



**TRENT**  
OUTBACK SHIFTERS

ZOE CHANT

TRENT

# OUTBACK SHIFTERS BOOK FOUR

ZOE CHANT

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## THE OUTBACK SHIFTERS SERIES

This book is a standalone with an HEA. However, it's also the fourth in a series with each book focusing on a different couple. They can be read in any order, but reading the series in order is recommended for maximum enjoyment!

1. [Outback Shifters: Hector](#)
2. [Outback Shifters: Callan](#)
3. [Outback Shifters: Euan](#)
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- 5: Outback Shifters: Rhys - COMING SOON!

You can also grab the first three books here in one convenient collection:

[Outback Shifters: Collection One](#)

## PROLOGUE

*B*reathe in, breathe out. Just be calm. No one knows.

Zina Alden kept her eyes focused in front of her, a look of cool professionalism on her face. No one really smiled around here – it was something she’d learned pretty early on, and to be honest, it *did* make her life a whole lot easier. Neutral was a lot easier to fake than happy.

Her heels clicked on the floor as she made her way down the corridor, walking neither too slow nor too fast. She had to look like she was *supposed* to be here – and to be fair, the ID tag hanging off her suit collar did give her permission to be on this floor of the building. She’d slowly climbed the ranks of Hargreaves Inc. over the past five years – she’d joined as a data analyst, but she’d been promoted quickly once people had realized where her *true* skills lay: in hacking and digital espionage.

Of course, Hargreaves had done a thorough background check before they’d hired her, so they’d already known about her skill set. Hiring in such a low-level position had just been a way of testing the waters with her – finding out whether she was a good *fit* for Hargreaves Inc.’s work.

*Of course, none of that was real, though.*

Well, her actual *skills* were real enough. But the background info Hargreaves had dug up on her life definitely wasn’t.

She’d never been to prison for hacking into any major bank’s databases and wreaking havoc on their systems. She’d

never, just for fun, snooped around in the FBI's computer system. Though she *had* actually been thrown out of college for messing around with an entire year level's admissions forms – but that had been a youthful prank to show off to a friend, and she'd been planning on putting everything back how she found it, but the system had unexpectedly thrown her out before she'd had the chance! So that *really* hadn't been her fault.

That was how these things worked, though – you sprinkled a little truth in with the lies. Just enough to remember who you really were.

She nodded briefly at a couple of men in lab coats as they wandered past her, but they didn't look up from where they were discussing whatever was written on their clipboards.

Reaching up, Zina ran a hand through her hair, even though it was pulled back into a tight bun, not a strand out of place. It was a nervous gesture, but she knew stopping halfway through would make her look even *more* suspicious.

*All right. Here we go. Not much farther now.*

Soon, she'd be finished, and out of here.

But she knew that that was only the beginning. It was what came *after* that was going to be the hard part.

Making her way unhurriedly around a bend in the corridor, Zina came to a large, metal door, locked and sealed, a fingerprint scanner the only way to get through the door to what was on the other side. A sign, white with massive red lettering, read *AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY*.

Zina was definitely *not* authorized – but that was something she could fake. 3D printers could work wonders these days, after all, and it hadn't taken much to get what she needed.

She'd quickly established herself as someone who didn't mind getting her senior colleagues a coffee or two if they looked strung out. So it hadn't struck anyone as odd when she'd started grabbing coffee cups from desks over the past few weeks, asking if anyone wanted her to go fill them up.



People left their fingerprints all *over* their coffee mugs, of course – they were there for her to painstakingly lift, using Hargreaves’s own technology against it.

It’d taken *weeks* for her to get a clear enough print for her to use: one she could lift from a cup, scan, and then use a 3D printer to create a false fingertip from.

She didn’t know if it’d work, though – the fake fingerprint was rubber, after all. The 3D printer was precise – it needed to be, since it was usually used to create machine and weapons parts, where even a fraction of a millimeter could mean the difference between success and disaster – but Zina had never tried to use one like this before. It was possible the scanner would recognize the material as rubber, and not human skin. It was possible the print was blurry in some way she hadn’t noticed when she’d been examining it. It was possible that when she laid it down on the scanner it would trip an alarm, and everything Zina had worked for would be for nothing.

*Okay. Okay. Calm down. Don’t think like that. Don’t think about it until it happens.*

Zina let out a long, slow breath. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a tiny plastic bag and a tiny pair of tweezers.

Keeping her breathing even, she opened the bag and, using the tweezers, reached inside and pulled out a thin sliver of rubber – the fake fingerprint.

With intense concentration, she laid the print down over her own right index finger, before putting the bag and tweezers back inside her pocket.

*All right. Well, I guess it’s now or never.*

Licking her lips, Zina pressed her finger down on the scanner.

Nothing happened.

Not at first, anyway. The scanner blinked, indicating it was scanning – or it was *trying* to, anyway. Something didn’t seem quite right, though, and the blinking lights just kept flashing, as if the machine was confused.

Zina held her breath.

*Come on, come on*, she thought, resisting the urge to jerk her hand away and run back the way she'd come. There weren't alarms going off yet – well, none that she could *hear*, anyway – so she couldn't give up.

The scanner flickered again, clearly *trying* to scan the fingerprint she'd given it – and just as Zina was about to give up hope and snatch her hand away, it blinked green, greeting her with the message *WELCOME, DR. SUMNER*.

Well, she definitely wasn't Doctor Sumner – Doctor Sumner was probably up on the fifth floor, enjoying a coffee and none the wiser his fingerprints were being used to break into his own laboratory.

Zina took a deep breath as the doors opened before her. She stepped into the lab.

The room was dimly lit, but that only made it easier to find what she was looking for. The glow of a warm, red light over by the far wall told her all she needed to know.

Zina was used to danger. She was used to having to put on a calm face, no matter what was happening around her. But as she took the first few steps across the room, there was nothing she could do to stop her racing heart, or stop the slight shake in her fingers.

*Okay*, she thought, as she tried to tell herself to just keep breathing in and out, slow and deep and even. *Remember. This is where the hard part starts.*

## CHAPTER 1

Being called into the boss's office first thing in the morning was *never* a good thing.

It didn't matter how much Trent Bowman tried to fortify himself with coffee, it didn't make the sinking feeling in his stomach get any better. It also didn't matter that, unlike in the past, he *really* couldn't think of anything he'd done recently to warrant getting such a summons, completely out of the blue like this.

Trent was more than willing to admit that in the past, he'd occasionally been a little... unorthodox in his approach to missions – but Trent kind of thought that when you were an operative of a highly specialized, highly trained undercover agency, whose sole purpose was to take down some of the nastier shifter criminals out there, *unorthodox* was sometimes required.

And it wasn't like he'd ever actually *failed* a mission, even if it had been a near-run thing at times. And he'd never actually broken any laws or done anything totally inexcusable, either morally or legally! Occasionally he'd had to put a few creative omissions in his mission reports to avoid the wrath of his higher-ups. But it wasn't like they'd ever find out about those, right?

*Right?*

Trent stared down at his coffee as it bubbled happily out of the espresso machine.

*I wonder what the statute of limitations on stealing a ferry is?*

He'd put the ferry back where he'd found it – no one even knew it had gone anywhere in the first place. So no harm done, right?

Swallowing, Trent plugged a second espresso pod into the machine, making another cup of coffee. It couldn't hurt to front up to the boss's office with a pre-emptive peace offering, right? No one could get *that* angry when presented with a piping hot coffee, right?

Trent glanced over his shoulder as the espresso machine bubbled. Eight fifty-eight a.m. He'd been told to present himself at nine. No more time to put things off.

Sighing, Trent picked up both coffees and made his way down the hall to where his boss, Robb Lockwood, had his office. There were no other staff in the office at the moment, and Trent couldn't help but think Robb had wanted it that way so he could yell as hard as he wanted without causing a disturbance to the usual office goings-on.

Not that Robb ever really *yelled* at anyone, Trent thought as he jostled the coffee cups, trying to hold them both in one hand so he could use the other to knock on Robb's office door. He was much more of an *I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed* kind of guy – which, as anyone could tell you, was much, *much* worse.

“Come in, Trent.”

Robb's voice sounded from the other side of the door before Trent had even finished lifting his free hand to knock.

“Uh. Right,” Trent said, juggling his coffee mugs back into two hands, before pressing the door handle down with his elbow. Okay, so a little coffee had slopped down the side of the mug now – but it was the thought that counted, right?

Robb certainly didn't seem to appreciate the thought at all, though, when Trent finally did enter his office and put the mug down on his desk.

“Just some hot coffee for you, Boss,” Trent said chirpily, hoping Robb wouldn’t notice the way the coffee he’d spilled down the side was now seeping into the wood of his desk. “Take the edge off these early morning meetings.”

Instead of saying anything, Robb just stared at it as if he didn’t know what it was, but was pretty certain he didn’t like it.

*Not a good sign.*

“I see.” When he did finally speak, Robb’s voice was totally emotionless. He *did* pick up the coffee mug, but it was only to put a coaster under it. “Sit down, Trent.”

Trent sat. He did his best to look relaxed, and not like he was expecting to get the bollocking of a lifetime for some as yet unknown transgression that perhaps Robb had only just now found out about. There might be a statute of limitations on stealing giant boats, but Trent was pretty sure there was no limit to Robb getting angry about it.

*We had a very good reason for stealing that boat,* Trent’s inner kangaroo spoke up.

*Maybe we did, but if it comes to that, let’s just take it on the chin and not make excuses, all right?* Trent told it – sometimes, the best way to get through these kinds of meetings was just a quick, *Yes, Boss. I’m sorry, Boss. It won’t happen again, Boss.*

Trent waited, but Robb didn’t seem in any hurry to get started. Instead, he turned in his large, leather chair, gazing out of his office window and over the Sydney skyline, out to where the water sparkled in the early morning sunshine.

Finally, his mouth flattening into a long, thin line, Robb turned back to his desk, taking out a piece of paper from a stack to his right. He pushed it across the dark wood to Trent, his finger tapping on the photo on the upper left-hand side.

“Zina Alden,” Robb said, as he took his finger away. “Does that name ring any bells to you?”

Trent sucked in a quick, harsh breath, his blood running cold in his veins. He glanced down at the photo, blinking.

*It's her.*

Of course it was her. He'd know her anywhere – it didn't matter how much time had passed, every detail of her features was engraved on his memory, set down in stone.

There was nothing stony about the face of the woman in the photo, though – she was beautiful. High, wide cheekbones; full, pillowy lips. She wasn't smiling in the photo, but her ebony eyes held a hint of laughter. Her hair was pulled back, but Trent could still see the springy curls where they fell down past her shoulders behind her.

*Of course that name rings a bell to me.*

“Zina Alden,” he said, forcing his eyes back up to Robb's face. He couldn't tell if Robb had clocked his reaction to the sound of Zina's name and the sight of her face. Given how sharp he was, it seemed likely. But at the moment, he was still simply regarding him quietly, his expression unreadable. “Yeah, maybe a little bell, right at the back of my mind.” He swallowed. “Why? Should it mean something to me?”

Robb didn't answer right away. He seemed to be thinking something over.

“Hmm,” he finally said, after a long, painful pause. “Well, you've met her before.”

*I know I have,* Trent thought, trying not to let the thought show on his face. *I'd never forget about that.*

“Righto,” he said, nodding. “I meet a lot of people. Want to give me a hint?”

Robb cocked his head, his eyes sharp enough to drill little holes right into Trent's head. “Think back. London. About three years ago. You were on a mission there.”

Trent did his best to look like remembrance had suddenly hit him. “Oh! *Right.* The American – I remember now.”

“Caused you a bit of trouble as I recall, if your mission report was anything to go by.”

“Nothing I couldn't handle.” Trent shrugged, to – hopefully – cover up the fact that his heart was beating at

double time, his inner kangaroo lifting its head and twitching its ears frantically.

*What's this?* it asked, instincts going into overdrive. *What's this about our* –

Trent gritted his teeth, shoving it down inside him, ignoring its furious grunts and the angry kicking of its back legs.

“She sounded like a tough one,” Robb said, raising an eyebrow.

“She was good, I’ll give her that,” Trent said cautiously. “But that was three years ago. Why are you asking me about this now?”

Robb’s lips pressed even more tightly and thinly together, if that was even possible.

He didn’t answer in words – he simply pulled another piece of paper from the stack to his left and pushed it across the desk toward Trent.

Trent looked down at it – and felt his heart stop.

It was another photo of Zina Alden, though in this one she looked different – her hair was shorter, chopped to shoulder length, and all the laughter was gone from her eyes. But the main difference was that the words *BURN NOTICE* were written in large, black letters across the bottom of her photo, just below her chin.

There was some text below the photo, presumably detailing just why Zina had been burned, but Trent couldn’t say he was really in much of a mind to take any notice of it.

He stared at the photo, then at the words stamped across her photo. A burn notice was serious – it meant the agency Zina worked for had completely disavowed her, and had informed every other intelligence agency out there that she wasn’t to be trusted. Nothing she said or did should be considered reliable.

In other words, she’d been dismissed as an agent: she’d done something bad enough that her agency was willing to

throw her to the wolves, and offer her absolutely no protection now that her identity was known.

She was fair game for whoever wanted to take a shot.

Trent glanced up at Robb. Distantly, he was aware that his mouth had gone completely dry, his breath shallow in his throat. Cold sweat had broken out across the back of his neck.

Swallowing, he forced himself to get his bodily reactions under control.

*You shouldn't be under control*, his kangaroo argued, forcing its way back to the forefront of his consciousness. *You should be going mad, you should be fighting, you should be trying to find her* –

“So... this is serious, isn't it?” Trent said, doing what he could to ignore its harangue. No matter how he felt, he couldn't do anything until he found out more about what was actually going on here – why an agent who had seemed as competent, trustworthy and reliable as Zina had been burned by her agency.

Robb nodded. “About as serious as it gets.” He leaned back in his chair, eyes still trained on Trent's face. “It's a burn notice, which is bad enough. But I was able to ring around to a few contacts and find out some more information about why it was issued. It's not just that this Zina Alden is considered unreliable – it's that she's gone rogue.”

Trent stared at him, hardly able to believe his ears. “Gone rogue?”

Robb nodded. “She disappeared from her assignment without any permission to do so. No one knows where she is, or why. All they know is that when she left, she took a briefcase full of classified documents with her. Not to mention the fact she's got a head full of top-secret information she could sell off to the highest bidder – *if* that's what she was inclined to do.”

Trent didn't fail to notice the slight emphasis on the word *if*. As if Robb wasn't *quite* convinced by whatever information he'd managed to squeeze out of his mysterious sources.



“She wouldn’t.” The words were out of Trent’s mouth before he could stop them. He swallowed, gritting his teeth, wishing he could pull the words back out of the air, but it was too late now.

Robb raised an eyebrow. “You seem very certain about that. How could you possibly know?”

*Because I know her, Trent thought. Because I know who she is, right down to her soul. Because she’s my –*

“She just didn’t strike me as that type,” Trent said, shrugging.

“Did she strike you as the type to go rogue, then?” Robb asked, voice quiet.

Trent sucked in a quick, angry breath, before forcing himself to calm down. “No,” he admitted. “But are they completely sure that’s what’s happened?”

“Sure enough that they’re willing to issue one of these,” Robb said, gesturing down to the burn notice. He cocked his head. “And before you were acting like you barely knew her – I had to remind you of her name. You seem *very* sure you know who she is now.”

“I –” Trent began, before cutting himself off, taking a deep breath. “I remember her now,” he started again. “She seemed... reliable, when I met her. Dedicated to getting the job done. Pretty sure she would’ve cut me down if I’d gotten in her way.”

Robb was silent. He turned his head to look out the window again, at the sun glittering on the sea.

“I asked you in here because you’re the only person here who’s ever met her,” he said after a pause. “I just wanted to get your thoughts on the situation. And to ask you whether she might’ve let anything slip – anything you thought was strange or unusual at the time.”

“It was three years ago, boss,” Trent said. “And it wasn’t like we had much time for a friendly chat.”

*I barely had enough time to figure out she was my mate, Trent thought, almost surprised at the sudden, searing pain that tore its way through his heart. That was three years ago, and then she disappeared off the face of the earth. This is the first time I've seen her since then.*

After all this time, it seemed like the pain should have numbed a bit – but he should have known that you never got used to the pain of having found your mate, only to lose her again.

He stared down at the photo of Zina Alden on the burn notice. Robb had said her agency believed she'd gone rogue – that she'd disappeared with the intention of selling off her knowledge of intelligence and government secrets to the highest bidder.

*I don't believe it, he told himself firmly. I don't think that's what happened at all.*

But it wouldn't do any good to *say* that, Trent knew. Robb might've been willing to believe him, but Trent also knew that telling Robb that Zina Alden was his mate would put Robb in a very tricky position. If he was asked, he might feel duty-bound to tell his own higher-ups about it. And besides the fact Trent didn't want to cause him the dilemma, he refused to let himself be used to potentially hurt Zina. No matter what.

*Something's wrong here. I know she'd never do what she's being accused of doing. I don't know what's going on, but I know it's not good.*

He couldn't believe it. He'd only known Zina for a short amount of time, but that was what being someone's mate *was*. It was knowing who they were, no matter how short of a time you knew them for. It was knowing they were *meant* for you, just like you were meant for them.

Trent narrowed his eyes as he raised them to look at Robb from across the desk. "Is there any other reason I'm being asked all this stuff?"

"Not really," Robb said blandly, returning Trent's stare. "Like I said, you're the only one here who's ever actually *met*

Zina Alden – an agent who, according to you, is very competent and possibly dangerous –”

“I never said –” Trent said, feeling his ears heat up in anger.

“Saying an agent is competent is saying they’re dangerous,” Robb interrupted him icily. “She had access to who knows what secrets, and she has the means to create any false identity she wants.” Robb’s mouth tightened as he paused, eyes narrowing. “And the last our US friends were able to discern, she seemed to be heading here.”

Trent blinked. “Here?”

“To Australia,” Robb clarified. “Where she has no links at all. That anyone knows about.”

*Except that at one point, she met you.*

Trent could feel Robb’s unspoken words hanging in the air between them. He swallowed heavily, picking his words carefully.

“Maybe that’s exactly *why* she’s coming here?” he suggested. “Exactly *because* she has no links here? In that case, why would anyone suspect it, as opposed to somewhere she has known associates?”

Robb leaned back in his chair. “Maybe so,” he said, after a long pause.

Trent could feel the seconds ticking by as Robb gazed at him, his expression totally unreadable.

“Well. I’m sorry I couldn’t be more helpful,” Trent said finally, doing his best not to fidget. He felt like he often felt when subjected to Robb’s scrutiny: like he was Frodo Baggins doing his best to evade the eye of Sauron.

“Apparently not.” Robb’s tone was neutral, but his eyes were hard. Clearly, he suspected Trent knew more than he was letting on – but Robb hadn’t gotten to where he was by being easy to put one over on, Trent supposed. He guessed he should just feel lucky that Robb had chosen not to force the issue – for now, anyway.

“Can I go, then?” he asked hopefully, cocking his head. “I swear if I think of something, you’ll be the first to know.”

Robb stared at him a moment longer, before giving a quick, slight nod of his head. “All right.”

Trent stood up gratefully, almost forgetting his cup of coffee in his haste to get out of his boss’s sight.

Still, he didn’t feel completely comfortable, even when the office door was firmly closed behind him. Somehow, he felt Robb was watching him, even through the solid wood of the door.

But that feeling paled in comparison to the roaring unease that was tearing through his gut. A feeling that no shifter could help but feel when they knew their mate was in trouble.

*We have to find her and help her,* Trent’s kangaroo insisted – he felt like it was kicking at him, tearing at his chest with the claws on its powerful hind legs in its state of agitation. It was clear that it had gotten sick of being ignored, and it wasn’t going to let him push it away anymore.

