliner and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to untangle the knots. It was interesting to realize that as she stood under the water, touching herself and imagining it was Nolan, the nausea, dizziness, and general feeling of malaise had lightened considerably, but now it was back. That should tell her

something regardless of whether it was something she wanted to know or not.

Bryony allowed herself the luxury of closing her eyes, trying to force her libido into neutral so she could think. Not only did her libido not want to go, neither did her mind. Both were focused to the point of obsession on Nolan, her fated mate. She tried to push those thoughts away, as they weren't helpful. *Not being what I want to hear doesn't make it so.*

She could feel the link between them spring back into being. Bryony had been successful at pushing it away from the time he left her standing on the balcony, but now it seemed to fill her mind. He was searching for her. Perhaps she should let him find her. The bed looked comfortable, and she really needed to feel him inside her again—barbs and all.

Bryony *felt* more than *heard* a presence moving closer. Reluctantly she stood, tying the sash on her robe more tightly around her as she headed toward the door. Something told her she was better off dealing with Nolan brazenly as opposed to meekly, which was good because she sucked at meek.

As she reached for the handle, the door flew open as it was kicked in by security men she had seen before—at her tiny home in Moab and on her father's estate. It wasn't Nolan who had found her, but rather Jared. Brazen was probably better for him as well.

“She is here, Alpha,” said a man with an ugly scar on his face and an even uglier expression.

“How did you find me?”

Jared walked in behind him and backhanded her across the cheek. “You stupid bitch. I warned you not to try and thwart my plans. As to how I found you, we've kept this place under surveillance for years. The minute you showed up, we got a call.”

“Mandy betrayed me?” Bryony asked, disillusioned.

“Hardly. Like most of you females, she hasn't a clue what's going on around her. You've made a royal mess of

things and most likely will end up gracing Riccardo Gutierrez's bed."

In her mind she could hear the roar of an enraged lion, or in this case a lioness. She might not be fully through the transition, but apparently her lioness was unwilling to be manhandled or abused. Good. They were of the same mind.

Not knowing if calling her lioness would work differently than calling to her otter, Bryony summoned her lioness to come forth. The lioness with whom she now shared a soul roared again as she bounded out of the shadows of Bryony's mind and leapt to the forefront.

An opaque mist of lightning, thunder, shards of color, and electricity swirled all around her. Bryony could feel its power and magic as the cells of her body were caught up in the powerful current shifting her from human to lion. As the mist dissipated, pooling at her feet, Bryony reached out with her large paw, claws extended and made a swipe across the ugly man's throat. His death scream became nothing more than a gurgle.

"What the hell..." Jared cried as he jumped back and shoved another man between Bryony and himself. The second swipe of her paw opened the man's belly up, eviscerating him and leaving him to crumble on the ground, his life ebbing away. "Get in here," Jared shouted as she began to advance on him.

Stalking—that's what she was doing; she was stalking her prey. Bryony snarled and hissed at him, staying between him and the door. No, if this asshole wanted a showdown, she was willing to give him one.

"Holy shit," called a voice from behind her. It sounded as if he was in a corner of a faraway room, barely significant enough to make note of. Bryony spun on her powerful haunches and launched herself at the man, springing towards him and knocking him to the ground. She made a vicious bite to his throat, ripping away skin and jugular and leaving him gurgling as he bled out.

She turned back to Jared. “So, the little otter sow has become a lioness, has she? You might be far more interesting to mount than I had thought. You will never bear my children, whore, but Riccardo’s brat wants you. It might prove enlightening to watch him fuck you for the first time. He’ll be expecting a little otter who will tremble at his prowess. He won’t be expecting someone who will fight back.”

The question was how many people that underestimate would cost Enrique?

In that moment, Bryony saw the blackness of Jared’s soul and wondered how her father had missed it. Knowing what he planned to have in store for her, Bryony spun once more to race out of the cottage as what she thought was the last of the men who’d accompanied Jared burst through the door. Bryony looked over her shoulder to watch, as if it were a slow-motion freeze-frame, as Jared raised a gun, squeezed the trigger, and placed a bullet between the man’s eyes. The man didn’t even have time to register shock at his alpha’s betrayal before falling dead to the ground.