*I know we do,* he told it sharply, shaking his head to try to clear it of the kangaroo’s frantic, aggressive insistence. *But when I do, it has to actually help her. Not land her in more trouble than she’s already in. No matter why she’s in it.*

Despite its fury, the kangaroo actually seemed to see the sense in that. It backed off slightly, narrowing its eyes.

*I don’t know how you can be so calm when our mate needs us,* it said accusingly. *Our mate needs us, and you’re drinking disgusting caffeinated water –*

*Don’t you think I want to help her as much as you do?* Trent asked it, cutting it off angrily. To be honest, sometimes sharing his head with a massive, prehistoric kangaroo was like sharing a house with a belligerent housemate: it wanted everything done the *exact* way it wanted it done, and it wanted it done *now*.

Thankfully, he’d learned how to reason with it over the years, otherwise he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t have just given up

his shifter heritage and buried the animal so far in his psyche he never heard from it again.

“I need some time to think,” he muttered, as he headed down the corridor. If Robb’s friends were right and Zina *was* in Australia, then that was good. At least he wouldn’t have to think up some excuse to head overseas to go looking for her.

*But there’s just one problem. Well, two problems.*

The first problem was that Australia was a big country, and Zina could be literally anywhere.

The second was that, while Trent knew down to his bones that Zina Alden was his mate, she didn’t seem to know at all that *he was hers*.

## CHAPTER 2

*Three years earlier – in London*

Trent glanced up, watching as the last office worker rose from his desk, stretched, and then started shrugging on his heavy winter coat.

He'd been undercover here, posing as a cleaner, for the last four weeks. He'd been given the new name of Tony Landers, a totally clean background, and the credentials to spend his evenings here dumping rubbish out of people's desk bins, running a vacuum over the carpet, and scrubbing the toilets. It was hardly the most glamorous of assignments, but then, one thing he'd quickly had to learn about this job was that it was ninety percent waiting around for something to happen, and only ten percent things actually *happening*.

*Well, at least something's going to happen tonight*, Trent thought, shaking out the rubbish from a desk bin into the bag he was carrying as the office worker ambled his way toward the exit. He'd finally gotten word that it was time to make a move.

It was funny how appearances could be deceiving – this place might *look* like any other completely ordinary office, albeit with some pretty slick, modern interiors and some pretty fancy hardware sitting on the desks for what was supposedly an accountancy firm. And there was no doubt most of the people here *had* been hired as accountants and staff, and

probably had absolutely no idea what this company – Equitix Accounting – sidelined in.

But what they were, was a very, very high-end fencing organization – or in other words, a company that bought stolen goods and sold them on to the highest bidder.

But instead of laptops, cheap jewelry, handguns and stolen cars, this place specialized in something a little more, well, *special*.

Instead of laptops, they dealt with hard drives full of state secrets. Instead of cheap jewelry, they dealt with priceless museum pieces. Instead of handguns, they sold things like rocket launchers, missiles, and torpedoes, and instead of stolen cars it was tanks, and even the odd submarine.

None of this was in Trent's usual wheelhouse – this was all stuff for human law enforcement to deal with, and his work dealt strictly with shifters and shifter crimes. The only reason he was here was because Equitix, knowingly or unknowingly, had gotten its hands on something that very much concerned shifters: a hard drive with the name and location of almost every undercover shifter agent around the world, from every country.

Obviously, it was something people were extremely keen not to have fall into the wrong hands – and in this case, *the wrong hands* was almost everybody.

Trent hadn't been briefed on whether the people at Equitix knew that shifters existed, or whether they simply thought it was a list of government secret agents. No one was sure who they'd bought it from. The only thing anyone knew was that they had to stop them from selling it.

And that was what Trent was here to do.

After a lot of careful surveillance, the location of the hard drive had been narrowed down to this office building – carefully locked away in the most high-tech safe money could buy, waiting for a buyer with deep enough pockets to afford what Trent was sure was Equitix's outrageous asking price.

For the four weeks since he'd been hired he'd been scoping this place out, watching everything, memorizing every schedule, every hallway, every nook and cranny of the building, putting a 'face', so to speak, to the blueprints and schematics he'd pored over before ever coming here. Being a shifter helped – even in human form, he was faster than any human could hope to be, had better senses, and possessed a preternatural sense for danger. That was possibly where being a prehistoric giant kangaroo came in handy – a sense for danger was a necessary part of survival.

This was one job, however, where he'd be using his technical know-how a lot more than his shifter abilities, at least when it came down to the brass tacks of the operation. Kangaroo paws weren't exactly useful when it came to safecracking.

Trent whistled a little tune as he moved on to the next desk, checking underneath it for the rubbish bin. There was no one left here now who'd get annoyed about it, after all – as soon as this last guy clocked out, Trent would be on his own. The guy, however, didn't seem to be in any hurry, loitering in the office kitchen, getting himself a glass of water or something.

*Can't get impatient*, Trent told himself as he carried on whistling, moving easily between the rows of desks as if he didn't have a care in the world. Impatience was death at times like these. It could only lead to mistakes. He had... well, not all the time in the world, but enough that he didn't need to raise anyone's suspicions by hurrying.

All he needed to do was wait, and –

A movement in the shadows by the far wall caught his eye, and he turned in time to see the woman who came to water and tend the office plants wheeling her trolley down the aisle across from him.

She wasn't too personable, but Trent liked her anyway – well, he thought she was *very* nice to look at, with her long black hair and dark eyes, and he thought her American accent



was pretty cute, as well. She was usually finished up by this time, though – maybe she was doing a later shift?

“Hey, Laura, what’s up?” he called to her, lifting a hand to wave at her cheerfully. She never really seemed to be that into his attempts to make small talk, but then, Trent couldn’t blame her. All she’d told him about herself was that she was from New York – not even which *bit* of New York! Though it wasn’t as if they could really become friends – he wasn’t who she thought he was, after all, and after tonight, they’d never see each other again.

Laura gave him a quick, perfunctory nod in return. “Hey.”

“On late tonight?”

“Something like that. I had a fresh consignment of potted palms to organize up on the seventh floor,” Laura said as she watered a fern, just one of dozens that stood in stands around the desks. The office *was* really nice after all, and the plants helped contribute to a healthy work environment, or so Trent had read in the company’s onboarding literature.

“Lucky seventh floor,” Trent said lackadaisically as he emptied another bin, keeping one eye on the man in the kitchen. *Finally* he seemed to be finishing up whatever he was doing in there and was starting on his way out, rolling his shoulders and yawning as he went.

Trent hadn’t counted on Laura working late tonight, though – obviously, it’d be better if there was no one here when he went to crack the safe. Just how far back had her schedule been pushed, anyway?

“Tough break for you though, working so late,” he continued after a moment. “You won’t have to stay back too much, though, will you?”

Laura shrugged. “Hopefully not.”

“I can imagine someone like you must have a lot to do of an evening.”

“Imagine all you want.”

Trent sighed internally. All right – he could tell when someone wanted him to shut up. If Laura didn't want to be charmed by his friendly overtures – and so far, she definitely didn't, not even when he'd brought her hot chocolate and oliebollen, one late night worker to another – then he wasn't going to push it.

He moved down the line of desks, still whistling. He glanced at the clock. He really ought to get moving, but he was extremely reluctant to make a move while Laura was still here. He was confident in his abilities, but this was risky business – if he *did* happen to trip a silent alarm or bring a bunch of security guards down on his head, he'd really rather not have a civilian in the building when it happened. The kind of guys who were likely to show up were definitely of the 'shoot now, ask questions later' variety.

Laura was still checking the plants, now trimming a few dead leaves and stems with a pair of clippers. She looked engrossed in her work, and not inclined to finish up particularly swiftly.

*Come on, come on! How much maintenance could one plant need?!*

Trent ran a dust cloth over a few computer monitors, stalling a little, glancing across at Laura every now and then. It wasn't that he *mind*ed having her to look at – the opposite, in fact – but why had it had to be *today* of all days that she'd had to stay back late? Or seemed to need to pay *extra* close attention to watering the giant fern in the corner?

"Are you staying back late yourself?" The sound of Laura's voice made him pause. Given how coldly she'd cut him off before, he was a little surprised she'd struck up the conversation again.

"Well, you know – I got rapped on the knuckles last week for leaving dust around. I don't want to deal with that again," Trent laughed, even though no such thing had happened. "Gotta be extra thorough! But you seem like you know the value of a job well done."

“Huh. I guess,” Laura said, turning her attention back to her fern. Slowly, she put the snippers she’d been using to neaten the plants back in her toolbox. Then she spent some time arranging the toolbox on its cart. Then she took off her gloves, folding them up. “Well... I guess I’m done. Will you be here much longer?”

“Not if I can help it,” Trent laughed, relief coursing through him. *Finally!* “’Nother five minutes, tops, I think.”

Laura nodded. “Okay. Good. Well – have a nice evening.”

And with that she was gone, rolling her cart back toward the service lift, without looking back.

Trent let himself breathe a long sigh of relief. With Laura out of the way, he could get started. He’d give her five minutes to get down to the car park and leave the building, and then he’d get moving – down into the basement where the cleaning gear was kept, and then up into the ducts, to make his way to the safe.

*And then I can get out of here for real.*

Impatience and adrenaline were rushing through him as he packed up his cleaning gear – not a good combination in any circumstance, but especially not in this case because his kangaroo *knew* they were in enemy territory, and the spike in his heartbeat was making it shifty, ears twitching, whiskers bristling, powerful shoulder muscles bunching.

*I don’t like it.*

*I’m sure you don’t,* Trent thought as he rode the lift down into the basement. *But let’s just get it over with, yeah?*

*Something’s wrong. It doesn’t feel right.*

Despite himself, Trent cocked his head, bringing his shifter senses to the fore – especially the advanced sense for danger.

*Well, what is it?* he asked.

*I don’t know.* The kangaroo swiveled its head, searching. *But there’s something here...*

Trent gritted his teeth. He really couldn't delay any longer. Danger or not, he only had a small window of opportunity. His handler had told him Equitix had found a buyer for their list, and it'd been brought here to this building for the handover tomorrow. There wouldn't be another chance.

Quickly, he put his cart away, not bothering to stow it as neatly as he otherwise would – it wasn't like he was going to be here tomorrow to be disciplined for it anyway. Opening a side compartment of the cart, he silently removed the black mask and gloves he'd secreted in there for just this moment, slipping them on.

*All right. Time to move.*

He'd checked out the duct system on the building blueprints – he knew they'd lead him where he wanted to go, *and* that he could fit inside them, though it'd be a tight squeeze. He went to a service door, punching in the code, and opened it, before heading up the ladder just inside to the entrance of the duct system.

It was easy to pull himself up and inside, though his shoulders were touching the smooth metal sides as he pulled himself along.

*Oof. Too many oliebollen, maybe,* he thought as he scooted along. He'd done a quick trial run before, and he did *not* remember things being quite this tight!

*Stop. Wait. I sense something.*

Trent froze as the kangaroo suddenly twitched to attention, its senses straining toward the duct running at a crossroad ahead of them – the one that Trent would have to turn down if he wanted to get to where he had to go.

*I don't hear anything – what is it?* he asked, but the kangaroo didn't answer him. It just kept looking straight ahead, seeming twitchy as hell. *I can't stay here all night waiting for you to get your head on straight,* Trent told it after a minute of silence. *I have to get this done, I'm already running behind schedule.*

He started on his sliding way again, only to hear a sudden noise – and then a black shape slid along the duct in front of him, too fast for him to see exactly what it was. One moment it was there, the next it was gone.

*What the –*

It wasn't like there were many options for what it could be, though – it had to be another person, on their way to the vault, just like he was.

*I have to get there first*, he thought grimly, though he knew that was impossible now. Somehow, he'd been outfoxed, and whoever that was had gotten in ahead of him. *Too late to abort. I'll just have to deal with them.*

Trent slid his way up to the intersection, peering around the corner. The duct was empty, so whoever it was had already found their way to the section that overhung the room with the vault, and made their way down.

*All right, let's go. At least I'll be able to get the drop on them*, Trent thought grimly. He found it quickly enough – the vent that whoever-it-was had jimmied open to get out of the ducts. And when he peeped down through the newly created hole, he could see them crouched over the digital lock on the vault, busily working.

*There's something familiar about them*, Trent thought as he prepared himself to drop down on them. *Something – oh, what the hell!*

He'd been carefully lining himself up for a silent drop down into the room below – but just at the moment he'd been preparing himself to jump, the figure below had raised their arm and Trent had heard the sound of a gun with a silencer fitted going off, before several bullets tore through the thin metal of the vent where he'd just been.

Forced off-balance, Trent threw himself down into the vault room, landing badly – though not badly enough that he couldn't knock the gun from the figure's hand with one movement of his arm, sending it spinning across the room.

He scrambled after it at the same moment the other person did, but he was faster. He grabbed it, raising it and – *Wait. Wait. What?!*

“*Laura?*” he blurted out, before he had time to think.

Because that was very definitely who this was. She was wearing a mask and a hood, but Trent would know those big dark eyes anywhere – he was completely, utterly, one hundred percent *sure* he was looking at Laura.

*If that even is her real name!*

Right now, those gorgeous dark eyes were going wide with shock as she swept them over him, head to toe, as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing.

“*Tony?*”

“I thought you were the gardener,” Trent said, at exactly the same moment as Laura – *Not her real name!* – said, “I thought you were the janitor!”

“Well, it looks like neither of us are who we said we were,” Trent said after a long moment, during which the only sound was their panting breath. He shook his head. “I can’t believe this. I brought you hot chocolate and oliebollen!”

“Yes, and I’m sure that was purely out of regard for me, and not because you wanted to help maintain your cover as a lovable goof,” not-Laura snapped, her lip curling. “Between that and turning up here every day with the ‘oh gosh I just didn’t get time to shave’ look.”

*Actually, it was because I thought you were pretty cute... but also the other reason, yeah,* Trent did not say.

“And anyway, I really prefer ice cream,” not-Laura finished.

“Ice cream?” Trent asked, incredulously gesturing to where there *might* have been a window, had they not been currently situated in a high-security vault. “In *this* weather?”

“That doesn’t matter!” Not-Laura shook her head. “What *matters* is why you’re here. And if you’re actually intending to use that gun on me. Because if you are, you better do it now.”

Trent swallowed. The truth was, he definitely *didn't* want to use the gun on not-Laura – despite the fact she'd already shot at him, he'd really, really prefer not to have to do that. Clenching his jaw, he lowered the gun. Despite her obviously trying not to show it, Trent could see the relief that washed through not-Laura as he did so.

“Okay. Well. I can't say I would have made the same decision,” she said after a moment.

“Yeah, obviously,” Trent said. He glanced at his shoulder – one of the bullets had barely missed him, grazing the side of his shirt and tearing it open. “Look – you almost shot me.”

“I didn't know who you were,” not-Laura pointed out. “In fact, I *still* don't know who you are. Just who *are* you, and why the hell are you here?”

“Well, the first one's classified information,” Trent told her, even though it absolutely wasn't. “The second one... well, I'm getting the feeling it's for the same reason *you're* here.”

Not-Laura's lips tightened. “I guess so. Now I just have to decide what we're going to do about that.”

Trent raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I guess so.” He narrowed his eyes. “So you're a buyer who got outbid then, I guess, come to grab it and expose the agents who're listed on that hard drive? Or just an opportunist who's hoping to steal it and then sell it on themselves?”

“Neither,” not-Laura shot back, sounding outraged. “I'm just trying to protect the people who're on that list – some of them happen to be friends of mine. I'm from my own agency – not a company who's trying to steal it, not someone who's looking to sell it. I just want to take it back where it belongs and protect my colleagues, and whoever else is on that list.”

Trent blinked in surprise. He hadn't been expecting that – his agency hadn't told him there was anyone else working this. If they had, they might've been able to organize to work together.

“How do I know you're telling the truth?” he asked.

“I guess you don’t,” not-Laura said grimly. “So if you really doubt my word, I guess you’re just going to have to shoot me.”

Trent grimaced. She kind of had a point, there.

*We will not shoot her.*

His kangaroo’s voice was firm and clear in his head, and Trent knew that right now, he couldn’t have raised his hand holding the gun even if he’d wanted to – which he didn’t. It was strange, however – his kangaroo wasn’t usually very sentimental about these things. If anything, it was often Trent who had to rein it in from going to extremes – if it felt it was in danger, it usually didn’t want to stop until it felt it was safe again.

*What’s got into you?* he asked it, even though he wasn’t exactly *arguing* with its firm directive not to shoot. He hadn’t been going to in the first place! It was actually kind of rude that his kangaroo had thought he’d had to be told not to!

The kangaroo didn’t give him an answer, however – it remained resolutely silent, though it was as tense as Trent had ever felt it.

“Fine,” not-Laura said, as the silence went on. “You’re not going to shoot me, then. But are you going to stop me from taking the hard drive?”

“Well, that’s a bit academic at the moment anyway,” Trent said, mainly because he wasn’t sure what answer he was going to give her yet. “Since hacking the lock might take some time. If it can be done at all.”

“It’s already done.” Not-Laura gave him a *look*, raising one eyebrow. “I did it. It’s open.”

“What?” Trent moved to look over her shoulder, but it was true – he hadn’t noticed it in all the excitement, but the LED on the digital lock was glowing green. It was open. The most sophisticated digital lock he’d ever studied, and not-Laura had gone through it like it wasn’t even there. “How did you –”

“Trade secret,” she snapped. “You didn’t think I’d come here without knowing how to hack a digital lock, did you?”



She raised her eyebrow at him again. “Or is that what *you* did?”

“No,” Trent only half-lied. He had a decoder tucked into his pocket – he’d just been expecting it to take a while. Clearly, not-Laura was a cut above average, though. Or *several* cuts. “I just didn’t expect it to take such a short amount of time.”

“I have my ways,” she murmured. Then she glanced at him. “So. I’m taking the hard drive. It’s up to you what you intend to do about it.”

She gave him a hard, challenging look. Trent swallowed. Then, she opened the door of the safe – and all hell broke loose.

“Shit!” Trent looked around as alarms blared, red lights flashing. “Shit, the alarms systems weren’t disabled?”

“They should have been!” not-Laura yelled, one foot still in the vault. “I don’t know how this happened!”

“Well, grab the hard drive, if you’re grabbing it!” Trent motioned with the hand that wasn’t holding the gun for her to hurry up. “We’re not leaving it after getting this far!”

Not-Laura actually did as he asked, dashing into the vault and then out again in record time, the hard drive in her hand.

“Is that the right one?” Trent asked.

“It’s the only one in there, so I guess so,” not-Laura said. “Come on – we don’t have time to climb back into the ducts. We need to –”

“We can do it,” Trent said firmly. He laced his fingers together, indicating that not-Laura should use his hands as a step. “I’m tall enough. I can lift you.”

A conflicted look crossed not-Laura’s face, before she evidently decided to take him up on his offer. She tucked the hard drive away in a pocket of her pants and then planted her foot in the middle of his joined hands. He hoisted her up easily, and she sprung up agilely into the hole of the removed vent.

*Is she a shifter then?* Trent wondered, as he gazed up after her. *I don't get that sense from her, but I've never seen a human move like that...*

“Come on, if you're coming!” Not-Laura's head appeared from the edge of the duct. “Or do you need help climbing up here?!”

“No need,” Trent told her – and there really wasn't. As soon as not-Laura's head moved back, he jumped, drawing on his kangaroo's strength. He got his hands on the edge of the duct and hauled himself up, joining not-Laura in the confined space. “Come on,” he said. “Let's move.”

“God, this has been a botched job from start to finish,” not-Laura muttered as they crawled hurriedly down the duct. “Just a mess.”

“Look on the bright side,” Trent pointed out. “We got the hard drive.”

Not-Laura snorted. “Well, I'll look on the bright side once we're actually out of here, and not strung up by our thumbs in some terrorist torture chamber.”

“Oh, that is it,” Trent said, rolling his eyes. “Since I know now that your name isn't Laura, I'm just going to call you Smiley. Because you're really lifting my mood right now.”

“Call me whatever you want, I literally don't care,” Smiley said. “You can call me Gerald if we get out of here.”

Trent couldn't hold back a quick, snorted laugh. “I think I'll stick to Smiley. Gerald just doesn't suit you.”

*We must find out her real name,* his kangaroo said, strangely insistent. *We have to know it. We cannot leave here without discovering what she is truly called.*

*What's gotten into you?* Trent asked it, as, ahead of him, Smiley kicked out a wide, vertical vent, before crawling out of it and into a stairwell. *I get it, she's good, and she'd gorgeous, and honestly, the grumpy act is kind of hot. But can you please just keep your mind on getting us out of here?*

Out in the stairwell, he could hear the echoes of voices rebounding off the concrete walls – but none that seemed to be heading their way.

“Come on,” Smiley whispered. “If we can get to the roof, we can get out of here.”

Without another option, Trent wasn’t inclined to argue with her. Together, they charged up the concrete steps, the blaring klaxons echoing below getting quieter, the shouts of the security guards getting fainter.

*It won’t be much longer until they figure out where we’ve gone, though,* Trent thought. *It’s not like there’s a lot of places to go – only up or down.*

“Geeze,” Trent muttered. “This is embarrassing. Even if we get out of this, I’ll probably get assigned to, I don’t know, Adelaide or somewhere after this.”

“Adelaide?” Smiley asked, glancing at him. “Is there something bad about that?”

“Not really, I guess,” Trent said. “But it’s not what I would call exciting. If you ever need to lay low some place where not much happens, head to Adelaide. That’s my advice.”

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind,” Smiley said. “If we *do* in fact get out of here.”

There wasn’t really any more *up* to go to – they’d reached the stairs leading out to the roof. And the lock required a keypass.

“Stand back – let me handle this,” Trent said. “You have the power of hacking, but I have the power of kicking.”

“Oh, great,” Smiley muttered – but Trent knew she couldn’t deny the effectiveness of his approach as, with one mighty kick, he sent the door spinning off its hinges and out into the night beyond. He never missed leg day, after all.

“Oh, all right – I guess that was a *little* impressive,” Smiley said, as they came out onto the freezing cold roof. “But just a little.”

“Thanks.” Trent shot her a grin – it might’ve been only faint praise, but he’d take it. “So – where’s the ride you promised?”

“Over there.” Smiley pointed, and Trent followed the direction of her finger to the helipad on the roof of a neighboring building.

“Huh.” Trent nodded. “Did you have any plans about how to *get* over there? I can jump, but not *that* far.”

Smiley swallowed, glancing at him. “I have a grapple gun and rappelling line,” she said after a moment. “But... I have no idea if it’s strong enough for two. Especially someone as, uh, large as you are.”

“Hey, this is all lean muscle, I’ll have you know,” Trent told her.

“Yeah, that’s part of the problem – muscle weighs more than fat. And you’re obviously all muscle.” She paused, pursing her lips. “But I guess if we want to get across, we don’t exactly have many other options, and security will figure out where we are in the next few minutes. And then I don’t like your other options for getting off this roof.”

“You could just go across without me,” Trent pointed out. “You’ve got the hard drive. You could just cut me loose.”

Smiley paused, then she screwed up her face. “Do *not* tempt me. You wanna get off this roof in one piece or not?”

“That would definitely be my preference,” Trent murmured, as Smiley pulled a small grappling gun from her belt and ran to the side of the building, lining up her shot. The line shot out, attaching itself to the neighboring building, and then Smiley hooked the other end to the stone lip of the one they stood on. She took the hook from her belt and attached it to the line, then turned to look at him.

“Are you coming?”

Trent didn’t need to be told twice.

“Let me hold the hook, though,” he said, as they prepared to shove off. “Like you said, I’m heavier than you. You don’t

want to be trying to hold me up.”

“Fine.” Smiley passed him the hook, and he grabbed hold of it.

“Now grab on to me – let’s get out of here.”

Smiley, grimacing, wrapped her arms around his neck, while Trent held fast on to the hook. And then, he pushed off.

The air was cold and cutting as they whizzed down the line, and for a moment Trent could feel it sag dangerously, as if it was threatening to break, or the end of the line was going to detach from the building under their combined weight.

But in the next moment, every single thought, every single fear, was erased as he felt Smiley shift against him, hooking on to his waist with her legs, her head tucking up under his chin as her arms squeezed even more tightly around his shoulders – and the sudden knowledge blasted through his mind, leaving no room for anything else –

*Mine! She’s mine! Ours! Our mate!*

His kangaroo stood up straight, beating on its chest with its forepaws, leaping frantically with the sudden explosive realization.

*Oh my God, it’s true,* Trent thought, dazed, staring sideways at the top of Smiley’s head. She seemed utterly unfazed, utterly indifferent to the sudden revelation he could feel coursing through every single cell of his body.

*Is she... does she not... maybe she doesn’t – OOF!*

Whatever Smiley might have thought of the life-altering realization that was setting off fireworks in Trent’s brain, the look on her face as she glared up at him when they crashed into the side of the building was *not* happy.

“Watch out!” she hissed at him. “You almost crushed me!”

“Sorry,” Trent managed to get out, as, letting go of the hook with one hand, he curved his arm over the side of the building and managed to haul them both up.

They stood, panting, hands on their knees. When Trent looked over his shoulder, he could see the vague shapes of security guards milling about on the roof of the building they'd just come from.

*Best make this snappy*, he thought. But he couldn't leave without asking Smiley for her name – without *telling her* –

“Well, that's my ride,” Smiley said, looking up, and for the first time, Trent realized he could hear the drone of a helicopter as it came down from the sky. Smiley looked at him challengingly. “You're not going to fight me for the hard drive, then?”

Trent hesitated. He knew he *should* try to get it off her. It was his mission to recover it, after all. *But* –

“Are you really who you say you are?” he asked, looking her straight in the eye. “Are you really doing this to protect those agents? You're not going to expose them or sell the list on?”

Smiley nodded her head, once, quickly. “I promise you. I really am who I say I am.”

*She's our mate*, his kangaroo insisted, frantic with the knowledge. *You know she's telling the truth.*

*But she doesn't seem to think she's our mate at all*, Trent thought desperately. *But... if she's human... and I can't even tell if she is... then of course she wouldn't know...*

Should he just blurt it out now? Surely she'd know about shifters, if she worked in this kind of area. Perhaps she'd even know about mates, and what they meant?

Trent opened his mouth, still not completely sure what he was going to say, but before he could speak, a ladder dropped down from the helicopter that was hovering above their heads, and Smiley grabbed hold of it with one hand, stepping onto it.

“I take it you believe me, then,” she said, staring at him levelly.

Trent nodded. “I believe you.”

A look of confusion and almost wild disbelief crossed Smiley's face, but then she shook her head. "Then I'm getting out of here."

Looking up, she signaled to the pilot of the helicopter, and then slowly began to rise as it began to ascend.

"Wait," Trent called out, as she rose into the air. "What's your name?"

She stared down at him for a long moment, emotions chasing themselves across her face, before finally, she seemed to come to a decision.

"Zina," she said, shaking her head, as if she couldn't quite believe she'd actually *told* him. "That's my name – Zina. Zina Alden."

*Zina*, Trent thought, inhaling deeply as if breathing it in. *Her name is Zina, and she's my mate.*

He waited, watching until the helicopter had disappeared from view, the sound of its whirring blades fading into silence.

"Americans," he muttered, as he turned away, heading for the stairs. "Always so dramatic."

*Back in the present –*

Lying on his bed, Trent was forcefully pulled out of his memories of the last time he'd seen Zina Alden by the sound of his phone buzzing with a message notification.

He lifted it, grimacing – the only thing it could be this late at night was something to do with work. Swiping up and punching in the code, Trent stopped, his thumb hovering over the screen, completely frozen in place, though his heart was pounding double-time in his chest.

The number on the screen didn't belong to any of the fake companies he received texts from as part of his cover that he

was an independent IT consultant. It didn't have a name at all – it was just a totally unfamiliar string of digits.

But it was the text in the message itself that had caught his attention and made his blood freeze in his veins.

*Hey – what've you been up to? Long time no see. I took your advice, by the way.*

*xx Smiley.*



## CHAPTER 3

**S**wallowing heavily, Zina glanced down at her watch and did her best not to look like she was in a hurry to be anywhere.

*Maybe this was a mistake. A huge, terrible mistake.*

She wouldn't have done it, though, if she hadn't been absolutely desperate and completely flat out of options. She'd known right from the start of this that Hargreaves would be utterly ruthless in tracking her down – not to mention her own workplace would be hot on her tail as well.

*Or maybe that should be former workplace. I doubt I'll be welcomed back with open arms after this.*

Zina sighed inwardly and hitched her bag a little closer to her chest, doing her best to tune back in to the tour guide's lecture. She'd joined this tour group because it was safer than being alone – the tour guide was keeping close tabs on everyone to make sure no one had gone astray – and because if anyone pegged her as not being a local, then she'd stick out less amongst a bunch of other obvious travelers.

Almost everyone in this group was a tourist, mostly middle-aged, casually dressed, and hiding from the sun beneath large hats, so she didn't stick out too much with her own hat and sunglasses. The fact that they *also* hid a lot of her face was a bonus, of course, since she'd run out of ways to change her hair: it'd been pink when she'd been buying a new car for cash after she'd absconded from Hargreaves; she'd scorched it blonde with bleach in the world's seediest motel

when she'd still been on the run back in America; finally, she'd hacked it all off in an airport bathroom when she'd arrived here.

*Don't know if it did any good, though, Zina thought, eyes on the two men who'd been loitering at the edge of the park ever since the tour group had arrived, keeping their distance but still fairly obviously following them.*

Or rather, following *her*.

*Or, maybe, they're just two guys looking for a nice place to picnic.*

Either way, even as exhausted as she was after all this running, Zina wasn't about to let her guard down.

Not now, not when she was so close.

Well. Provided Trent Bowman had understood the text messages she'd been sending him, anyway, and there was no guarantee of that.

“And so, this impressive bronze statue portrays Colonel William Light, pointing out across the area that he planned to be the site of Adelaide, all the way back in 1836...” the tour guide went on, gesturing up, voice loud in the quiet of the morning.

Zina glanced up at the statue – a huge bronze thing of a man, his finger thrust dramatically out in front of him, pointing over the parklands they'd just walked through as part of this guided tour of Adelaide. She'd known about it beforehand, of course, and that was why she'd sent the text she had a few days ago – *I guess I'm kind of new in town, so I'm looking for someone who can give me a pointer.*

She'd been a secret agent for long enough now that her fingers didn't shake when she was nervous. But nonetheless, she'd hesitated for just a moment before she'd hit *send*, and *hoped* that the recipient would know what she meant. Being any more specific was way too risky. She simply couldn't be sure that the people on her tail hadn't already started tracking her phone.

It had been a *huge* gamble. But then, everything about this had been a gamble. Well – not really a gamble, she supposed, since she'd never really expected to come out of it alive.

*But as long as I can make sure they're safe...*

She pulled her bag, with its precious contents, a little closer to her chest.

That, really, was all that mattered.

*And even if I can't trust him for anything else, I think I can trust him for that.*

Zina honestly wasn't sure why, after all this time, she'd thought of him.

She'd managed, through a bit of diligent hacking, to find out Tony Landers' real name of Trent Bowman. She'd found out who he really worked for. And she'd made the decision – maybe the *stupid* decision – that if she wanted to achieve her goal, she'd have to trust him.

So she'd sent her texts, sending him a message that – she hoped – only he would understand. She'd used the dumb nickname he'd given her during their run-in in London. She'd referenced the advice he'd jokingly given her about where he'd go to lay low, if he ever had to.

Maybe he wouldn't remember it, and the texts would seem meaningless to him. Or maybe he *did* remember, and the first thing he'd done was go straight to his bosses to tell them where to find her.

She could only hope that wasn't the case.

*Though it's not like I had any other options, really.*

Zina had always known her options would be limited, if she really went through with what she'd planned. She couldn't contact any of her known associates – they'd be the first people who'd be under surveillance. No one from Hargreaves. No matter how many years she'd spent undercover there, or what friendships she might have made during her mission, that would just be like putting her own head in a noose. She'd hoped she might've had just a *little* more time to sort out what

she'd do after she'd walked out on her mission with what she'd stolen. A little more time to think and plan. But things had gone faster than she'd anticipated. And soon, she'd realized she was completely out of options, and there weren't many places she could run.

But for some reason, as she'd sorted through her options and realized they totaled *absolutely zero*, her mind had kept coming back to the agent who'd allowed her to walk away with the USB she'd been sent to recover, all those years ago. Agents had it drilled into them from the first day of training: *always complete your mission, no matter what*. And yet, he'd given up his own success, just to make sure she had hers.

*Who even does that? And why?!*

It was a question she'd asked herself dozens of times since then, and she wasn't sure she was any closer to an answer. But despite the fact she'd never really had much trouble letting go of bothersome thoughts in the past, she simply couldn't let go of this one.

*Or, really, the memory of his face... his smile...*

Zina shook her head. No way was she going down *that* road. Good-looking guys were a dime a dozen. It meant *nothing*. She definitely wasn't getting her head scrambled because she'd thought he was *hot*. And funny. In a kind of annoying way, but funny nonetheless.

But as her desperation had grown, her thoughts had kept circling back to him. And finally, she'd had to conclude that maybe, her shifter form, an antelope, was trying to tell her something.

*Did it sense back then that we could trust him?*

It seemed absurd. She'd been suppressing her shifter form then, with a completely top-secret serum developed by her agency, that allowed her to appear as a normal human being to other shifters. They couldn't sense that she had a shifted form while she was taking it, which allowed her to go undetected in places where enemy agents might be on their guard against a shifter, but wouldn't look twice at a mere human.

The downside was, of course, that she couldn't access her shifter powers while she was using the serum. It had felt so strange, not having her antelope there inside her, its heightened senses, its extreme sensitivity to danger and swift reactions.

It was a handicap in some ways, for sure. But it also meant that, if those two men who'd been trailing her really *were* after her, they'd hesitate to make their move.

They were looking for a *shifter*, after all. And right now, they couldn't detect any shifters here. Well – unless someone else in the tour group or the guide was a shifter. But none of them looked anything like her description, so she figured they'd be safe.

Once Trent Bowman arrived – *if* he arrived – he wouldn't look anything like her, either. So hopefully she'd have enough time to achieve what she wanted to achieve and slip away.

*Once my current dose of serum wears off, I'll only have two left*, she thought. It might be enough to get her out of the country. But really, it was only a matter of time before *someone* caught up with her. Maybe continuing to run was just delaying the inevitable.

As the tour guide continued on, Zina flickered her eyes over the two men who'd been tailing her, who were currently standing in the dark shade of an enormous fig tree.

They were *definitely* watching her. Closely.

It might have been that even without being able to clock her as a shifter, they were uncertain enough of her identity that they'd decided to keep an eye on her.

And that was bad.

Especially since Trent hadn't shown up yet, and the tour was almost over. The pointing statue of Colonel Light was the last stop.

Maybe he hadn't understood her coded texts after all, and she was on her own.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

“Oh – a few *pointers*. I get it. Because the statue is *pointing*, right? Ha, you’re pretty funny.”

Zina *almost* jumped at the sound of the drawling voice beside her, soft in her ear.

Instead, she glanced over – and *up* – as quickly as she would let herself, suppressing her first instinct to gasp as she did.

*It’s him. He did understand. He did come.*

Zina studied his face from the corner of her eye as she forced herself to turn away from him again.

*It’s definitely him. I know it.*

It might’ve been three years since the last time she’d seen him, but there wasn’t a shadow of a doubt in her mind. Everything about his face seemed to have etched itself into her memory – the square jaw, the straight nose. The large brown eyes that were surrounded by thick lashes that might have given his face an almost delicate look, if the rest of it hadn’t been so undeniably masculine. He still had that bit of stubble across his chin, too, just like she’d teased him about having all those years ago. She would have been tempted to snap at him that he clearly still hadn’t learned how to shave, except for the fact that she had to admit it was a good look for him.

The way he held himself hadn’t changed either – he was tall, broad-shouldered, and kind of rangy, but his body moved in a way that suggested strength, coiled and waiting.

And that was despite the fact he was currently holding two slightly melting ice creams in his hands.

Zina blinked, looking down at them.

“See, I didn’t forget,” Trent said, holding one out to her. “Ice cream, right? You said you preferred it. I didn’t know what you liked, though. So you can have any flavor you want, as long as it’s honey.”

He held out one cone toward her, the golden-brown ice cream dripping slowly down the cone.

“You have chocolate,” Zina blurted as she took the sticky cone from him, her shock at his appearance finally loosening its hold on her brain, though not enough for her to say something *not* completely asinine.

“Yeah, but this one’s mine,” Trent said, lifting it to his mouth and licking up the drips. “Go ahead – don’t let it melt. Well, any more than it already has.”

Swallowing, Zina did what he asked – and then realized the method in his madness. Holding the ice cream in front of her mouth meant if either of the guys who were following her could lipread, they’d have a much harder time of it now.

Grudgingly, she took a long lick of her ice cream. Despite the tension in her stomach – in her *whole body* – she had to admit it was pretty good ice cream, sweet and creamy.

“So,” Trent said quietly after a minute or two of ice cream licking, as the tour guide began wrapping up their tour. “You wanna tell me what all this is about?”

Zina took a deep breath. She’d known this was coming. She’d thought, obviously, about what she’d say and how she’d explain it. But now, she found her head was curiously empty. Maybe she hadn’t truly believed he’d come after all – and now that he was actually here, she’d forgotten everything she’d wanted to say.

“Maybe not here,” she said softly. She moved her head slightly, indicating the loitering men.

Trent’s eyes didn’t move. “Yeah. I clocked them already. We’re downwind of them. Keep your voice down and they won’t hear a thing.”

*Huh.* Zina supposed she would’ve known that if she’d had her shifter senses about her. But as it was, these subtle changes in the wind were invisible to her for the moment.

“I don’t really have all that much time to explain,” she murmured. “I don’t know how much an explanation would help. Or what it would fix.”

“Try me.”

Zina glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He wasn't looking at her, his eyes on the tour guide as she said, *And with that, our tour is concluded! Don't forget to leave us a review on social media if you enjoyed your time today!*

Licking her lips, Zina realized she'd have to hurry this along. The group was already beginning to disperse, drifting away to look for a better angle to take photos of the giant pointing statue from.

"You don't really need to know more than you already do," she said. "I just need you to take *this* –" she hefted her bag slightly "– and get out of here. You won't see me again after that. That's all I need from you."

Trent frowned as he looked down at her. *Damn* but he was tall – it wasn't like she was a short woman, but she still had to look up to see his face.

"And what'll happen to you after that?"

Zina shrugged. "It's not really your concern. Once you have what I need to give you, I'll be the decoy and lead them off. You just take these back to your boss and then we're – we're done. Okay?"

Zina's heart thudded in her chest as she spoke, in a way she didn't remember it doing since she'd been a raw cadet, still wet behind the ears.

"Zina." Trent's voice was completely stripped of any of the joking tone he'd been using earlier. "I can't help you if you're not forthcoming with me."

Swallowing, Zina shook her head. *I can't drag him into this. I started it, so the consequences are mine alone.*

"I'm not *asking* for your help, except to take what I'm going to give you and get out of here. That's it."

*That's already too much,* she added silently.

"I don't have a lot of time," she said lowly. "Come on. Follow me. I need to get this over with, and then I can leave you in peace."



She started to walk away, briskly moving around the other side of the statue, out of sight of the men who'd been watching her. It was clumsy, but she had no other choice. She'd just have to hope there'd be enough doubt in the men's minds that they'd split their resources, and she could lead the one following her away, and Trent could evade the other.