Bryony turned back on Jared and leaped—fangs bared, claws on both front paws extended. She would rip his miserable head from his body, and then she would call Nolan. He could handle cleaning this mess up. She would not leave Mandy to deal with any of this. She would ensure her safety one way or another. Something smashed into her chest. Thinking it was a bullet and she had moments to live, she stretched out to reach Jared and pounced on his chest, sending his breath from his body.

She got to all four feet and roared in defiance before blacking out, never expecting to wake again.



NOLAN

Nolan felt the sharp object enter her chest. “No!” he roared.

“The delivery man said his first stop after the estate was Fern Hill. That must be where she is,” said Heath as they raced

to find Bryony.

“We’ll be there in less than five,” said Danny as he pressed the helicopter for more speed.

“Can you feel where her spirit is?” asked Heath.

Nolan gasped for breath and centered his mind and emotions. He could feel her. He could feel her heart beating and her chest rising and falling as she breathed. Her mind was silent, but she was alive. “It feels like he tranquilized her.”

“Gutierrez or Pettigrew?”

“It has to be Pettigrew. She has become a lioness. The beast within her called to mine before she blacked out. She still lives. If it had been Gutierrez, she would be dead.”

“If she was a lioness...”

Nolan nodded. “Pettigrew will know that I have claimed her. That means he can’t use her to legitimize his claim to their bevy and territory. But he can use her to make a deal with the cartel. If he gives her to them, there’s no telling what they’ll do to her.”

“It won’t get that far, Alpha. We will find her before then and make those who did whatever they did pay for it,” vowed Rolf.

Nolan laid his hand on Rolf’s brawny shoulder. “Yes, we will, but Pettigrew is mine.”

“Unless I get to him first,” said Rolf quietly.

Nolan suppressed a chuckle; he had chosen the bodyguard for his mate well. Rolf would protect and defend her regardless of who got in the way.

“Deal,” said Nolan.

“I should have...” started the burly bodyguard.

“The fault is mine. I should have known this would be difficult for her. I should have remained at her side. And if I couldn’t be there, I should have had you. I will not make that mistake again. Whenever, wherever we find her, you get her out of there and get her back to the chopper. Danny?” he said

looking at the pilot. “If we aren’t hot on Rolf’s heels, you get them to safety and come back for us.”

As they landed in a small clearing, they could hear gunfire and a powerful engine as it raced away.

“Danny, stay with the chopper. Heath, Rolf, and I will get to Mandy and see what she knows.”

“Bryony?” asked Rolf.

“Is most likely in the vehicle that just left. I can feel her lifeforce. She is strong, but most likely unconscious. We’ll get what info we can from Mandy. We need to know which of her cottages Bryony was in and if she knows anything about what happened.”

They found Mandy dazed, but unafraid. “I don’t know how they found her. There’s no trace of her in my records. But they knew she was here. They left one beefy guy up here with me and the rest of them went after... shit, I don’t even know her name.”

“Bryony. Her father was Bryan Gates.”

Mandy’s eyes widened in recognition.

“My guess is that it was his people. Bryony and I were wed yesterday...”

“You’re the sonofabitch that she was running from?” accused Mandy.

“Hardly. But I think the idea of being a mafia bride when she had so successfully avoided being a mafia princess just overwhelmed her and she panicked. It was entirely my fault, but I can assure you that I will love and cherish her. My fear is those who have her mean to use her as a pawn in a deadly showdown between Enrique and Riccardo Gutierrez.”

Mandy’s eyes searched his face for deception and found none. “She was in the island cottage—the one in the middle of the river.”

“Thank you,” said Nolan as he stood. “Heath, stay with her. Depending on what we find, we’ll send a team. Rolf and I will go down to that cottage and see if there are any clues as to

where Pettigrew has taken her. Mandy, I promise you everything will be all right. I'm going to leave people here with you until we get this sorted out. Heath?"

"On it, Nolan. Go find your lady."

Rolf and Nolan ran toward the cottage. The smell of blood assailed their nostrils long before they reached it. Nolan put his arm in front of Rolf. "She's not here. We're looking to see if we can learn anything. She is your first and only concern."