"Zina, I –"

She interrupted him, reaching into the bag she'd kept clutched against her chest this whole time. Her fingers curled around the large, black leather box inside, pulling it out the moment they were out of sight.

"Take this," she said quickly, "and get out of here. I don't have time to explain. You'll just have to figure it all out on your own."

Trent blinked, looking down at the box, a frown carving its way across his face as he lifted the hand that wasn't still holding an ice cream to take it from her.

"Is this what you... took? The thing that got you burn noticed?"

It still struck a bolt of pain directly into Zina's heart to hear the words spoken aloud, but it wasn't like she hadn't known what would happen once she'd made the decision to do what she'd done. For now, she just forced herself to nod.

"... If these are top secret documents, why are you giving them to me?" Trent asked, frown still in place. "They said you'd be trying to sell them off to the highest bidder."

*They're not documents!* Zina wanted to yell at him – they were ten, one hundred, *one thousand* times more important and precious than that, but not for the reasons anyone thought. But she had to admit, the story sounded good – telling everyone she'd run off with a file full of top-secret documents with a plan to auction them *definitely* made her sound like the bad guy.

"I told you, I don't have time," she forced herself to say, instead of offering Trent any kind of justification or

explanation. What good would it do, anyway? “Look – I’ve done what I asked you to come here to do. Just go.”

“And what about you? Do you know how many people are after you right now?” Trent asked.

Zina resisted the urge to shake her head in frustration. “Obviously I do! Why do you think I’m so desperate to get out of here? I just need to lead them away – that’s it. After you leave, it’s none of your concern what happens to me. Just get that box back to your people.”

She started to turn away, determined this time to leave, no matter what Trent tried to say or do, and no matter how hard her heart was beating every time she lifted her eyes to his face.

*What’s wrong with me?! He’s just some guy – I don’t even know him. I definitely can’t trust him more than I already have. I only contacted him because –*

“Zina.”

Zina gasped at the feeling of fingers around the crook of her arm, stopping her as she turned. A strange mix of emotions surged through her – anger mainly, but also – *relief?*

*That can’t be right –*

“Zina, wait. I’m not going to let you do that.”

She blinked up at him as he spoke. “Why? Do you have plans to turn me in yourself?” She swallowed. Well, she couldn’t really say it was a surprise. She was going to get caught sooner or later anyway. At least this way, Hargreaves wouldn’t be the ones to catch up with her first.

“No.” Trent shook his head firmly. “I’m not going to turn you in. And I’m not going to let you go back out there on the run by yourself. If you’re going somewhere, then I’m coming with you.”

Zina felt her mouth dropping open, even as her mind went completely blank with shock.

“W-what?” she managed to stutter out after a moment or two.

“You heard me.” Trent’s voice was steady as his eyes looked down into hers, completely unwavering. “I don’t think you’re guilty of what you’ve been accused of – and even if you *did* do something unauthorized, I think you must have had a good reason for doing whatever it was. I want to help you. And if that means coming with you now, then so be it. You can explain everything on the way to wherever we’re going.”

Zina *knew* she wasn’t dreaming, because her dreams were always weird black-and-white affairs where she was trying to brew coffee in half an avocado or drowning in a knothole in the floorboards despite the laws of physics. They never had storylines or coherent dialogue or hot guys offering to assist her with going on the run from a group of *incredibly* dangerous opponents – *And yet, this has to be a dream, because why the hell else would this be happening?!*

“Why – why would you *do* that?” was the only thing she could think of to stutter out, her throat too tight for any other words to pass through her lips.

To her shock, Trent let out a quick, sharp exhalation, blinking and pulling back slightly, looking almost as if he’d just been slapped.

“Because – because you’re –” He swallowed, cutting himself off suddenly, shaking his head. The pain that had briefly crossed his face evaporated as quickly as it had come, replaced with the slightly roguish, *extremely* infuriating smile she remembered from three years ago, as if no time had passed at all.

Still smiling, he handed the box back to her – as if he was reassuring her he wasn’t about to cut her loose and run off with it.

“Because I’m just that nice of a guy,” he said.

## CHAPTER 4

*S*he's our mate – our mate!! Why didn't you tell her the truth?!

Gritting his teeth, Trent shoved aside the absolutely massive tantrum his kangaroo was throwing – well, insofar as that was currently possible, which wasn't very far at all.

*Now is not the time to spring that on her,* Trent told it as it kicked up its powerful legs in disgust, nostrils flaring, ears twitching. *It'd be too much – not to mention that she doesn't seem to think we're mates at all.*

If Zina had been able to tell they were mates, she wouldn't have needed to ask why he was helping her – she wouldn't even need to think about it, not even for a moment.

Aside from that, Trent was finding it impossible to get a read on Zina in other ways, too.

*Is she a shifter, or isn't she?*

She hadn't *told* him that she was a shifter back in London, even though that had made sense to him at the time. He'd never felt anything like it before. When he was seeing her from afar, or even if he was standing right next to her, he couldn't sense that she was a shifter at all. But when his skin came into contact with hers, he could tell, suddenly and definitely, that she *was* a shifter. It was something he should have been able to sense even when they weren't touching – and Trent had never been more perplexed in his life.

*Maybe she's a half-shifter?*

He'd never met someone who had one shifter parent and one non-shifter parent before. Perhaps that was it?

Zina was as confusing as she was fascinating – but Trent knew that right now was *not* the time to get into it. He'd clocked the two men watching them from beneath a Moreton Bay fig tree as soon as he'd come into the park, and Zina herself was clearly of the opinion things could get nasty at any moment. Right now, his only priority was to get Zina somewhere safe. Everything else could come later.

*She's my mate, after all, whether she knows it or not. The only thing in the world that matters is her safety.*

Right now, however, his mate was staring at him with an openly suspicious expression on her face, asking him, “Is this a joke?” as he tossed the melted remains of his ice cream into a bin and grabbed her hand, leading her back through the gardens, toward Adelaide Oval.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Why would it be? I *am* just that nice – that's not something to joke about.”

Behind him, he heard her sigh – a little theatrically, he thought.

“You *know* that's not what I meant.”

Trent glanced over his shoulder. The two men weren't following them – yet. But they were definitely still watching. They must have at least suspected that both Trent and Zina were onto them. He had to get the both of them somewhere they could talk, and quickly.

“Well, if you don't believe me when I say I just want to help you out of the goodness of my heart – and, I'll admit, a bit of curiosity to know what you've actually *done* to get everyone so mad at you – then there's not much I can do about that. Why do *you* think I'm helping you, then? Why, out of all the people in the world, did you reach out to me, if you didn't think I'd help?”

Zina bit her lip, her eyes narrowing. “Lack of other options, mainly.”

“But you *did* think I'd help you, right?”

This time she rolled her eyes, just a little bit. “You helped me out in London when I wasn’t expecting it. So I just thought...” She cut herself off, shaking her head. “Well, I *thought* I’d just offload this parcel on you and make myself scarce. I honestly didn’t think you’d offer to go on the run with me. You *do* realize what you’re doing, right?”

*Of course we do. We’d do all this and more for our mate!* Trent’s kangaroo spoke up, wild with fervent desire to show its mate just what lengths it would go to to make sure she was out of harm’s way – well, as much as they could, with what was soon to be *even more* people on their tails.

“No, not really,” Trent said, as the River Torrens came into view. Another glance behind him told him that the men who’d probably tailed Zina here were finally on the move. They were following them down the path through the gardens at a fairly discreet distance – though Trent knew that depending on what kind of shifters they were, they didn’t need to be close to be able to follow them easily. “You’ll have to explain it all to me as we go. Since it seems like the line we were fed about you running off with a briefcase full of documents with plans to sell them was, let’s say, a bit of a creative writing exercise. Am I right?”

Zina’s dark eyes flashed up to his, her lips tightening. “Yes. It was. But I can’t explain everything right now.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “I’m not sure I could really *explain* anything. At least not in words.”

Well, she just got more mysterious and more fascinating with every passing moment, Trent thought, as they crossed the footbridge that led over the river, the men still behind them.

*If we can get back to the city, though* – Trent thought, before his kangaroo suddenly reared its head, nose and ears jerking, all its senses on high alert.

*Not this way*, it told him, flanks twitching. *There’s danger this way. Our mate cannot be put in danger!*

As much as Trent often wished his kangaroo would just shut up, he always listened to it when it alerted him to something around him not being right. Its senses were beyond

human – even if he couldn't see a thing, he knew better than to doubt its words. Too many times it'd saved his bacon, before his human mind had even been aware there was a threat.

*This* time, however, he was able to pick out what had set the kangaroo off right away.

To most people, they probably didn't look like much – but Trent could spot them immediately. Trent's kangaroo could sense them – they were shifters, and they shifted into some kind of large predator, though he couldn't tell what. That wasn't really important, though – they *probably* weren't going to shift here, in front of all these people. The only thing that mattered for the moment was that they were bad news.

Even though it was a weekday morning, it was a sunny day and there was a reasonable number of people around, walking by the river, looking for a spot to sit on the grass, or waiting to travel down the river on the Popeye boat cruise or hire a paddleboat.

*But still, I don't know that they won't take the risk of attacking Zina in broad daylight. It's not like they'd need to shift to do it.*

Shifters had access to all kinds of things humans couldn't even dream existed in the first place – like poisons that only worked on other shifters, that could kill or knock someone out in moments, even with a shifter's hardiness and fast healing abilities. Trent knew he couldn't risk them getting close to Zina, or herding her toward where more of their friends might be waiting – he still wasn't completely sure she even *was* a shifter, but that only made things even more dangerous for her.

Zina hadn't seemed to notice the two shifters, but she *did* notice his sudden alertness.

“What is it?” she asked, voice soft.

“Two guys, blue shirts, just up ahead,” Trent replied, turning his head and avoiding moving his lips as much as possible, suddenly regretting that he'd gotten rid of his ice cream, even though it'd be nothing but a melted, soggy mess by now.

Zina's eyes found them right away. "I see them." Somehow, she still had *her* ice cream, and it was still even mainly intact.

"Do you know them?" Trent asked her. "Anyone you've seen before?"

"Mm. LAX. They followed me until I managed to throw them off, and then I deliberately missed the flight I was booked onto. I'm pretty sure they still caught it, though. But they've caught up again."

"Well. I guess we have to get somewhere conspicuous, then. Isolated, but conspicuous," Trent said, glancing around.

"That sounds a little like a contradiction in terms."

"Maybe a little," Trent said, glancing around. "But not necessarily."

He reached down, grabbing her hand – as if they were any other couple enjoying a sunny day by the river together. Immediately, he felt that warm tingle under his skin that told him that Zina was his *mate*, that she was the most precious thing in the whole world and he'd box the ears – to say the least – of anyone who tried to harm her. But still, she didn't seem to notice, aside from glancing down in surprise at the contact between them.

"What're you –" she started to ask, but Trent turned back to her with a grin before she could get too far.

"C'mon," he said, tugging at her hand. "I'm taking you paddle boating."

"Paddleboating?" he heard her squawk as he maneuvered through the crowds, one eye always on the men who'd been watching and waiting for them. "What are you *talking* about? On the *river*?"

"Yep," Trent said, leading her to where the paddleboat hire employee was unchaining a boat for a family. "It's conspicuous, and the hire guy keeps a close eye on you in case you get into trouble. There's only a couple of families with kids out on the river, so we won't be getting pushed toward anyone who might be lurking in a crowd. You're in the middle



of the river, so it's pretty obvious if anyone's getting too close. And it's a bit hard to creep up on someone in a paddleboat."

"...I guess," Zina admitted, albeit a little reluctantly. "Unless they're a crocodile shifter or something like that."

"...Okay, good point," Trent said. He *hoped* that wasn't the case. Knowing his luck, it probably was. But in the absence of any other plan, and with the now four men closing in on them from both directions, it was the best idea they had. Well, probably.

He had to stop himself from incredulously saying *Twenty-five dollars?!* when the employee told him the price of a thirty-minute hire, because he *swore* it had only been ten the last time he'd been here – which, granted, had been several years ago, but still – *twenty-five dollars?!*

He handed over the cash and the man began unchaining a paddleboat, as Zina kept her eye on the pursuers.

"Okay. They're just staring for now," Zina said, as Trent helped her onto the boat. "They're probably wondering what the hell we're doing – and I can't say I blame them, since I'm wondering the same thing."

"At the least, it buys us some time," Trent said as they sat, bums on the seats, feet on the pedals. "And you can perhaps explain to me what's actually in that box. Or show me, if you can't explain it."

He watched as she, apparently unconsciously, pulled it a little closer to her chest, as if trying to shield it from view.

"Not in the middle of a river," she said, as they began turning the pedals with their feet, the water around them churning as they made their way out into the river.

"Well, you know I said I'd help you," Trent told her. "And I meant it. But at some stage, you're going to have to actually tell me what I'm in for."

He didn't want to press her – not really, anyway, even if he had to admit that he was being eaten alive by curiosity just now. But he also couldn't deny that it would help him *a lot* if he actually knew what they were supposed to be protecting

just now, and what Zina had actually *done* to cause this level of fuss.

*Not that it matters*, his kangaroo spoke up, as soon as the thought entered his head. *We will protect our mate no matter what!*

*Of course we will*, he told it. *But let's just get some stuff sorted, okay?*

The kangaroo sniffed a little at that, as if it couldn't possibly see the need for such things – and, well, maybe it was right. Nothing she could tell him would change Trent's mind about his decision to help her.

"We can talk here a little bit more easily," Trent said, as they reached the mid-point between the two river banks. "There's no one around – and we can see if anyone approaches." He glanced at his watch. "And we still have twenty-five minutes left on this paddleboat hire. You may as well tell me what all this is about."

Zina blinked, licking her lips. Trent could tell she was nervous, but that was understandable. No one liked being backed into a corner.

"All right," she said, after hesitating for a moment. "I get it. You deserve to know." She took a deep breath, as if collecting herself.

*Comfort our mate! She may be strong, but right now, she needs comfort and aid!* His kangaroo's voice suddenly burst into his consciousness, loud and demanding, and Trent found he'd unconsciously raised his arms to do just that almost before he could stop himself.

He forced them back down to his sides immediately, clenching his fists, while his kangaroo bucked up its back legs in outrage at being thwarted in its aims.

*I can't do that right now!* Trent told it – no matter how much he personally wanted to take Zina in his arms and tell her everything would be okay, he doubted it would go down well just at this moment. *She's just started to trust us properly! You want to fuck it all up now?*

*She is our mate. She would know we meant her no harm,* his kangaroo insisted – and maybe that would have been true, if Zina had known it as well. But as it was, she seemed just as clueless as the last time they'd met, shifter or not.

*How can I be so certain of it, when she doesn't seem to know it herself? Especially if she really is a shifter?*

There was too much Trent didn't understand about this whole situation. Right now, he could only focus on one part of it at a time. So he decided to focus on the issue of what Zina had done to get into so much trouble.

“The burn notice wasn't *completely* made up,” she said, her voice soft. “I *did* go AWOL from my mission. And I *did* steal something from Hargreaves before I left. But it absolutely wasn't with the intention of selling *anything*, to *anyone*. It was to save them. That's all I wanted to do – save them.”

“Save them?” Trent asked, confusion darting through him. “What do you mean?”

Zina looked up at him, her dark eyes wide. She took another deep breath. “What I mean is –”

*Behind you.*

Trent's head whipped around as his kangaroo alerted him to some kind of danger at his back.

Sure enough, he could see the two men in blue shirts speaking with the paddleboat hire operator, handing over some cash before the man went to unchain a boat for them.

*So they've decided to risk coming out onto the water,* Trent thought, frustration rising within him. *Zina had* been about to tell him what was going on – but on the upside, it *probably* meant that neither of those guys was a crocodile shifter.

Well, whatever Zina had, these guys, whether they were from her agency or from Hargreaves, were clearly desperate to get it back. Which told Trent they *definitely* shouldn't get it.

“Zina –”

“Don’t worry, I see them,” Zina said, her voice level. “Where should we go?”

“We could paddle back to the shore... but then we’re just back in the same situation as before,” Trent said. “We could paddle our way across the river and ditch the boat in the reeds.”

But just as he said it, he saw the two men who’d initially been following them emerge from the trees on the parkland side of the river, clearly watching them carefully. Ditching the boat and clambering out of it would give the men more than enough time to catch up with them, even if they paddled at full speed down the river – which wasn’t really much faster than walking, anyway.

“For now, let’s head that way,” Trent said, pointing toward the rotunda. “There’s more people down that side. Perhaps they’d rather not risk a confrontation in plain sight.”

Zina just nodded her agreement, and together, they put their feet back on the pedals and paddled their way down the river.

“I feel stupid,” Zina muttered, as river water swirled around them.

“At least it’s a nice day for it,” Trent said, glancing up at the bright, clear blue sky. “When was the last time you got to go for a relaxing paddle on the river with an ice cream on a warm spring day? Anyone else would call this relaxing.”

“Anyone else hasn’t got half the spy agencies in the known world after them, and some other people besides,” Zina shot back, rolling her eyes. “It kind of puts a bit of an edge on things, wouldn’t you say?”

Despite himself, Trent had to laugh. Zina was just as he remembered her – sharp, no-nonsense, fiery, and *just* sarcastic enough to make it interesting.

*And she’s just as beautiful as I remember her, too.*

It was true – despite the huge floppy hat she was wearing and the nondescript, baggy, tourist-y clothes, he could still tell that Zina was a complete knockout. Her black eyes, framed by

thick, long lashes, flashed with a dark fire, and the softest dimple appeared in her right cheek when she spoke. Her hair might have changed, but it didn't matter – her heart-shaped face with its high cheekbones and cute pointed chin could carry off any look.

*Not to mention she's keeping pace with me on the paddling.*

Trent knew he was hardly a slouch when it came to fitness – there was nothing he loved more than going for long runs in his human form, or, when the occasion allowed it, shifting into his kangaroo form and spending hours bounding across the countryside, knowing there was nothing on earth that could stop him.

And yet, Zina wasn't showing any signs of tiring either, despite the water churning on either side of the boat.

*She has to be a shifter, Trent thought. No human could keep up – although I suppose if the human was especially motivated and running on adrenaline...*

He shook his head. This was no time to speculate. He'd just have to ask Zina about why she read so confusingly the next time they had a moment to themselves.

Which right now, they did not.

The two men in blue shirts were currently paddling determinedly toward them, faces *far* too grim for anyone who was trying to sell the idea they were just two guys, out for a nice morning's paddle. They'd clearly decided that it was worth the risk of attracting attention to try to get their hands on whatever it was that Zina had – and most likely Zina herself, too.

*Well, I'm not about to let that happen.*

“Quick – let's head out that way,” Trent said, pedaling backward to reverse the boat a little. “They're heading over.”

“Yeah,” Zina said. “Do you think they're gonna try to ram us?”

“Maybe,” Trent said – certainly, the guys didn’t seem to have any intention of slowing down, even as they came closer and closer, water splashing up around them as they furiously paddled.

If he hadn’t been so concerned for Zina’s safety, Trent might have laughed: they were two incredibly serious and no doubt highly trained secret agents, and trying with all their might to engage in a low-speed paddleboat pursuit down a relatively small river in Adelaide was probably not how they saw their careers going when they signed up for this gig.

*But then, neither did I, really.*

“Come on – we have to outpace them,” Trent said, paddling harder – and saw with concern that Zina was at last beginning to flag, unable to quite keep up with him. He’d have to slow his own pace, or they’d start turning in a circle.

That was fine, though – the men seemed to have decided ramming them wasn’t the way to go after all, or at least, not at this second. They were still approaching, but not quite at such a ferocious speed.

“Come on –” Trent began to say, before a sudden squawk from overhead made it clear why the two men in the boat had backed off in their attack.