They entered the cottage, and it was a bloodbath. Three men lay dead and a fourth was bleeding out quickly. Nolan kneeled down beside him. The man's eyes widened in horror. "Good. So, you know who I am. You're a dead man. There's no way to save you. Tell me what I need to know, and I'll end your life swiftly and painlessly. Tell me nothing or lie, and it will take you hours of excruciating agony to leave this life."

The man seemed to gather his wits. "Cartel. He's taking her to the cartel. She shifted and became..."

"She is my mate. Her lioness came forth to do battle. Where is Riccardo?"

"Enrique. Arrgghh," the man cried out in pain. "Pettigrew made a deal with the cartel. He couldn't risk taking Bryony home. She knew too much. She could have turned the bevy against him. Please. You promised."

"That I did. Where is Enrique?"

"They've got a safe house outside the city. Riccardo is at the Ritz in St. Louis. I didn't know. I don't think any of us did. We backed Jared as there seemed no other choice."

"There was always a choice," said Nolan. "You made the wrong one. Did Pettigrew sell out Gates to the cartel?"

The man nodded and groaned in agony. "Gates to Riccardo, but he made a side deal with Enrique."

"With my mate as the price of doing business."

"Please..."

Nolan grasped the man's head and gave it a vicious, swift twist, breaking his neck and ending his anguish. Nolan stood up, looking at Rolf. "That vicious little otter has no idea what he has unleashed."

Rolf nodded. "Milady will not be easily subdued. If her lioness can do this," he said, indicating the bodies on the floor, "she will not go down without a fight."

"Then she will buy us the time we need to find her. Let's get to the chopper. They're on four wheels, we can get to the safe house before they can."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Do you think I'd let the cartel have any property within my territory and not know where it is and keep eyes on it at all times?"

Rolf bowed his head. "I wasn't thinking."

"Rolf, don't start trying to beat yourself up over what happened. None of this is your fault. It isn't mine or even Bryony's fault. The only ones responsible are the cartel and Pettigrew, and they will pay for what they've done."

They ran towards the chopper and were barely inside before Danny was taking off.

Nolan called Heath. "We have four dead bodies and lots of blood. It seems my mate's lioness made her presence known. We're headed towards the cartel's safe house. I want someone to get eyes on Riccardo. He's staying at the Ritz. We think Pettigrew is taking Bryony to the cartel's safe house."

"Is he responsible for her father's death?"

"That's what the dying man said. Pettigrew made a deal with the cartel and then he and Enrique made a separate deal. My guess is Riccardo's mongrel son has figured out his father intends to take Bryony to mate and sire a legitimate line of heirs."

"That's going to be a problem," said Heath.

"An insurmountable one. Pettigrew has to know at this point Bryony has no worth to anyone but me."

It had been proven long ago that a human could be transitioned twice—one from human to shifter and then from one species of shifter to another. A third transition would kill them. Shifters could only be transitioned once. As Bryony had been an otter shifter when Nolan claimed her, anyone trying to transition her a second time would kill her.

CHAPTER 20



BRYONY

*S*hit! Waking up after being tranquilized sucked. Bryony didn't open her eyes and tried to give no indication that she was awake. The last thing she remembered was springing toward Jared with the intent to kill him as a lioness. The same lioness that now prowled in the back of her mind, snarling. Bryony opened herself to the bonding link. Right now, the odds were against her, but if somehow Nolan could find her, she knew all would be well.

She vaguely recalled Jared slapping her several times to get her awake enough to shift back to her human form before tying her up naked and tossing her into the back of his SUV and covering her up. Bryony was sure that her comfort had nothing to do with it. He simply didn't want any prying eyes to see a naked woman lying tied up in the back of the SUV.

"Awake yet, princess?" sneered Jared. "I hope you are. We'll be at the cartel's safe house soon. I'd keep the fact that Hamilton claimed you to yourself. Regardless of which Gutierrez ends up with you, neither will want a female they can't breed. For that matter, neither would I. He was your father's enemy."

"But he wasn't my father's rival. Nolan didn't have anything to do with my father's death."