Looking up, Trent found himself looking into the face of a large and apparently highly enraged seagull – though not the relatively benign seagulls he was used to, who were mainly cheeky little fellas who’d steal your hot chips out of your hand and maybe follow you around a bit looking for more. No, this one was *big*, with a cruelly hooked beak and evil, beady little eyes that seemed to stare directly into his soul, and it definitely was interested in more than just chips.

*And even more than that, it’s a shifter,* Trent realized as it swooped in low again, beak darting and pecking, a horrendous scream flying out of its throat.

That would explain why it looked so different from the seagulls he usually saw – *and* why it was being so aggressive,

though he didn't know, maybe this was just usual for American seagulls.

“Ugh!”

He looked away from the bird as it swooped away, still shrieking, to check on Zina. She was hunched over, protecting her bag with her body, her arms wrapped tightly around it, pulling it against her chest.

“Did it go for the bag?” Trent asked – the bird was big, but he didn't think it would be able to carry it, especially not with the large, sturdy box Zina had shown him earlier inside it.

“No, I don't think it's trying to get it,” Zina said. “More like it's trying to unbalance me or get it out of my grip for long enough that –”

*They're coming!*

Trent's head whipped around at his kangaroo's warning to see that the two men in blue shirts had started their paddleboat charge again, and this time, it was clear they had no intention of backing down. Obviously, they were working in tandem with their seagull shifter friend, who was running interference for them.

*The moment Zina lets go of that bag –*

Trent shook his head. It didn't do any good to think of things that way. They might be outnumbered, but this still wasn't something that would definitely go smoothly for the other agents. They were hampered by being out in public. They couldn't move as freely as they would have liked.

He would just have to do his best to try to use that to his advantage, as much as he could.

Zina ducked her head, hunching her shoulders as the bird swooped again, squawking and screaming like a banshee. Steeling himself, Trent swatted at it, his fist catching it across the chest and definitely giving it something to think about as it faltered in its flight path, crashing down into the water for a moment before flapping awkwardly back toward the bank and becoming entangled in the reeds and weeds, its wings and legs askew, squawking furiously as it struggled.

It would be back, though, Trent assumed – it was a shifter, not an *actual* gull, and that would hardly keep it out of action for long.

Maybe it didn't matter, though – perhaps it had already achieved what it had set out to do, because in the next moment the paddleboat swayed dangerously in the water, the moment before he heard the ominous *clunk* of plastic hitting plastic, and Trent realized the two men in blue shirts had taken advantage of the distraction to ram into them, setting both boats rocking dangerously.

*Well, let's hope whatever Zina has in that bag is waterproof,* Trent thought, gritting his teeth as he stood, planting his feet as far apart as the limited space on the paddleboat would allow, and trying not to think about how ridiculous this entire situation was.

“Give us the bag – and the girl,” one of the men in blue growled as he too rose, fists bunched by his side. He was shorter than Trent, but it was clear he was made of pure muscle, short and stocky, like a pit bull terrier. “You don't wanna get involved in this, whoever you are. That's the only warning I'll give you.”

“Seems like I'm already involved,” Trent shot back. “Thanks for the warning, though.”

The man's eyes reduced to slits as he moved them back and forth between Trent and Zina, while his friend kept the paddleboat beneath his feet steady. Given how strong the man looked, Trent didn't think there was much chance of knocking him into the river – the man was basically a tank.

Behind him, he could sense Zina glancing around, keeping her eye out for other attackers, but right now, all he wanted her to focus on was protecting her bag and whatever was inside it.

“Trent,” she said quietly – and Trent immediately knew what she was talking about. Two more paddleboats were approaching, each containing two more men. If the pit bull-looking man hadn't attacked him yet, it was because he was waiting for backup.



Clearly, whatever was in that bag was worth *a lot*.

“You’re outnumbered.” The pit bull smirked. “You wanna rethink my generous offer?”

“Maybe,” Trent murmured, eyes flickering as he looked around for any other sources of attack. “I mean, the odds *are* pretty stacked against us right now.”

“You got that right.” Pit Bull’s smirk grew wider. Trent was having trouble placing his accent – it seemed to be a little bit of everything. “You should make this easy on yourself. Hand her over – nothing has to happen to you.”

“Mmm. I see, I see.” Trent nodded. Of course, he knew *that* was a lie. Even if they didn’t know who he actually was, there was no way they’d leave a loose end like that lying around, no matter who they worked for. “I guess you’re right.”

Maybe they were more desperate to haul Zina in than it seemed, because his words were all it took for Pit Bull’s eyes to dart over to Zina, his attention momentarily off Trent. But it was the moment Trent had been waiting for.

The momentary lapse in concentration, the slight relaxation in the hunched muscle of his shoulders was all he needed.

*Now!*

Leaning back as far as he dared, Trent raised his leg and then shot it forward, planting his foot squarely in the center of Pit Bull’s chest, sending him flailing over the side of his paddleboat and into the dark water of the river. It took a lot of effort – the man was built, well, like a pit bull – but by drawing on his kangaroo’s strength, Trent managed it.

“*PADDLE!*” Trent yelled, slamming back down into his seat and shoving his feet onto the pedals. Zina paddled – and the boat slowly began to pull away, the water on either side of them churning furiously.

Trent didn’t have time to look back – he knew this was their only chance to get away before the other men closed in on them. Hopefully if they’d all gathered here, he and Zina

would be able to escape and find somewhere to lay low in the city, before figuring out where to go from here.

“They’re gaining on us.”

Trent glanced across at Zina to find her looking over her shoulder, watching the paddleboats that were now chasing them down the river.

“And it seems like they already fished out that guy you kicked. He doesn’t look too happy.”

“Well, with any luck he’ll be down with a nasty case of giardia,” Trent said as he turned back to face forward. They’d need to start making themselves scarce, and soon.

“Wait – there’s giardia in this water?!” Zina demanded, clutching her hand back a little closer to her chest, and staring in horror at the splashes that were rising up either side of them. “What the hell?!”

“Hey, you told me you were from New York, and I read somewhere that there’s gonorrhea in the Gowanus Canal,” Trent shot back.

“No one goes paddleboating in the Gowanus Canal!”

“Well, regardless, it was just a joke. There is *probably* no giardia in this river,” Trent said. “And if the blue-green algae levels had been too high, they wouldn’t have let us come out.”

“Well, that’s very reassuring, thanks,” Zina said, with what Trent thought was some pretty unwarranted sarcasm.

Still, at least it got the tension out: Trent knew his tendency to talk during times of trouble annoyed some people – well, *most* people – but he personally found it helped him keep a clear head, so he could spot an opportunity when one was needed.

*And one is definitely needed now.*

The men, grim-faced in their watercraft, were paddling nearer and nearer by the second. They’d have Trent and Zina encircled in a moment – since, for all his confusion about whether she was a shifter or not, Zina’s stamina *was* flagging now. They wouldn’t be able to keep this up for long.

*Can't head towards the shore – they've got us cut off already,* Trent thought, glancing around. *Can't head back the way we came.* Trent took a deep breath. *Think, c'mon, think. There is no way you and your mate are about to get caught by some guys on paddleboats.*

As he'd been desperately putting his rational mind to work, Trent's kangaroo had been scrabbling at the back of his mind, trying to get him to listen to it.

*You aren't paying attention to me! You aren't using your instincts!*

It seemed, finally, that the kangaroo had had enough of being ignored, and it burst with an almighty leap into his conscious mind, demanding he pay attention to it.

All at once, Trent found himself immersed in a world not of thought, but sounds and smells, sense and instinct – the way he was when he was in his shifted form, and at times like now, when the kangaroo wrested control away from his human side and *forced* him to listen to it. It was a strong-willed, aggressive animal, after all, and it did *not* like being ignored.

That was when Trent heard it – the sound he hadn't consciously been registering, but which had slowly been getting louder and louder over the past couple of minutes. It was the slow, steady chug of an engine.

*A boat engine,* Trent realized.

Twisting in his seat, he already knew what he'd see when he turned: the Popeye.

He remembered going on the Popeye when he'd been a kid – the motorized launch, chugging along the river conducting sight-seeing tours had seemed kind of boring to him at the time, since when his parents had said they were going on a *river journey* his childhood imagination had run away with him and he'd imagined, for some reason, zooming along on jet skis, or something involving rowboats and picnic baskets.

Right now, however, Trent could have kissed the Popeye and every single one of its occupants. It might have seemed a slow journey to him at the time, but if there was one thing the

launch *could* go faster than, it was a bunch of guys on paddleboats.

Trent narrowed his eyes, calculating the distance as the Popeye drew closer.

*Can we make it?*

It seemed very far – fifteen meters or so, though it might narrow to ten as the launch passed them.

*Of course we can make it,* his kangaroo answered, indignant. *For our mate, we can do anything.*

Trent decided he'd just have to trust it on that. He let the kangaroo take over the reins of his mind. He'd need it, if he was going to make that jump.

“Zina, stand up,” he murmured, taking his feet off the pedals. He needed the boat to be still for this.

“Huh?” Zina looked up at him, blinking. Then, she followed his gaze and seemed to intuit what he was thinking. “No. No way.”

“Actually, it's the *only* way,” Trent said. He took his eyes off the Popeye for a moment, to check on the progress of the men. They were advancing in a pincer formation, and in a moment they'd have them surrounded.

He heard Zina suck in a sharp breath as she seemed to realize the situation too.

“All right,” she muttered, taking her feet off the pedals, as together, they stood up. “But I better not get giardia.”

Trent just nodded, though he appreciated her joke. Right now, he had to concentrate. The men were closing in – the Popeye was chugging closer – *closer* –

*It's now or never!*

Wrapping his arm around Zina's side, Trent pulled her close against him, making sure she was secure. And then, he *leapt*.

It was a sensation he wasn't used to feeling in his human form – the air rushing past him, the incredible strength and

speed of a powerful jump.

Beside him, he heard Zina gasp. He could also feel the heat of her body where she was pressed up closely against him – just as she had been when they’d ziplined from one roof to another, all those years ago when he’d realized she was his mate.

*C’mon, just a little more –*

Somehow, the feeling of Zina’s body against his had lent Trent a strength he didn’t know he possessed in his human form. Just when he thought they weren’t going to make it, he felt his foot hit against the back paneling of the launch, a small but fairly secure toehold, before his free hand found a tiny ledge beneath the back window to grab onto. Still, it was a lot of weight to ask two tiny little protrusions to manage, aside from the fact that the launch was rocking a little after the impact.

“Come on – quick, climb up!”

Trent lifted Zina up as far as he could. She held her bag tightly with one arm, using the other to pull herself upward to the relative safety and security of the roof of the boat. Once he was sure she was safe, Trent climbed up after her – and saw the surprised face of a small boy looking out the back window at him as he went.

Trent gave him a small wave, and then pressed his finger to his lips, hoping the kid would understand the universal signal for *keep it a secret, okay?*

Given that no one popped their head up over the side of the launch a moment later to ask Trent and Zina what the hell they thought they were doing, Trent had to assume the kid had in fact kept his mouth shut.

Turning, he gazed out over the river, looking back at their pursuers. One or two boats were still trying to chase after them, spraying water with their furious pedaling, but it was no good. They couldn’t hope to keep up. Eventually they broke off, joining their friends in floating impotently on the gentle currents of the River Torrens. Trent gave them a little wave.

“Can’t you be serious for one moment?” Zina asked, shaking her head as she watched him.

“Well, I could. But why?” Trent asked, turning to her.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Zina muttered, breaking their eye contact and shaking her head again.

“But you wouldn’t want me any other way, right?”

*We wouldn’t want her any other way*, his kangaroo spoke up, as Trent looked down into Zina’s large brown eyes, taking in her parted lips and the way she was slightly gasping for breath after all that exertion and excitement. *She is perfect as she is. Utterly perfect.*

Zina pulled in a deep breath. “Well. I guess you *did* pull our asses out of the fire.”

Trent laughed, low and soft. “Well, thank you.”

“Even if it was your stupid idea that put us in there in the first place.”

“Well, that’s less nice. But you have to admit, this is a pretty good ride.” Trent glanced around. From the roof of the Popeye, the view of the scenery was completely unimpeded by the doors and window frames inside the boat. And the fresh air wasn’t too bad either.

Nor was the view of Zina, as she took off her big floppy hat, running her fingers through her short hair – she must’ve cut it during her escape, to make herself less recognizable. Trent had thought she looked great before, but short hair suited her as well: she had such a striking face, with her large eyes, strong, high cheekbones and cute pointed chin that she’d look amazing no matter what she did with her hair.

*But I can’t really just get caught up in the view*, Trent thought, forcing himself to remember that no matter what, he’d come here to help Zina. And for that, he had to know what was really going on with her.

“You never did get a chance to tell me exactly why you’re on the run – *and* exactly what’s in that bag of yours,” he said.

Zina bit her lip, swallowing. “No, I guess I didn’t. And I guess I better tell you now, in case this is the last moment of relative peace we get.”

Trent nodded. “Honestly? Yeah.”

Still biting her lip, Zina reached into her bag, pulling out the sturdy box she’d tried to pass off to Trent earlier. It looked pretty high-tech, now that he had a chance to look at it properly – and he was proved correct a moment later, when Zina ran her thumb over a hidden sensor on the front, and Trent heard a slight *beep* and *whir* as the box unlocked.

“So how was I supposed to open that, if I didn’t have your thumbprint?” he asked, as Zina unfastened the latches.

“I would have given you a spare. I made a copy of my fingerprints with a 3D printer,” she said, as if this was normal. “Though hopefully *someone* at your organization would have been able to hack in eventually.”

Trent felt that deserved some kind of sassy retort, but whatever words he might have said died abruptly as Zina opened the lid, lifted up a foam covering, and *finally* showed him what was inside the box.

Trent stared. He’d never seen anything like it before – three stunningly beautiful iridescent oval-shaped objects. Two were a deep, dark cobalt blue, speckled with silver and gold. The third was a deep green, so dark it was almost black.

Trent hadn’t *seen* anything like them before – but he’d definitely heard about it. But still, were these *really* what Trent thought they were?

*Well, I guess there’s only one way to find out.*

Swallowing, he dragged his eyes away from the beautiful objects, to find Zina watching him closely.

“Are – are those –” he began to say, before she cut him off with a nod.

“Yes,” she said. “They’re eggs.”

## CHAPTER 5

*W*hat am I doing. What am I doing. What am I doing.

Zina couldn't say this was the *first* time this refrain had beat through her head ever since she'd decided to grab the eggs and go on the run – but it certainly was the most persistent time.

She was sitting at a back table of the diner they'd stopped at, staring down at her hands where they sat folded in front of her. The bag with the case containing the eggs was between her leg and the padding of the booth she sat in. No one would be able to get it without having to go through her – and Trent, presumably – first.

*God. What have I done?*

Zina swallowed heavily. They'd managed to make their way off the Popeye without being detected when it steered closer to the bank to check out some native foliage. Trent had pulled her close to his side again and *jumped*, landing easily on the bank, before the two of them had made their way swiftly through the brushlands and back to a road they could follow.

Trent had told her he couldn't sense any danger – she'd guessed he was a shifter back in London, and the leap from the paddleboat had only confirmed what she already knew – so they'd set off. Trent had asked Zina where she wanted to go, and Zina had simply told him anywhere they could get some breathing space. Trent had nodded, and said they'd better get



on a bus, then – nice and anonymous, and it'd get them out of the city.

Nothing that had happened today had been in her plans, Zina thought, as she stared down at her hands. Nothing had gone the way she'd thought it would.

*I was ready to offload the eggs and let myself get caught, if that was what it took to keep them safe. I was going to use myself as a decoy and lead Hargreaves and whoever else is after me away. I was prepared for it. I always knew I'd get caught in the end – I'd just wanted to make sure the eggs were safe before I did.*

None of that had happened.

Instead, she found herself... well, *here*. Wedged up the back of a booth in a small-town diner on the very outskirts of the suburbs, which was as far as the bus they'd jumped on would take them. After this, Trent had told her, there was only bushland.

There hadn't been any chance for Zina to explain anything more to Trent on the bus – it had been crowded, and the last thing she needed was anyone overhearing what she had to say. But Trent hadn't seemed to mind at all – he'd been content to wait, telling her they'd have time later.

*He said he trusted me, and that he'd help me. But why? Why the hell is he doing this?!*

Zina glanced up, feeling her heart... *wobble* a little inside her as she found Trent's tall form over by the cash register, where he was paying for the meal they both badly needed. Zina wasn't sure whether it was the adrenaline or the nervous exhaustion, but she was *starving*.

But aside from being hungry as hell, Zina felt as if her stomach was trying to bully its way out of her skin with a vengeance. She'd never had a case of nerves like this before – if she suffered from them, she wouldn't have made it very far as an undercover agent. Her job required her to remain cool, calm, and able to assess any situation rationally, no matter the amount of pressure she was under.

*Why is it that just when I need it most, I can't seem to stay calm?!*

Trying to figure it out, she lifted her hand, resting her chin on her palm. She studied Trent's profile as he laughed with the lady behind the counter, who was obviously *charmed* by him, laughing along lightly with whatever he said, fluttering her lashes, flipping her hair over her shoulder, all but *biting her lip*...

*Honestly, who flirts that blatantly while they're on the clock?!*

If Zina hadn't known better, she would have said it was *jealousy* that was currently coursing through her veins, making her narrow her eyes and screw up her lips – but that would have been ridiculous, considering she didn't even *know* Trent.

Not really, anyway.

She'd only planned on seeing him for as long as it took to give him the eggs, then she'd been planning on disappearing again.

*This was not in the plan. So how can I be jealous about a man I was never even planning on seeing again? Clearly I just need food and sleep.*

She forced herself to tear her eyes away from where Trent was thanking the pouting and preening waitress with a smile. She *definitely* didn't want to have been caught staring.

Still, she couldn't help but watch Trent as he returned to their table, moving with a kind of rangy, languid ease that spoke of an underlying power and strength running through his body, his biceps obvious beneath the material of his shirt and the muscles of his thighs encased in the tight denim of his jeans, and *okay*, Zina admitted, maybe she couldn't exactly blame the waitress for trying.

Trent sat down opposite her, lowering his long, *long* body into the booth and folding his hands on the table in front of him. His legs were long enough that she felt his knees brushing hers, and she shifted a little uncomfortably in her seat.

“Okay. Dinner’s on its way,” Trent said easily, as if they had all the time in the world. She didn’t miss the serious expression in his eye, though. “Now that we’ve got some space, how about you tell me exactly what all of this is about?”

Out of habit, Zina covertly scanned the room. There weren’t many people around, though – a couple of middle-aged men at the bar, and some older ladies enjoying a quiet chat on the other side of the room. What looked like a teenage couple staring at each other over their milkshakes, clearly in the first stages of puppy love.

*I guess the coast is clear. And I can’t put this off forever.*

Hauling in a breath, she forced herself to meet Trent’s eyes – and he returned her gaze unflinchingly.

“You guessed right,” she said, keeping her voice low and even. “You knew they were eggs as soon as you saw them, right?”

Trent nodded, but he said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

“I... well, I realize what I’m about to tell you is going to sound pretty crazy. But I promise you, it’s true. I had trouble believing it at first myself, but I read the files, I looked into what Hargreaves were trying to do as part of my mission. And if there’s one thing I know, it’s that Hargreaves aren’t in the business of wasting money, and they poured *a lot* of it into this project.” She swallowed. “Because pretty obviously, those eggs didn’t come from a chicken, right? But I’m not sure you’ll believe me if I tell you what they *are* from.”

“Try me,” Trent said mildly.

Zina smiled softly. She *wanted* to believe he’d believe her, but until she’d said it, she couldn’t quite bring herself to think he would. “Well – that’s just it, I guess no one’s *exactly* sure what they are. Hargreaves have been looking into it, but they only have guesses based on incomplete records.” She cocked her head, watching his face for any sign of disbelief. “Records

of things like dragons. Unicorns. Basilisks. Pegasi. Manticores.”

To her surprise, Trent didn't seem especially fazed. She frowned. Everyone thought these creatures were extinct – if they'd ever existed in the first place. But Trent was just nodding along, as if this was all perfectly normal to him.

Zina had to admit she was a little... surprised?

*C'mon, even the guys in Jurassic Park were a little surprised when they heard about the dinosaurs – and we do definitely know dinosaurs existed!*

“Let me guess,” Trent said after a moment. “And alicorns as well?”

Zina blinked.

*Oh. So he's making fun of me. It's that deadpan Australian sense of humor.*

“Believe me or don't,” she said, aware she sounded a little testy, “but can you not joke around for half a minute, please?”

“I'm not joking.” Trent's voice was, for once, perfectly serious. “I'm really not – I believe you. Honestly.”

Zina felt the slightest uncoiling of the tension in her belly, even as she wasn't really sure Trent *completely* understood what he was saying. Otherwise, how could he be so blasé about it all?

*No one's seen these creatures for thousands of years, after all. Can he really be so casual about the fact they may still exist in the world?!*

“You do?” she couldn't help herself from asking.

“I do.”

Trent sounded certain, but Zina still wasn't quite sure why he seemed to be having such an easy time with it.

“Okay... so... nothing really to say about... all that, then?” Zina asked, though she knew that really, her relief that Trent didn't think she'd ruined her life and career – and *his*, most likely – over delusions about dragons and unicorns and

basilisks should override everything else she might be feeling just now.

“No – unless you *want* me to say something?” Trent said, cocking his head. “I’d prefer to wait until I have the full story before commenting, to be honest.”

Zina pursed her lips. She supposed she at least owed him that much. Her *own* questions for him about why he didn’t seem that surprised about dragons, alicorns, basilisks and pegasi existing could wait until later.

“Well, I’ll start at the start, then. It’s been a project of Hargreaves’s for some time – ever since they first heard that maybe there were some of these eggs lying dormant, forgotten, somewhere out there. A lot of people thought it was a wild goose chase, but evidently someone far enough up the food chain decided it was worth pursuing.”

“You mean, looking into whether these creatures – or at least their eggs – still exist in the world?” Trent asked.

Zina nodded. Trent was taking this *much* better than she’d thought he would. She wondered what the catch was – there was *always* a catch.

“That’s right. They’ve spent a lot of money and time on it – getting in contact with people who trade in rare artifacts, doing a lot of the searching themselves to find these eggs – the eggs of creatures that everyone’s assumed have been extinct for thousands upon thousands of years, lying dormant in caves, buried deep underground, or other places like that. I’ve heard rumors that they’re even looking in places like active volcanoes.”

“Any idea why?” Trent’s tone gave nothing away.

“Because they think a lot of these creatures will still have the primal powers that modern-day shifters have lost over the centuries,” Zina said, holding his gaze. “Powers that we can only imagine. Things like... the ability to heal any disease, almost, with just a drop of blood. Things like mind control, and the ability to alter memories. The power to turn people to

stone with a single glance. Things that sound like something out of a fairytale.”

“So in other words, the kind of things that a company like Hargreaves would absolutely *love* to get their hands on,” Trent said.

Zina nodded. “Exactly. If they could find out how a basilisk’s power works – well, can you imagine? Soldiers who could turn an opposing army into stone just like *that*.” She clicked her fingers. “Or a flying, fire-breathing dragon with armored scales. Or having a shifter that can control people’s minds – they could do just about anything with that. It’s terrifying to think about. That kind of power in anyone’s hands could be scary, but *especially* in the hands of the people who run Hargreaves.”

“I can agree with you there. Not good at all,” said Trent, nodding. Which seemed to Zina to be just a *tiny* bit of an understatement.

“It’s taken them a lot of years and *a lot* of money,” Zina said. “But they finally managed to acquire what they think are some of the eggs they’ve been looking for.”

“Hmm.” Trent’s eyes didn’t leave her face. “Which *you*, apparently have now acquired yourself.”

Zina nodded, feeling her face flush. “That’s right.”

“And the chain of events leading up to this was...?”

Looking down at her hands, Zina swallowed. She could feel her throat getting tight – maybe it was nerves, but it was also embarrassment.

She’d *never* lost her head like this before. She had a reputation for being a consummate professional: always cool, always calm. She’d had long years of training. She’d always been able to tell herself that the mission was the only thing that mattered – not her thoughts, not her feelings, not her opinions.

*Until it came to these eggs....*

“I...” Zina started, before taking a breath, and starting again. “I assume you know I was working undercover at Hargreaves.” When Trent nodded, she continued, “I wasn’t very high up – that wasn’t the plan. I was just a data analyst. I was just supposed to do my job and keep my head down, and occasionally hack into whatever top secret work Hargreaves were up to and pass it along to my superiors. It wasn’t exciting – just information gathering. I wasn’t authorized to make any actual moves on my own, no matter what I found out about what Hargreaves was doing.”

“Until?” Trent prompted, seeming to anticipate where this story was going.

Zina pulled in a shaking breath. “Yeah. *Until*. I knew something *big* had gone down, because of all the chatter in the servers I was supposed to be monitoring, but they were behind an extra layer of security and it took me a while to get past it. So I didn’t know for a while that Hargreaves had hit the jackpot – some rich guy in Monaco was putting up some stuff from his great-grandfather’s estate, and two of these eggs were part of that, though they were billed as rare items of ancient sculpture. Hargreaves knew better, though. The third one they found in Bermuda, after they funded an archaeological dig there. They really spared no expense.”

“Right – so I’m guessing that they weren’t completely legally acquired, then,” Trent said. “No tax declarations or cultural evaluations or anything like that.”

Zina let out a short, sharp laugh. “That’s one way of putting it, yeah.”

Trent glanced down at where the bag sat behind her leg. “So... what will hatch out of them that Hargreaves was so desperate to get its hands on?”

Shaking her head, Zina shrugged. “That’s just it – no one knows. No one really *knows* all that much about these creatures, obviously. But I did see some people speculating about what kind of eggs they were, as well as what their plans were going to be for whatever *did* hatch out of them.”

Trent narrowed his eyes. “Plans?”

“Yeah.” Zina drew in a shaky breath. “You can probably guess. You know what Hargreaves is like. What kind of... experiments they do. But... reading some of that stuff... it made my stomach turn. They weren’t interested in the fact that living, breathing creatures would – *might* – hatch out of those eggs. Only in what they could do. Only in what *experiments* they could carry out on them to find out how their powers worked.”

Zina swallowed, still recalling the sick, horrific things she’d read about what was in store for the innocent creatures – the *children*, really, since they’d one day be able to take on a shifted human form – at the hands of Hargreaves’s scientists.

“The program was being run by Doctor James Sumner – a really, really nasty customer. Completely ruthless. He was the mastermind behind it all, and he’s not someone you mess around with. He barely thinks of other shifters – or humans – as anything more than potential lab samples. So I know whatever he had in store for these eggs, it wasn’t pretty.”

She’d known even as she read it back then that she couldn’t stand by and let it happen. She couldn’t *know* what would become of them and simply sit there and do nothing.

“I did some work with Doctor Sumner, to help tighten up his lab security – and I knew I could use what I’d learned to break into it. I managed to steal his fingerprints and figured out how to get around his safety features. It took a lot of time and effort. I was all ready to go with stealing the eggs and getting them somewhere safe.”

Trent raised an eyebrow. “But?”

Closing her eyes, Zina bit her lip. “Yeah, *but*. I asked for permission to steal the eggs and run for it. But my handler said no – he said I had to stay where I was, and continue doing what I was doing. That even if Hargreaves had the eggs, it wasn’t worth risking all the info I’d been gathering to try to steal them. I argued with him – I said *surely* the eggs would be worth more than that. But I knew at the time... well, that wasn’t the only reason I wanted to steal them and run. Yes, obviously, I thought they were valuable. But I wasn’t being



exactly honest, since the reason I wanted to do it was... well, it had nothing to do with the mission, I just – I just couldn't –”

Zina felt her throat getting tight – too tight to let any more words pass her lips.

Frustrated, she shook her head. This *never* happened to her. She was *always* supposed to keep her head, no matter what.

“You couldn't let that happen, though,” Trent said, his voice low, calm, and even. Even in the midst of her unexpected emotional turmoil, Zina found something about it soothing – it felt almost as if he'd reached out a hand and run it gently over her head, calming and comforting her.

Zina looked up, blinking in confusion, but Trent's hands hadn't moved. He was still just where he'd been, sitting across the table from her, his hands resting palms-down in front of him.

“You couldn't bear the thought of knowing what would happen to whatever hatched out of those eggs, and doing nothing,” Trent said, as if he'd read her mind, his voice still low and measured.

Swallowing, Zina tried to force herself to focus. She knew the power suppression serum she'd taken would be wearing off relatively soon – probably sometime in the next forty-eight hours. But it usually took a little while. Her antelope shifter powers would be fading in and out for a while, and she knew she'd be very on edge until then, having hot and cold flushes, and maybe even feeling a little nauseated. It was fine – she knew the drill by now. She usually didn't like to be around other people while it was happening, though.

Maybe that was why she'd found herself so on edge over the past little while – it had nothing to do with Trent, and everything to do with the serum wearing off.

*But I didn't mean for him to come with me, she thought, confusion swirling within her. Why is he doing this? I don't understand at all.*

“So. What happened then?” Trent asked. “Though I think I can guess.”

Zina nodded, heart thudding. “You probably can.” She licked her lips. “I just... I couldn’t accept it. I *know* the mission is paramount. *Of course* I know that. But is it more important than standing by *knowing* if you don’t do something, innocent shifters are going to be subjected to fates worth than death?”

She looked up at him, willing him to understand. Could he really think she’d done the right thing? She’d abandoned everything she’d ever trained for. Everything she’d ever believed in. She was on the run from just about everyone. There was no safe place for her to go. And now, somehow, she’d dragged him into this mess as well.

“Of course I understand, Zina. You did the right thing. Well, as far as I’m concerned you did, anyway.”

For a moment, Zina wasn’t sure she could have heard him correctly – and then, as she stared at him and realized she had, a wave of relief washed over her. She had the sudden, near-overwhelming urge to throw herself across the table at him and – uh.

*Give him a hug?*

Zina blinked.

She wasn’t much of a hugger, and never had been. But it was hard to explain the impulse she was having to fight hard not to give in to now.

*I must just be tired. And sleep-deprived. And hungry. Did Trent say he was getting food?* She shook her head. *No, that must be it. I’m just hungry. I can’t think straight when I’m hungry.*

Trent was still looking at her, his eyes steady on her face, clearly waiting for her lead as to what to say next.

“You... you really think it was the right choice?” she asked, aware her voice sounded small, and maybe even shook a little.

“Of course.” His answer was instantaneous. “I would have done the same.”

Zina stared at him. “You would?”

His voice had been completely serious, and it didn’t leave any room for doubt. Despite herself, Zina believed him – but she was still surprised.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I know what kind of place Hargreaves is, and what kind of things they’d stoop to – especially when it comes to mythical shifters. I have a friend who...” He grimaced slightly, cutting himself off. “Well, maybe I can tell you about that later. Right now, food’s here.”

Zina looked up as the waitress – the same one who’d taken Trent’s order – approached the table, two steaming bowls in her hands. She completely ignored Zina, but made sure to give Trent her biggest, brightest smile as she put their meals down on the table in front of them.

“Here you go – two pie floaters and chips. Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Trent said, giving her a small, polite smile.

“No problem. If you need anything, just let me know.” The waitress winked at him as she stood up, before sashaying slowly away – but Zina couldn’t help but notice that Trent’s eyes remained fixed on her own face, without showing the slightest bit of interest in the waitress’s swaying hips at all.

It was harder than Zina wanted to admit to look away from his eyes.

When she did, though, dropping them to the plate in front of her, she frowned.

“Uh. What is this?”

She stared down at the... meal... sitting in front of her.

“Just what the lady said,” Trent said, picking up his knife and fork. “Pie floater and chips.”

“No, I *heard* what she said,” Zina told him. “I just didn’t understand it.”

Looking at the food in question *really* wasn't enlightening her any further either. What exactly was she even *looking* at?

"It's the classic!" Trent said enthusiastically. "You can't come to Adelaide and not have a pie floater. Look – it's a meat pie, sitting in a bowl of pea soup. And then you get chips on the side. It's great. All the food groups in one."

Zina opened her mouth, realized she had *absolutely nothing* to say to that, and closed it again.

"The *food groups*?" she finally managed to sputter out.

"Yeah – vegetables, soup, and pie," Trent said, as he sawed a massive chunk off his meat pie, before using it to scoop up some of his pea soup. He put the whole huge thing into his mouth, chewing enthusiastically. "C'mon – aren't you hungry? It'll get cold."

*Maybe I can just have the chips,* Zina thought. They at least looked safe enough – like thick French fries.

"No, have some meat!" Trent said, as Zina picked up one of the chips. "You've had a long day, and I don't think this is over yet – not by a long shot. You'll need to keep your strength up while we figure out where to go from here."

Zina knew he was right – about what they were doing being far from over, *not* about whether or not she should eat some pie floater. But as her stomach gurgled hungrily, she realized that right now, she'd probably eat just about anything, no matter *what* it was or *what* it was called.

"All right. Fine," she muttered, picking up her knife and fork.

The pie floater, despite the name, turned out to be surprisingly decent – the pie was rich and savory, and it was offset by the mild, fresh taste of the pea soup. Zina had to admit that for something with floater in the title, she was pleasantly surprised. Add the salty tang of the chips, and all in all, she was left... weirdly satisfied at the end of the meal.

She supposed this was a lesson not to judge a book by its cover... or a meal by its absolutely horrific-sounding name.

As she and Trent began cleaning up the last of their pea soup and pie gravy with their remaining chips, Trent looked across at her, his voice low and serious once again.

“I’m sure you already know this, but I don’t exactly have official sanction to be out here looking for you right now,” he said. “You told me everything – and I believe you. So now it’s time for me to be honest with you. My boss asked me if I knew you – if I remembered you from when we met back in London.”

Zina swallowed, a cold, hard knot forming in her stomach. Suddenly, she wasn’t that interested in finishing her food.

“I told him I didn’t – well, not really, anyway, not any more than I’d remember someone I met on a mission. I told him I had no reason to think you’d contact me. That was before you actually *did*, so it wasn’t technically a lie.”

Despite herself, Zina laughed a little. “Well, you were right,” she said. “I really didn’t have any reason, except for the fact that I was getting desperate.”

Trent said nothing to that, and when Zina looked up at him she saw the same strange, almost pained, confused expression on his face, before he inhaled a quick, sharp breath, and then cleared his throat.

“Well, be that as it may, you *have* contacted me now. And I’ve thrown my lot in with you. I’ll have my own agency on the lookout for me. It’s possible I can explain things to them... but you *do* have a burn notice. It won’t be easy to convince them you’re someone who can be trusted. Not to mention the obligation we have to inform *your* agency if we find you.”

Zina nodded, licking her lips. “I know. It really wasn’t my intention to drag you into all of this. I just wanted –”

“I know,” Trent cut her off, nodding. “But I made my choice. And I’m sticking with it. And if I can help you, then I will. But it may take some doing. And I think we have to get somewhere safe before we do it.”

“Somewhere safe,” Zina repeated, before biting her lip. “Well, what about the opposite of that?”

Trent raised his eyebrows. “Well, I mean, sure, if that’s what you want. But could I maybe get in on your thinking?”

Zina pulled in a deep breath. “There aren’t only eggs in that case,” she said. “There’s also a USB, with some info I swiped from Hargreaves on their latest project. It’s all encrypted, of course, and it would have taken you guys a while to figure it out. But you would have. And then you would have known the *other* reason I knew I had to get to Australia.”

“You mean aside from the sunny weather and the beaches,” Trent said, voice deadpan.

“Yeah, and your pie floaters, of course,” Zina said. “But no – there’s one last egg Hargreaves are after. And they seem to think they’ll find it here.”

“Well, *here* is a pretty big place,” Trent said. “Can you narrow it down any?”

Zina nodded. “Yeah – they think they’ll find it buried deep underground, out in the desert somewhere. They’ve been buying up mining prospects, as many as they can, for years now. So far, they’ve had no luck. But they must think they’re onto something, because they’re still at it.”

“Mining – what kind of mine?” Trent asked.

“Opal mines. They’ve *definitely* made a lot of money out of it, but that’s not their main purpose there, it’s just a convenient sideline,” Zina said. “The land they’ve been buying up is somewhere called Jackson’s Ridge?”

“Oh – I know it,” Trent said. “Well, I know *of* it. It’s on the way to Coober Pedy. I have family out that way. Or I used to – they moved north a few years ago.”

“So... you’re familiar with the area, then?” Zina asked, leaning forward, hope beginning to bloom in her chest.

“Not very,” Trent admitted. “But I can get us there. You say Hargreaves are poking around out there? Then it seems like the kind of thing we should be stopping them from doing.”

Zina felt a smile twitching at the corners of her lips. “You mean... together?”

Trent nodded. “I mean together.”

## CHAPTER 6

There was really only one motel in the town, and it was immediately apparent why it had rooms free – Zina thought if *this* was what she saw on opening the door, she would have immediately kept driving until she reached the next town as well.

“Well, it’s, uh... well, it’s cozy!” Trent said, as both of them stood in the doorway looking around the room. The brown wallpaper was mildewed and, in some places, outright rotting, the carpet was worn completely away in places, and... well, the less said about the bed, the better.

“Well... that’s one way of putting it,” Zina said, as they made their way inside, Trent closing the door behind them.

“On the bright side, we have multiple exits, and we have a bit of a vantage point, being on the second floor. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than nothing. I guess?”

“I know,” Zina said somberly. And she *did* know Trent was right, but part of her couldn’t help longing for a long, hot bath and a soft, fluffy bed. She’d been on the run for so long she felt like she couldn’t really remember what it felt like to fully relax – but then, that was pretty much a feature of the life she’d chosen as a field agent. “And anyway, I’ve stayed in worse places.”

*That* was true as well. Maybe she’d just gotten soft – while being undercover at Hargreaves had demanded a high state of alertness, part of playing her role had been living in a *very* nice apartment on her fat Hargreaves salary, which had been very



generous even as a relatively low-level employee. That, she supposed, was part of the reason people kept working for them, even when they got to know more of the shady stuff Hargreaves was involved with: the money was hard to walk away from.

Trent was over by the far wall, opening the door that Zina assumed led to the bathroom. He whistled.

Zina was a *little* worried about what that might signify, until he said, “Well, at least the bathroom’s pretty swanky – I mean, compared to the rest of it. Maybe they had some rennos done, but only had enough cash for the bathrooms.”

“Some *what* done?” Zina asked, as she came over to join him.

“Ah – renovations, sorry,” Trent said, shooting her a grin.

Poking her head around the side of the doorframe, Zina had to admit he was probably right. The bathroom looked newly done – not fancy by any stretch of the imagination, but relatively clean, with what were obviously some nice new tiles – not moldy, not scummy – and a bathtub that looked like it might actually have seen a scrubbing brush in the last week or so, and a showerhead that wasn’t leaking green water into it. No actual *bath* though, which, churlishly, she couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed by.

“Okay... this is actually pretty nice,” Zina said. “I take it back. We can stay here.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that,” Trent said. “Seems like you could do with a moment of peace and quiet, even if it *is* just in the bathroom of a cheap motel.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a country and western song,” Zina murmured. “My mom *loved* those kinds of songs when I was a kid. I remember listening to them all the time when we’d drive around.”

Immediately, she snapped her mouth shut again. What had possessed her to say a thing like that? She’d been trained for a long time against those kinds of little slip-ups. Her backstory when she’d been undercover had mixed lies and truth, as they

almost always did, but that had been something *personal* – something she hadn't meant to reveal. Maybe she was too exhausted to think clearly anymore, and that was dangerous.