She wasn't asking him a question, not even a rhetorical one. It was a simple statement of fact. Nolan had been right all along; he had no reason to kill her father. Neither did the senior Gutierrez. Her father had died because his second-in-command had betrayed him and because Riccardo Gutierrez

didn't like his bastard son. She would have to think about how she wanted their heads delivered up—on a platter or on spikes.

They pulled off the main highway onto an unpaved road. Bryony was getting tired of being jostled around in uncomfortable positions.

“What’s the matter, Jared? Won’t any respectable hotel take you or your new little buddy?”

“Shut up, bitch. I’m only sorry I didn’t have you that night before you ran.”

“Yeah, that was never going to happen. Either I would have killed you or myself first. But I suppose I do owe you. After all, if you weren’t such a murderous sonofabitch I might never have realized Nolan is my fated mate.”

“You don’t actually believe that romantic drivel, do you?” he snorted.

“I didn’t until this afternoon. I’m going to spend some time researching why otters don’t believe. It’s kind of cool. You see, there’s this link that connects bonded pairs—kind of like a soul-based GPS unit.”

“That’s an old cliché. No one believes it.”

“Maybe not otters, but we lions do. I can feel him closing in on you.” She couldn’t, but Jared had no way of knowing that. “Your best hope of living through this is renting me a nice room, arranging for a masseuse and a nice candlelight dinner for Nolan and me. Then run like hell and pray he’d rather fuck me than kill you. I think it’ll be a hard choice, but I’m pretty sure fucking me will win.”

“Enrique isn’t going to put up with that shit. You’d better figure out how you’re going to keep him from knowing he will never be able to transition you.”

“Yo, *Captain Obvious*, that claiming bite on the back of my neck is going to be a pretty good clue.”

“By then I’ll be long gone. I never intended to stick around for the fireworks. There’s going to be a war—two, in fact. One between Riccardo and Enrique...”

“Trust me, junior doesn’t stand a chance against his old man.”

Jared shifted in his seat. “Shut up,” he said, failing to keep the fear from his voice.

“When the old man finds out what you and his little bastard are up to, he’s going to take both of you out. Who’s the other war going to be between?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he sneered.

The man really had been an imbecile. He was like the proverbial ostrich who stuck his head in the sand and convinced himself there was nothing wrong and nothing to see. The actions, or rather inactions he took, had cost him his life and in making those decisions that had led to his fate, he had not only failed her, but his entire bevy, as well.

“That will kind of depend. If Riccardo is even half as smart as I think he is, he’ll tuck tail and head back for South America. Enrique is going to figure out I’m Nolan’s mate and that you tried to trick him. He won’t survive that understanding, and I doubt you’ll last that long.”

They pulled to a stop. Bryony rolled over and saw what looked to be a well-appointed farmhouse. Given how long they’d driven on the unpaved road, it probably had sizeable acreage, which made sense. The back of the SUV opened, and Enrique’s men saw her lying bound and naked. They began to grunt and squeal in aroused excitement, but they knew better than to touch her.

“You boys might want to run. I killed shit for brains here’s men this afternoon.”

Squeaks of alarm began to resonate through Enrique’s little security entourage.

“Shut up,” Jared said, backhanding her again and adding a gag to her kidnapping ensemble.

Bryony was dragged to her feet and looked up to see Enrique trotting down the stairs with a blanket. “Why is she naked? Did you touch her?” Bryony shook her head violently and before Jared could backhand her again, she side kicked

him in the knee. Enrique smiled a greasy smile, showing his gold front tooth. He reached up and squeezed her breast. “A spirited thing. I shall enjoy taming you to my hand.”

She kicked again, this time missing her mark. Enrique barked angrily. Capybara did not have a wide range of vocal sounds. They didn’t roar, growl or purr. They could bark, make a clicking noise, whine, cry, or whistle—not all that impressive. Even otters had a wider vocabulary of sounds.

From somewhere beyond the clearing, Bryony felt a wave of calm and assurance wash over her. Nolan was here. The odds had just shifted, as she’d known they would.



NOLAN

They had her, but she was alive and unless she’d found a way to deceive the link, she wasn’t afraid—angry and concerned but not afraid. Rolf and Danny were with him. Danny had ensured the chopper couldn’t be stolen. Nolan meant to kill Enrique, his goons, and Pettigrew and leave them all to rot. It was time the cartel got its ass kicked and were made to leave his territory.

Stay alert and watchful, my love. We are here and will have you safe as quickly as we can. He didn’t know if the link was strong enough between them for her to hear his words, but he knew she could feel the soothing vibrations he sent her.

I knew you’d come. There are a total of five outside. She’d heard him and had used the link to let him know.

“There are five outside where she can see them. Danny, go around to the back and clear the house. Rolf and I will go get her.”

“How do you know that?” asked Danny.

“The bonding link between us is strong. Rolf, she is your first and only priority.”

“Understood, Alpha. I will not fail you.”

They were outnumbered, but only by a little bit. The sun was starting to set, and they would have full darkness soon, but Nolan was not inclined to wait. Capybara were nocturnal and so would have as good night vision as he and his men did.

Nolan and his warriors moved silently through the trees—like wraiths through a graveyard. Danny split off to enter the farmhouse from the back. He would clear the lower floor and take up a position that would have Nolan and Rolf covered and keep them from being flanked. Speed, stealth, and strength would see them victorious.

All three men had clothes in the chopper, with some for Bryony and Heath, as well. Taking cover in the dense foliage, they positioned themselves so they could charge Enrique, Pettigrew, and their minions from two different sides. Each man called his lion forward, suppressing the urge to announce their presence as they most often did with a vicious snarl.

When Nolan saw the enormous shape of Rolf in his lion form, he nodded once before splitting the dusk with a mighty roar. They'd been able to get close enough that two men went down—one each from Nolan and Rolf—before any of those being attacked knew it was happening. Rolf charged the man holding Bryony who shoved her at the bounding lion. Bryony must have recognized Rolf but refused to be separated from the fight.

She moved a short distance away and Nolan watched as she called her lioness forward and rushed Pettigrew. Rolf went after the man who stood between Bryony and her intended target as a shot rang out and a man who'd been hiding on the roof slid down the shingles and onto the ground. Realizing the outcome was inevitable, Enrique Gutierrez made a mad dash towards the woods.

Not a chance, you nasty little rodent. Nolan charged after him and heard Bryony cry out as if she was hurt. Nolan hesitated.

He heard her response barrel down the link: *I'm fine. Kill that little bastard.*

Heath was right. His mate tended to be a little on the blood-thirsty side. She was magnificent. Nolan bounded after Enrique. Another roar and Pettigrew and the only remaining goons with him cried out as they, too, fell. Nolan wasn't sure who'd killed them and didn't much care. He just wanted them dead.

Enrique was crashing through the dense undergrowth with all the stealth of an enraged elephant. Unfortunately for him, he was no elephant—just a very big rodent. He didn't even have the brains to shift and try to get away. It wouldn't have worked, but it would have beat running through the forest, screaming like a small child who'd lost its mother. Only this was a sociopath with a violent streak.

At the edge of the river, Enrique came to a screeching halt and turned, firing his gun into the woods behind him, aiming for and hitting nothing. Nolan crouched down behind a large fallen tree and waited for Enrique to empty the gun. Frozen heat played along his skin, enraging and soothing him in a rhythmic duet. His senses were on high alert. He could easily see Enrique and the stench of fear rolled off the younger Gutierrez's body. He could taste the humidity in the air and fireflies buzzed and popped all around him.

When the automatic pistol was out of ammo, Enrique threw it at the forest behind him. Either the idiot didn't know where Nolan was, or he had a lousy throwing arm. Nolan waited, dragging his tail slowly back and forth while he waited for the perfect opportunity. He didn't want to sneak up on Enrique, although he could have. No, he wanted him to know that death came to him on four paws with sharp claws and a mouth that was wide-open to show his sharpened fangs.

Enrique saw him crawl out of the undergrowth. The man looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Only Enrique was no deer, and Nolan was no car. Snarling and gnashing his teeth together, Nolan sprang forward, covering the ground so fast that Enrique did not have time to scream.