Maybe Trent could read the closed expression on her face, because he didn't remark on what she'd just said. He glanced at her, then cocked his head.

“If you want to have a shower, I can take care of keeping an eye out. And then I think you should get some sleep.”

Instinctively, Zina hugged her bag, which she'd been carrying since they left the diner, to her chest.

“It's okay – I won't let them out of my sight,” Trent said reassuringly. “Not even for a second. You can trust me.”

“No, I know that,” Zina blurted – and it was true, she really did. “I just... sorry. I've been looking after these for a while now. I guess it's just a bit difficult to let go.”

“You can take them into the bathroom with you if you want,” Trent said, a light laugh in his voice. “I won't be offended. I get it.”

“No, no, it's... it's fine.” Zina shook her head. She knew getting overly attached to the eggs, as precious as they were, probably wouldn't be the best idea. She'd have to give them up sooner or later. It would be best to start doing that in small steps, she guessed.

Relaxing her arm muscles, she let herself hand her bag, with the box with the eggs inside it, to Trent. She let out a long, shaky breath.

*There – not so hard, was it?*

She knew the kick of nausea in her stomach had nothing to do with having relinquished them – that was *all* about the serum wearing off.

“Are you all right?” Trent leaned over slightly, looking at her with concern. “What's up?”

“It's – it's nothing,” Zina said. Right now, she didn't want to explain it all to him. Old habits died hard, she supposed, and keeping some information to herself was something she'd had

to do for a long time, and she was still annoyed at herself about her slipup with her family history earlier.

*But does it really count as a slip if it's Trent? I know I can trust him... but...*

Zina shook her head. She was too exhausted right now to do anything else, and if she didn't get some rest she was going to make a mistake, and the eggs would fall into Hargreaves's hands.

A cold chill ran through her at the thought.

"I'm going to take a shower," she said. "And after that..."

"After that, you're going to sleep," Trent said firmly. "I told you, I'll take first watch. You need it, and I don't."

Exhausted, Zina could only nod. She felt gratefulness sweeping through her as she entered the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and started to strip off her clothes.

The shower didn't have a lot of water pressure, but still, it was hot, and Zina managed to feel refreshed after stepping out from underneath it and grabbing a towel, giving herself a vigorous rub – it was scratchy and dry, but right now, she felt like she needed a good scrubbing. She was still getting used to having such short hair, but she had to admit, this definitely cut down on the drying time.

She looked with a little annoyance at her dirty clothes as she began to put them on – naturally, they hadn't had a chance to buy anything new during their escape from Adelaide on the bus, but she thought it'd be a good idea to pick something up before they left tomorrow morning. Something completely different from what they'd been wearing already, and preferably, somehow, a new form of transportation as well.

Zina still had hard currency tucked away in her bag, and some more in a pouch she'd had strapped to her side beneath her clothes. There was no way she could risk going to an ATM, so she'd had to make sure she had enough cash on her.

*It might be enough to buy a second-hand car, she thought, opening the pouch and running her thumb over the bills, doing a quick count. A really old second-hand car...*

Swallowing, Zina gave herself a quick once-over in the tarnished mirror – one thing that *had* apparently lasted through the motel’s ‘rennos’, as Trent had put it.

She bit her lip as the thought of Trent flittered through her mind. She still didn’t know completely what to make of any of that. Maybe she’d have a better idea in a day or so, once the serum had worn off completely. Tomorrow was likely to be a nightmare, but after that, she knew she’d have a clear head, and her shifter senses would be completely intact.

*Still...*

The idea of spending the night in a motel room with Trent was making her nervous for reasons she couldn’t quite put her finger on. It made her stomach churn to think they’d be spending the night together – not like *that*, obviously, she scolded herself – and she couldn’t say it was *just* because of the effects of coming down off the serum.

*“Ugh!”*

Frustrated, Zina scrubbed her fingers through her newly short hair. She didn’t have time to think about this right now! Right now, she had to make sure she got enough rest so that she could make some sensible decisions about their next move.

Squaring her shoulders, she raised her hand to point at herself in the mirror, looking herself in the eye.

*You’ve come so far. Don’t mess it up now. You’re so close.*

Her little self-pep talk finished, Zina turned on her heel and marched out of the bathroom to find Trent spreading some fresh sheets over the bed.

“I found these in the cupboard – can’t say they’ll do much but it’s an extra layer between you and the mattress, which I thought you might appreciate,” he said, apparently in answer to Zina’s baffled look.

“Oh – right. Um. I appreciate that,” she said, watching as he quickly and efficiently tucked the sheets in around the mattress. For all Trent’s lackadaisical exterior, he could make a bed with hospital corners like no one’s business.

“Anyway, you need to get some rest,” Trent said. “How long have you been awake for now?”

“Not that lo—” Zina started to say, before a yawn cracked her mouth wide open, and she realized just how incredibly *bone tired* she was. Now that the adrenaline of the last few days had worn off, she was *exhausted*.

“That’s what I thought,” Trent said, a hint of laughter in his voice. “I told you – I’ll take first watch. I’m not the one who’s been on the run this whole time.”

Instinctively, Zina’s eyes darted to her bag, with the eggs stored securely inside. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Trent – far from it – it was just that she’d been keeping them safe for so long now that letting go was hard.

“Don’t worry about them,” Trent said soothingly. “I’ll keep them by me – keep them in my lap, if you like. Nothing’s getting to them. Okay?”

Zina nodded, swallowing. Either way, she needed sleep. “Okay.”

She hesitated a moment longer, and then crawled into the bed, with its double layer of sheets, pulling the thin blanket over her. The weather was pretty warm still, so she didn’t need much.

Her eyes felt heavy. She could feel herself falling asleep from almost the instant her head touched the pillow – and the last thing she saw before her eyes closed was Trent’s sharp profile as he kept a vigilant watch out of the motel window, the afternoon light filtering in through the ragged, aging lacy curtains.



“*H*ey – time to wake up.”  
“*Bluurgh?!?*”

Zina sat bolt upright, wakefulness hitting her like a ton of bricks. Her muscles tensed, and she prepared herself to jump

out of bed – to defend herself if she had to –

“Hey, hey – easy now. It’s just me.”

Zina blinked in the half-light, as memories came flooding back to her.

*The guys yesterday – the eggs – Trent –*

“Is everything all right?” she asked, glancing around the room. Trent seemed to be calm where he stood by the bed, so she had to assume nothing too urgent was going down.

“Everything’s good as gold,” Trent assured her. “I haven’t seen hide nor hair of those guys all night – though that doesn’t mean they’re gone for good. We should get moving as soon as we can.”

“Another bus?” Zina asked, rolling out of bed.

“If we have to,” Trent said. “But let’s get stocked up first and have some breakfast, and plot our next move from there. If we’re going out to Jackson’s Ridge, we’ll need our own wheels. No buses go out there unless you charter one – you can only get there by private car or by air. Or, I guess, by foot. But I wouldn’t rate our chances in the heat.”

*I might, if I had my shifter form,* Zina thought, biting her lip. Her antelope would have been able to speed through the desert sands, at least for a while. But Trent was right – the car would have to do.

“All right, well, we’ll see what we can do,” she said. “But first, like you said – breakfast. And supplies.”

It was early, but it seemed even this small town was already up and running. The diner they’d eaten at yesterday offered a breakfast menu of eggs, sausages and beans, and Zina had to say she kind of relished the fats and proteins after living so scantily for so long, snatching snacks from vending machines and convenience stores to eat on the run.

“So – where to first?” Trent asked her, as he mopped up the last of the bean sauce with a piece of white toast.

“I think we should invest in some new clothes,” Zina said, after a moment’s thought. “Maybe some hair dye.”

“For you? You haven’t got much left to dye,” Trent pointed out.

“Maybe not – but we should get some for you,” Zina said. “Maybe get you a new look, since you stick out quite a bit.”

*Ain’t that the truth*, she mentally added, resisting the urge to look him over. He was *startlingly* tall, over six foot six, and with *that* face and *that* body, Zina was pretty sure people were going to remember him. Changing his hair might not do that much, but at least it’d be something.

“Well sure, I don’t mind making myself pretty,” Trent said, flashing her a grin. “There’s a chemist across the street, I’m sure they’ll have some For Men or something like that. And sunnies too, hats, maybe even some undies and t-shirts.”

“Next thing is, we’ll need our own car, like you said,” Zina went on. “Just for the sake of being more mobile. Even if there *was* a bus we could catch, being beholden to a bus schedule doesn’t seem like a great idea right now.”

“Yeah. Pretty unfortunate if we got caught because Hargreaves’s guys managed to look at a public transport timetable.”

“Agreed.” Again, Zina felt her lips twitching into a smile. She couldn’t help it – Trent just seemed to have that effect on her. Or maybe she was just going insane after all the stress.

“But Zina, there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” Trent said, face turning suddenly serious. “It’s something that came to me last night. Something I think we should do *before* we head out to Jackson’s Ridge.”

Zina cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“I was thinking that if we’re going to be going somewhere Hargreaves has a pretty established presence, it may not be the best idea to take those little guys along with us,” Trent said, nodding down at the bag nestled against the back of Zina’s legs. “If we fail, they’ll just go back to the same situation you worked so hard to get them out of. It’d be best if we took them somewhere safe first.”

Zina bit her lip. She knew Trent was right – but *where* would they be safe? “So is there someone you can trust to take care of them? Someone in your agency?”

“Not exactly,” Trent said. “It’s not that I can’t trust them – there’s some guys there I’d trust with my life. But it’d be putting them in a pretty tricky situation, and I’d rather not make them make that kind of choice.”

*The same kind of choice you made*, Zina thought, with a renewed stab of regret at the situation she’d caused. But she’d never intended for Trent to join her – she still wasn’t entirely sure why he *had*.

“So... it’s a third party then?” Zina asked, a little warily.

“Yeah.” Trent nodded. “But don’t worry – she’s solid. I’d bet my life on her, every time. She’s utterly dedicated to the work she does.”

“Which is?” Zina asked.

“She runs a rare shifter sanctuary,” Trent said. “Not *too* far from where we’re headed, relatively speaking. Same general direction, anyway. By which I mean, north of here.”

“A rare shifter sanctuary?” Zina had heard about things like that, but she’d never visited one.

Trent nodded. “Yeah – she designed and built it as a safe haven for shifters whose shifter forms are extinct animals, or really rare, or mythical. The kind of shifters who can’t freely shift anywhere they like, and need somewhere they know they can go to just be themselves, away from prying eyes. So it’s pretty isolated, and there’s a strict code of absolute silence about what you see there.”

“That sounds... pretty wonderful, to be honest,” Zina said, after she’d swallowed her huge mouthful of sausage and eggs. “And you’re sure this would be a safe place for them?”

“Sure as eggs,” Trent said, as he reached for some more toast. “Tahnee is the lady who runs it, and she makes sure no one steps out of line. My mate Hector has been going up there for a while with his daughter Ruby.”



Zina blinked, her mouth dropping open slightly at the word *mate*. For some reason, Trent saying the word made her heart speed up, shock rippling through her.

“Oh... I... um. I see,” she said, looking down. Really, her sense of surprise and disappointment made no sense. It wasn’t that Trent was gay – she had no issue with that. It was just that –

“Oh, wait, no!” Trent said, holding up his hands suddenly. “No, I meant – not my *mate* mate. I mean my *mate*.”

Zina stared at him, wondering what exactly *that* was supposed to clarify.

“My *friend*,” Trent said, shaking his head. “Hec’s a good-lookin’ guy and all, but I don’t like him like *that*. And his *actual* mate might have something to say about it if I did.”

“Oh... right,” Zina stuttered, her pounding heart still trying to catch up to her brain. “I guess I got a little ahead of myself there.”

“Haha, yeah.” There was something strange and artificial in the way Trent laughed, and when she looked up at him, he seemed to be trying to evade her eyes. “No, believe me, Hec’s *very* happy with his mate Myrtle. I couldn’t get a look in there even if I wanted to.”

“So, uh, what does Hector shift into, then?” Zina asked. With that cleared up, she wanted to know more about this sanctuary – though she found herself curious to know whether Trent *had* actually found his mate yet. She assumed not, since he probably would have mentioned it if he had, and he’d only talked about Hector’s mate.

“A griffin,” Trent said. “But really, they go up there for their daughter’s sake. She’s kind of a special case.”

“Oh, really?” Zina asked. “In what sense?”

“She’s an alicorn,” Trent said. “And she hasn’t learned how to shift into her human form yet.”

Zina sucked in a quick, shocked breath. “An *alicorn*?” She had to admit she was amazed. Alicorns were the rarest of the

rare – everyone assumed they’d been extinct for centuries now. “How –”

“It’s a pretty long story,” Trent said. “But coincidentally – or maybe not so coincidentally – it has to do with Hargreaves. Hec was on the trail of a bikie gang – that’s like a biker gang – who were trying to sell a mysterious egg to our good friends there. Myrtle accidentally got in the middle of the deal, Hector had to pull her bacon out of the fire, and the rest as they say is history. But once the egg Myrtle had rescued hatched, out came Ruby.”

Zina shook her head. “No wonder you weren’t so surprised when I showed you the eggs and told you what they were. You’ve seen it all already. You already knew about what Hargreaves has been up to!”

“I didn’t know they’d made so much progress finding other eggs, though,” Trent said. “Or what they’re up to with their opal mining operations. They’ve kept *that* nice and quiet, that’s for sure. But the point is, Tahnee’s sanctuary is somewhere the eggs will be safe. I know Tahnee, and I know she’ll guard them with her life. And when they hatch, they’ll have a safe place to grow up.”

Zina looked down, nodding, forcing herself to swallow past the lump in her throat. She knew Trent was right – the sanctuary was the safest place for them to take the eggs. But it was so hard to give them up. She’d risked so much, and she’d become kind of attached to them. In some corner of her heart, she’d been hoping she’d get to meet what – or rather, who – would come out of them.

“I think we should do it,” she said, before she had time for second thoughts. “You’re right – if Hargreaves catch us sniffing around their mining operation, then the eggs will go straight back to where they came from. It’d be better to drop them off first and make sure they’re safe before we head out to Jackson’s Ridge.”

Trent nodded. “Good. We’ll do it that way, then.” He reached out for the cup of coffee he’d ordered with his

breakfast, taking a big gulp. “Well, now that that’s decided, how about we get our supplies, and then get on our way?”

Zina couldn’t argue with that, and they quickly found their way to a nearby drugstore, where, just as Trent said they would, they found hats, sunglasses and hair dye for sale, along with a few casual t-shirts and shorts. Zina bought some makeup – she knew how easily she could change her look with just a few different shades of lipstick and eyeshadow – and some cheap, flashy jewelry, which would be good for catching people’s eye and drawing their focus, so they’d pay less attention to her face.

Back at the motel they packed their new purchases away, changing into a set of clean clothes.

“So... do you wanna do this now or later?” Zina asked Trent, holding up the packet of hair dye. The men’s hair products were mainly aimed at subtly covering up gray, so instead, she’d chosen a dye that’d turn his hair from a light reddish-brown to a bleached blond. It was another tactic to keep people from looking at his face – and since they couldn’t do anything else about the way Trent looked, if all they noticed was his hair, they’d be less likely to be able to tell anyone anything else about his appearance except that he was tall.

“Let’s get it over with,” Trent said. “The quicker it’s done the quicker we can get moving again. Chuck it here.”

“You know how to use this stuff?” Zina asked, as she tossed the packet across the room to him. He caught it one-handed.

“Yeah – I’ve got a sister who was kind of a punk in high school,” Trent laughed. “Weekend chores were helping her dye her hair every color of the rainbow, even though it drove my parents bananas.”

“Well, dyeing your own hair is pretty different from dyeing someone else’s,” Zina said. “You gotta make sure you get coverage, or you’re gonna look like a nightmare. Getting the back of your head can be tough. Plus, you want to be careful

not to get that strong bleaching stuff on your scalp for too long.”

“Hmm. Maybe you’re right,” Trent mused, looking down at the packet. “And this is a pretty drastic change. I wanna make sure I *like* the new me. No point in an image change if it makes me feel worse about myself, right?”

“Oh, come here,” Zina said, rolling her eyes. She marched across the room to him, grabbing the packet out of his hand. “I’ll help you – I wouldn’t want your self-esteem to be crushed or anything like that.”

Trent laughed lightly, but Zina could see he looked a little uncomfortable. He licked his lips, eyes slipping away from her face.

“It’s really fine, Zina, I swear I can –”

“It’ll be quicker this way, too,” Zina said. She walked into the bathroom, pulling up a stool that sat by the wall. “C’mon – sit. I’m a seasoned pro. No fear of burns or it turning yellow, I promise.”

“Um. Sure. Okay.” Despite his obvious unease, Trent came and sat himself down on the stool in front of her, facing the mirror.

“Better take that shirt off too,” Zina said absently as she ripped open the box, shaking out the plastic gloves that came in the kit. “We don’t want to –”

She hadn’t really been thinking as she’d spoken, focused as she was on the task ahead. But as soon as the words were out of her mouth she realized just what a huge, *huge* mistake she’d made.

*And it’s too late to take them back now, she thought frantically, as Trent, after glancing at her briefly in the mirror, slowly started unbuttoning the front of his shirt. If I tell him to stop, he’ll know I don’t want to see him shirtless – or, well, actually, I do want to see him shirtless, but that’s the whole problem... no, I can’t, I’ll just have to pretend it’s not happening, just ignore it, it means nothing at all...*

Zina shook her head, trying to halt the whirl of her thoughts. What the hell was wrong with her?! She was calm, cool, level-headed. Hot guys didn't faze her. She didn't have a love life, for very good reasons, and she didn't particularly want one. Meeting Trent was *really* starting to mess with her self-image.

Still, she bit her lower lip, swallowing heavily as Trent's shirt slowly... came off, sliding over his shoulders to reveal the tanned skin beneath – and the tattoo that snaked over his shoulder and down his right arm in a complicated swirl of ink.

*I didn't notice that before...* she thought – though that was obvious, since Trent had always been wearing a few more clothes in the past than he was now.

Zina breathed a brief sigh of relief when she saw he was wearing a white tank top underneath, but then, after a moment, she realized that somehow made things even *worse*: the white cotton of the tank top only emphasized how taut and tanned his skin was; the armholes just made the lines of his collarbones and the bulge of his biceps *that* much more enticing. And the fact his pecs and abs were still hidden – *barely* – beneath the stretched-tight fabric just made her even more aware of them. They were *there*, just waiting to be uncovered –

Zina coughed loudly, forcing herself to turn away.

*Focus, you idiot!*

“Let's get this started,” she said, hoping her voice sounded all business – though the slight tremble in it sounded *very* obvious, at least to her. She just hoped Trent hadn't noticed it.

She mixed up the dye solutions swiftly with a practiced hand, before shaking them up in the applicator bottle.

“Okay!” she said. “You ready to go blond?”

“Ready as I'll ever be,” Trent laughed, though Zina couldn't help but notice his voice still sounded just the *slightest* bit strained – though it was probably just because he'd never dyed his hair before.

But as she leaned forward, Zina suddenly realized that the hell she had created for herself when she'd insisted on helping instead of just letting Trent dye his own hair the way he'd wanted to was only just beginning. *Now*, she had to lean down over him from behind, run her fingers through his hair – even if her fingers *were* covered in baggy plastic gloves – and stare at his upturned face, his closed eyes, eyelashes surprisingly long and thick against his high cheekbones.

*Okay. This is fine.*

Since his eyes were closed, Zina let herself bite her lip again as she slowly spread the dye through Trent's hair with one hand, working it in with the other.

Somehow, she could feel the warmth of his skin against hers even though she wasn't directly touching him. Her stomach churned, her fingers shaking as she ran them through his hair.