Nolan hit him with such force, that instead of tearing Enrique's throat open, he ripped his head from his shoulders. Nolan never took pleasure from killing, but he had to admit,

this one bothered him a little less than most. Grabbing his prey's head by his greasy hair, Nolan loped up to where Bryony waited. He dropped the head of Riccardo Gutierrez's son at her feet and then rubbed his head against hers. It was done.

Danny had already retreated to the waiting helicopter and when the others came into view, he handed them clothing into which to change. Nolan barely had time to pull on his jeans when Bryony came running around the front of the chopper and threw herself into his arms. He dropped the sweater he had in his hands and clung to her.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you. I love you. Please tell me you can forgive me and it's not too late for us." she said, the words tumbling out like an avalanche, gaining speed as they left her mouth.

"You are my fated mate. It will never be too late. Can I hear you say that again?"

"I'm sorry?" she asked, concerned.

"No, after that."

Recognition dawned. "I shouldn't have left you."

"No, after that."

"Oh, the I love you thing."

"Bingo, that's the one," he said as his mouth swooped down to capture hers in a fiercely passionate kiss.

"Alpha," said Rolf. "I hate to interfere..."

"Then don't," he growled, pulling Bryony closer and looking her over when she winced.

There was blood staining the shirt she had on. "It's nothing."

"It is not nothing when you're bleeding," he snarled.

"A bullet grazed her. I can get her bandaged up once we are in the air."

"Rolf is right. I want to get us up and out of here."

Nolan nodded and helped Bryony into her seat, taking the co-pilot seat so Rolf could tend to her wound. Danny had already radioed Heath to update him. Heath was staying at Fern Hill to make sure the clean-up efforts went smoothly, and that Mandy wasn't being adversely affected.

"Nolan, she wants to speak to Bryony. It is the only thing that has concerned her. Sasha came with me so she could be with Mandy. Even with Sasha's assurances..."

Bryony took the phone from Nolan's hand. "Heath? It's Bryony. Let me talk to her."

"Are you all right?" Mandy asked.

"I am. In fact, I'm happier than I have ever been. You can expect more help from our people in the future. Nolan is grateful you gave me a soft place to land. There were some bad men after me and I was afraid they would hurt Nolan or our people. Instead of talking to him, I got all bent out of shape and ran. Stupid I know, but he has been gracious enough to forgive me."

"If you're sure..."

"I am. I promise as much, and I promise you haven't seen the last of me."

They talked for a few minutes more before Bryony handed the phone back to Nolan, who spoke quickly with Heath before changing places with Rolf.

"So, she can expect financial and other help from me?"

"From us, and you should know she was already getting some help from some of our lionesses."

"I am aware and have been for many years. I will say again, there is little that goes on in our territory of which I am unaware." Nolan dialed another number. "Is this the Ritz-Carlton? I need to speak to one of your guests, Riccardo Gutierrez." [PAUSE] "This is Nolan Hamilton." [PAUSE] Nolan chuckled. "Thank you for the message. It is most appreciated."

He was still chuckling when he tossed the phone to Rolf. “Let our people know we’re headed home.”

“What did the Ritz tell you that was so funny?” asked Bryony.

“It seems about the time I was ending junior’s life, senior was leaving town. He wanted me to know he had been assured the rental was cleaned up and left in pristine condition, and that he and his associates would not be in the St. Louis or East St. Louis area again.”

“In other words, he’s tucked tail and run.”

“Rolf, call Bodie Lambeau. Let him know what happened. Unless I miss my guess, New Orleans is the last place Gutierrez can get a foothold in America. Let Bodie know he has our support if he needs it.”

Bryony wrapped her arms around his neck. “Um, you do know I’m the only one who’s used the L word, right? I hear all this talk about fated mates and nothing about love. For a guy who considers himself a big romantic...”

He silenced her with another fiery kiss. “I love you, Bryony, but if you ever run away from home again, I’ll make sure you don’t sit for a week.”

“That’s it?” she asked. “We run the bad guys out of town, and we get our own happily ever after?”

“Kind of anticlimactic, isn’t it?”

Bryony nodded as she turned around in her seat so she could lean up against him. He wrapped his arms around her and purred softly as Danny flew them off into the sunset towards home. There was a lot of work to do to unite two separate species into one working clan, but they could do it. If he could make a believer out of Bryony and defeat the cartel, he could do anything.

“I love you, Bryony.”

“I heard,” she said, the soft smile evident in her voice. “I love you, too. Let’s go home and be stupidly happy, shall we?”

“We shall,” he promised her, “we shall.”

EPILOGUE



BODIE

*B*odie Lambeau hung up the phone. So, Riccardo Gutierrez was zip for two. Twice he'd tried to set himself up as a force to be reckoned with, and to bring in and sell some new form of death into the United States. Twice he had failed. Both Nolan Hamilton and Randall Beckett had taken him on and flushed him from their territories like you'd flush a turd down the toilet. Both men had warned him that his home, New Orleans, was the most likely entry port for Gutierrez to try next.

His plan was to manufacture a new kissing cousin to ecstasy in South America, smuggle it in through the port in New Orleans, and then use the Mississippi River to transport it to distribution stations all through the Midwest.

Well, not on my watch.



Thank you for reading Stroke of Fortune. I hope you loved it. Next is the last book in the series, [Twist of Fate](#).

Available for Preorder [HERE](#)

BONUS SCENE



Thank you again for reading *Stroke of Fortune* (Syndicate Masters: Midwest)! I have enjoyed writing these mafia shifters. I wrote the first one on a lark and now I can't believe how many books are in the series. We head over to New Orleans next with Bodie and Quinn's story in *Twist of Fate*. He is focused on keeping drugs out of his territory and then she shows up. Watch out for the fireworks.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Bryony and Nolan 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!

[SIGN UP HERE](#)



ALSO BY DELTA JAMES

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Mystic River Shifters (small town shifter)

[Defiant Mate](#)

[Savage Mate](#)

[Reckless Mate](#)

[Shameless Mate](#)

[Runaway Mate](#)

Otter Cover Shifters (small town shifters/ spinoff Mystic River)

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[The Bargain](#)

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[The Understanding](#)

The Pledge

Box Set

Looking Glass Multiverse

Shifted Reality

Shifted Existence

Shifted Dimension

Box Set

Reign of Fire

Dragon Storm

Dragon Roar

Dragon Fury

Masters of Valor (spin off Masters of the Savoy)

Prophecy

Illusion

Deception

Inheritance

Masters of the Savoy

Advance

Negotiation

Submission

Contract

Bound

Release

Ghost Cat Canyon

Determined

Untamed

Bold

Fearless

Strong

Fated Legacy (spin-off Tangled Vines)

Touch of Fate

Touch of Darkness

Touch of Light

Touch of Fire

Touch of Ice

Touch of Destiny

Tangled Vines (spin-off Wayward Mates)

Corked

Uncorked

Decanted

Breathe

Full Bodied

Late Harvest

Mulled Wine

Wayward Mates

In Vino Veritas

Brought to Heel

Marked and Mated

Mastering His Mate

Taking His Mate

Claimed and Mated

Claimed and Mastered

Hunted and Claimed

Captured and Claimed

Contemporary Suspense

Relentless Pursuit (Duet)

To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Club Southside (spinoff Mercenary Masters)

The Scoundrel

The Scavenger

The Sentinel

Mercenary Masters

Devil Dog

Alpha Dog

Bull Dog

Top Dog

[Big Dog](#)

[Sea Dog](#)

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Marked and Mated

Mastering His Mate

Taking His Mate
Claimed and Mated
Claimed and Mastered
Hunted and Claimed
Captured and Claimed

Alpha Lords

Warlord
Overlord
Wolford
Fated
Dragonlord

Co-writes

Masters of the Deep

Silent Predator
Fierce Predator
Savage Predator
Wicked Predator
Deadly Predator

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

Delta loves connecting with her readers and tries to respond personally to as many messages as she can! You can find her on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/DeltaJamesAuthor> and in her reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

If you're looking for your next bingeable series, you can get a FREE story by joining her newsletter <https://www.subscribepage.com/VIPlist22019>.

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