*Focus. Just focus. No point in giving him nasty chemical burns on his scalp if the whole point of doing this was for him not to get nasty chemical burns on his scalp.*

“Um,” she said, casting about for some topic of conversation to take her mind off things. “So... what do you even shift into, then?”

“A kangaroo,” Trent said. “But not a regular one – my guys are all extinct outside of their shifter forms now.”

“Oh... what's the difference?” Zina asked.

“Size, mainly.” Trent's eyes flickered up to hers. “I'm a lot bigger.”

“Is that so?” she murmured, brushing the dye through his hair, trying to keep her mind on the job. “Um. Where did you get the tattoo?”

“Oh, this?” Trent gestured vaguely at his arm. “Youthful indiscretion. Not that I regret it, but I probably didn't need to spend *quite* that much money on it. And my mum went mad. She asked how I thought it'd look in fifty years' time, but to be honest I just thought it'd still look pretty badarse.”

Zina laughed – and felt her fingers twitching *just* a little as she resisted the urge to run them over the dark lines of ink, just to see if they felt any different to the rest of his skin.

*Not that I'm thinking about touching his skin anywhere else either!* Zina told herself resolutely, gritting her teeth and trying to keep her gaze *only* on the hair she was dyeing.

But still, try as she might to remain stoic, Zina found it took all her focus not to get drawn into the sheer *feeling* of Trent being so close to her.

*Okay. I just have to get this over and done with. As quickly as possible.*

She didn't have time right now to tease apart all the reasons *why* this was happening. Even if she *did* figure it out, it would have been completely the wrong time for her to say anything – they were on the run! Hargreaves could catch up with them at any moment! This was no time for her to be losing her head over a hot guy.

*Even if he is really, really hot.*

“Okay!” Zina said, yanking her hands back from Trent's head the instant she'd finished evenly covering his hair with the bleach. Well, at least she *hoped* she had. She *hoped* she hadn't just given him the world's worst, patchiest dye job.

As she stepped away, wanting to get at least a little distance between them, she noticed just how heavily Trent himself was breathing – and just how glistening his tanned skin was, overlaid as it was with a fine sheen of sweat. His hands were balled into fists on his knees, his knuckles white.

Zina blinked, trying to take all of this in, her mind feeling scrambled.

“Ah – right.” Trent's voice when he spoke was a low, husky growl. “Okay. Thanks for that.”

“Y-you should leave it in for twenty minutes, then rinse it out,” Zina stammered. “I'll – I'll put the little shower cap thing on for you –”

“No – that’s okay,” Trent said quickly, leaning over to grab it from where it was sitting on the sink. “I’ll do it. And. Uh. I’ll just stay in here for a bit. So I’m not getting bleach smell everywhere.” He cleared his throat as he opened out the plastic disposable shower cap. “If you... wanted to get some rest or pack up, now’s a good time. We should probably get out of here pretty quickly – as soon as we’ve organized some transport.”

“Um. Okay. I’ll do that.” Zina backed out of the room, her heart hammering in her chest. Only after she’d closed the bathroom door did she remember she still had the bleach-coated plastic gloves on her hands. Tearing them off, she tossed them in the trashcan in the kitchenette.

She wiped the bleach solution off the bathroom doorhandle with a tissue, resisting the urge to press her ear to the door.

*Why would you even want to do that?! she chastised herself as she stood up. Are you going out of your mind? Has all the stress finally sent you round the twist?!*

Shaking her head, Zina forced herself to action, marching across the room and picking up the bags of toiletries and clothes they’d bought this morning, tearing off the tags and folding them up, stuffing them inside the backpacks they’d also bought. Getting organized for the next leg of their journey *did* at least take her mind off the completely bizarre reaction she was having to Trent.

*It has to be the effect of the serum wearing off,* she thought, as she zipped up the backpack, her stomach roiling. It always played havoc with her senses. This was just a weird side-effect she hadn’t experienced before, because most of the guys she’d worked with recently had the sex appeal of a pudding.

Pulling in a breath, Zina reached over, grabbing her own bag and reaching inside. Even though she knew no one could have stolen it, feeling the solid black box she kept the eggs in in her hands was a comfort.

Pressing her thumb to the lock and snapping it open, Zina looked down at the three precious eggs inside, feeling her



heart swell as she brushed the tips of her fingers lightly over their warm surfaces.

*We're going to take you somewhere safe, she promised them, talking to the tiny creatures who were protected by the eggs' jewel-like surfaces. I promise you – I'll protect you with my life. You won't have to worry about a thing. Trent knows somewhere you'll be able to live without people trying to use you for your powers.*

Closing the box again with a *click*, Zina could only hope she wasn't making them an empty promise.

## CHAPTER 7

*Okay. Okay. Get it together.*

Trent dunked his head under the freezing cold water from the shower again, scrubbing his fingers through his hair to remove the last of the bleach.

He was *pretty* sure you weren't actually supposed to rinse this stuff out with cold water, but right now he didn't care. None of that mattered as much as the, uh, *situation* he had going on in his pants, and the need to take care of it as quickly and quietly as possible.

Cold showers might have been a cliché, but they were a cliché for a reason: they *worked*.

Trent shuddered as the cold water sluiced down over his skin, reducing his temperature down from 'burning hot firestorm' to 'smoldering coals' – which might not have been *much* of an improvement, but right now, he'd take what he could get.

He'd thought he could do at least a little better than this, but apparently not. He would have been a little more insistent about dyeing his own hair if only he'd known the mere touch of Zina's hands on his scalp through a pair of baggy plastic gloves was going to turn him into a raging inferno of desire, worse than anything he ever remembered experiencing as a hormonal teenager.

*I'm just lucky Zina at least was focused on the job and not on me*, he thought, letting out a long, slow breath, and *finally* feeling the erection he'd had for the last however long – it

*seemed like an eternity – start to go down. At least one of us is acting professionally.*

*How can we be expected to keep our heads around our mate? When she's so close, and yet so far away?* his kangaroo demanded, lifting its head and rearing back indignantly. *How can we be expected to behave as if nothing is happening, when our mate's fingers are in our hair, when she's leaning over us, pressing her –*

*Enough!* Trent mentally hollered at the animal – if it had been possible, he would have sprayed *it* with the shower hose. *I just calmed down! Shut up with that kind of talk or we'll never get out of here!*

The kangaroo simply sniffed haughtily at him, as if to signal exactly what it thought of Trent's standing here hosing himself down, rather than just marching out into the other room, taking Zina in his arms and –

*I said enough!* Trent thought again, but this time, he knew he had no one but himself to blame. *He* was the one imagining that scenario.

*But it's not the right time just now,* he thought. They had to keep their wits about them. He was already compromised – he didn't need to spring this on Zina too. Suddenly announcing to her that he thought she was his mate was no way to run a mission. Especially since she hadn't said a word about it herself.

*But then, is she a shifter or not?*

Pulling in another deep breath, Trent shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. He yanked a towel off the rack, drying himself off – before glancing up at himself in the mirror.

*Whoa.*

Well, it definitely *was* a change, Trent had to admit, staring at himself, and at his newly bright blond hair. He ran his fingers through it, arranging it a little, before deciding that no, that wasn't going to make any difference to him. But at least, it *did* change how he looked quite a bit. Since the Hargreaves

guys – or whoever they were – had definitely clocked him, that was a positive.

Nonetheless, Trent thought as he pulled on his clothes, they still had to actually make it up to Tahnee’s sanctuary safely and then to Jackson’s Ridge, and a new hairstyle wasn’t going to cut it in terms of evading the people who were after them. They’d have to move fast, and they’d need all the luck they could get.

*Time to get moving, then.*

Zina looked up at him when he pulled open the bathroom door, her eyes going wide.

“Whoa,” she said, echoing his thoughts. “Wow. That’s a change. You look... different.”

“Ah.” Trent ran a hand self-consciously through his hair. “Different in a bad way?”

Zina shook her head, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “No, just different, in a *different* way. Are you vain or something?”

“Maybe a little bit,” Trent admitted, with a laugh. “But it’s not so much that as just not wanting to look like a *complete* dickhead in public.”

“Oh, so it *is* vanity then,” Zina said, laughing. Trent felt his heartrate pick up at the sight of the two little dimples on either side of her mouth. She was just *too* adorable. Plus, this was the first time she’d smiled in that kind of wide, unguarded way since she’d come back into his life. Trent wanted to see more of those kinds of smiles from her – he’d do whatever it took to see them more often, to wipe any concern or care from her life, and make her happy.

“I suppose we better make a move,” Zina said, leaning down and shouldering her backpack. “Any ideas where we might find some wheels?”

“I looked up whether there was anywhere we might be able to buy a used car around here,” Trent said. He’d had some spare time last night while Zina was sleeping, so he’d put it to good use. “There’s a used car place not too far from here. It’s a

risk, but I'm guessing you have fake ID, right? Even having them run that isn't something I'm thrilled about, but it's the best option we have right now. There's no car rental places in this town at all."

"I agree it's a risk," Zina said, nodding. "But we need a car. So we'll just have to deem it an acceptable one. I have a couple of unused fake IDs that probably won't ping the system."

Trent nodded. "Okay. Well, let's do it. Let's go get us a car."



"Soooo..." Zina said, "did you say this was a car yard, or a car graveyard?"

"Hm. Well, I have to admit, I wasn't really expecting *this*," Trent said, as they surveyed the grassy, overgrown lot, filled with rusted-out hulks, cars without doors, cars without windshields, cars without *anything at all* except a basic chassis. "I mean, I don't consider myself a fancy man, but I do usually prefer it if my car has... well. Wheels. Doors. That kind of thing."

"No kidding," Zina muttered. "Maybe we need to try to come up with a Plan B."

"You might be right. But still, this might just be the cars whoever owns this place has stripped down for spare parts. There might be something drivable for sale around here."

"I think it's a waste of time," Zina said flatly. "Time we don't have."

Reluctantly, Trent had to agree with her. It seemed like they'd be beholden to the bus timetable for a little while longer – but they still wouldn't be able to get out to Tahnee's sanctuary without some kind of transport.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get out of here and –"

"You guys wanting to buy a car or not?"

Trent jerked his head around at the sound of the voice behind him. Turning, he saw a lanky man with a long graying beard standing by the door of a shed that sat in the midst of all the sad, broken-down, barely-deserving-of-the-name cars.

“Maybe,” Trent replied, a little warily. “If you have anything that’d actually be drivable. And I mean for more than fifty meters down the road.”

“No need to be rude,” the man said peaceably as he strolled toward them. “These’re just the ones I couldn’t save. There’s the ones I have for sale in the shed – all fixed up and ready to go.”

Trent narrowed his eyes, but the man met his gaze with an enviable tranquility.

“I can take a look under the bonnet and all that, right?” Trent asked.

“Of course. Plus, if you pay cash, I’ll even waive all the usual formalities.” The bearded man’s eyes flickered between Trent and Zina. “Somehow I get the feeling you two are in a rush. I’m used to dealing with customers like you. You don’t need to worry about it. Come on – I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

Trent felt a little ruffled as he glanced at Zina. Were they really that obvious?

“What do you reckon?” he asked, as the man turned and walked back toward the shed.

Zina shrugged. “I think we should at least take a look. Not having to run the risk of my ID pinging should be worth *something*, I think.”

“Well, I have to agree with you there.” Trent turned to grin at her. “Also, we may get a bargain.”

Twenty minutes later – after a short detour to stock up on food, water and cans of petrol – they were rumbling down the road in the kind of car Trent might have politely called a *paddock basher* when he was a kid. In other words, an unregistered, unroadworthy, barely functional bomb that was really only good for getting around the back end of a farm. It’d

been a tradition when he was growing up: every farmer had one, and every farmer let their kids drive it around their property long before they had a license – sometimes before their feet could even touch the pedals, in which case the kid would take the steering wheel, while the parent would work the brakes and accelerator.

Trent could remember doing the same thing with his father, back in the day – at least until he'd steered the paddock basher into a fallen tree and it had unceremoniously died, never to start again. But considering it had cost his father fifty bucks and a round of beers, it hadn't exactly been that big of a deal. Back in the here and now, wrestling this rusty old car out onto the highway brought back a few fond memories of when he'd first been learning to drive, that was for sure.

“I think we got ripped off,” Zina said skeptically from beside him, as the car's engine made an extremely suspicious rattling sound.

“It was only three hundred dollars,” Trent pointed out.

“Whatever you paid, it was too much.” Zina raised an eyebrow. “Is this thing going to even last until we get out of town?”

“Appearances – and sounds, I guess – can be deceiving,” Trent said sanguinely. “My first car was a lot like this one, and it went for ten years before it gave up the ghost.” He omitted the part where that was because he'd driven it into a log. “Sometimes these old things are tougher than they look.”

“Well, let's hope so,” Zina muttered.

“Anyway, look!” Trent leaned forward, jabbing at the ancient stereo. “How can you say we got ripped off when it came with a cassette already in the tape deck?”

“A *cassette*? Has anyone actually seen one of those in the last century?” Zina asked.

“Let's see what's on it,” Trent said, shooting her a grin. “I promise we can turn it off if it's – aw, what? No way! Chisels!”

“*What* is this exactly?” Zina asked, staring at him, as *Flame Trees* started blaring tinnily out of the speakers. “Although I’m not totally sure I really want to know.”

“What? No! *No!* I refuse to let you come to Australia and leave without learning about our culture. Come on – I’ll tell you all about Cold Chisel as we go,” Trent said, as Jimmy Barnes wailed about returning to the hometown of his lost love.

“No, it’s fine. You don’t need to do that. I think I’m picking up what I need to know from the song itself,” Zina said – and despite her seeming lack of interest, Trent could hear the slight smile in her voice.

“So, it’s all tragic love, go-nowhere towns, shitty jobs, nostalgia and heartbreak,” she said when the song had finished. “I told you my mom used to make me listen to a lot of country and western songs, and I guess this is just kind of the same thing with a different accent.”

“You kind of have a point there,” Trent admitted. “One day I’ll have to let you tell me all about the songs your mum used to play for you.”

*I want to know everything about you*, he thought as he glanced across at her. *Or as much as you want to tell me, anyway.*

He knew Zina was ridiculously competent, cool in a crisis, and had a strong enough sense of her own morality that she was willing to put herself at great risk to keep defenseless baby shifters who hadn’t even hatched yet out of Hargreaves’s hands. He knew she was beautiful. He knew she was his *mate*. But she hadn’t exactly been very forthcoming with many details about her life, and Trent had to say he kind of understood why – coming off a long-term deep cover mission the way she had couldn’t have been easy.

*But I do need to make sure I sort things out between us, as soon as I can*, he thought. He couldn’t let the question of what they were to each other drag out for much longer. *As soon as we’re at Tahnee’s sanctuary and we know the eggs are safe and sound, then we can talk.*



He just hoped his kangaroo would let him keep things to himself that long – it was already twitching impatiently at the thought of *more* delays.

*It's just a couple of days of driving,* Trent told it soothingly. *You can be patient.*

The kangaroo gave off a vague sense of *Can I, though?* But it otherwise ignored him. Which really, Trent thought, was kind of a relief.

“Hey, this one kind of rocks,” Zina said, reaching forward to twist the volume knob of the tape deck *right* up. “What’s it called?”

Trent laughed. “It’s called *Cheap Wine.*”

“Oh, well – that’s something we can all get behind,” Zina said, joining in with his laughter. “The man knows what he’s singing about.”

It did Trent’s heart good to hear Zina laughing. Maybe when this mission was behind them, he could hear her laugh more often, he thought – he certainly hoped so.

“Pretty desolate out here, isn’t it?” Zina said, looking out of the window at the passing scenery. It was all pale brown scrub and sandy earth now that they were out of town – a few stubby trees rose up here and there, but that was it. “I can see why you wanted to get the extra gas.”

“Yeah – you wanna make sure you don’t run out, because once you get past the towns, there’s nothing out here for miles and miles,” Trent said. “And believe me, this is pretty scenic compared to where we’re headed.”

“Nice.” Zina made a face. “And this sanctuary is in the middle of it?”

“Best place for it,” Trent said. “The middle of nowhere. Hard to get to, hard to find. No reason to come out here unless you know what you’re looking for.”

“Point taken.” Zina rested her chin on her palm, looking out of the window. Trent could tell she was thinking about something, and as much as he wanted to know what it was, he

also didn't really feel like quizzing her too much. She still looked tired – and Trent could well imagine that she was. And now that the adrenaline of the last few weeks would be wearing off, she'd need as much of a break as she could get.

“Hey, if you wanna get some sleep, now's probably the time,” he said, glancing across at her. “I promise you won't be missing much in terms of the view, and I'll wake you up if anything happens. You should just relax as much as you can, yeah?”

Zina licked her lips as she looked across at him. “I'm not tired, you know. I can stay awake as long as I need to.”

“I know,” Trent said. “But you *don't* need to right now. I'm driving, and the eggs are here with us, safe. You can take a little snooze.”

Zina looked conflicted for a moment longer, but then she nodded. “Okay. I will. Or at least I'll try.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Thanks – I mean for everything. Everything you've done for me. And for them.”

“No worries,” Trent said, doing his best to keep his voice level, even as his kangaroo rose up within him.

*Tell her we're devoted to her unto death, it insisted. Tell her that this is the least of the things we'd do to keep her and hers safe. Tell her we'd fly to the moon and back if it would show her how much she means to us.*

Trent could feel the words welling up inside him, trying to force their way out of his mouth. He knew he couldn't go on like this forever – the urge to confess all to Zina, no matter how she might take it, was going to become overwhelming sooner or later. And perhaps if he was honest with her, she might also tell him more about herself – why it was he got such a strange feeling off her, and why he couldn't sense whether she was a shifter or not.

*At the sanctuary, Trent told his kangaroo firmly. Once the eggs are out of danger.*

The kangaroo huffed out an annoyed breath at that, but it seemed to accept it. Thankfully, it had decided that the task of

protecting the eggs came first.

*Anyway*, Trent told it, glancing across at Zina again, and finding her eyes closed, her head rolling gently against her shoulder. *I think she might be asleep.*

Trent couldn't help the smile that crossed his face as he let his eyes rest on Zina's face for a moment, before looking back at the road. She was peaceful – for now.

And Trent intended to do everything he could to make sure she got as much peace as possible in future.

*Protect our mate at all costs*, his kangaroo said approvingly.

And for once, Trent found he was in complete agreement with it.

## CHAPTER 8

The car rattling to a stop jerked Zina out of the deep, deep sleep she'd drifted into.

Blinking, it took her a moment to extract herself from the dream she'd been having – a dream in which she'd been swimming in a vast ocean of pea soup and sunning herself on a golden beach made of pie pastry – and realize that it was dark outside the car window.

“How long was I asleep?” she blurted out, speaking before her brain could catch up with her mouth.

“Well, just about the whole day,” Trent said, turning to her with a grin. “I woke you up to give you a bit of water to drink, but I don't think you were with it enough to remember.”

“No, I definitely don't remember that,” Zina said. She twisted in her seat, looking around for her bag. “The eggs –”

“They're in your bag at your feet,” Trent said soothingly. “It's okay – I only stopped for a moment to get you something to drink. There was no chance anyone – or *anything* – could have gotten them.”

Zina released a long, relieved breath as she lifted her bag from where she'd stowed it at her feet, feeling the familiar weight of the box with its precious contents still inside it. She knew Trent wouldn't have let anything happen to them, but still, it helped to be sure.

“Where are we?” she asked, as Trent opened the driver's side door, unfolding his long body and getting out of the car.

“Little two-horse town in the middle of nowhere,” Trent said easily. “It was getting dark, and the car was getting hot, so as soon as I saw a *Vacancies* sign I pulled over. Can’t promise you the Ritz, though.”

“No, that’s fine,” Zina said, following him out of the car. “I’ll grab our stuff if you want to check us in.”

“Sure.”

Zina watched as Trent headed off to the motel reception, taking in the line of his shoulders, his long, long legs, and the easy way he walked. She swallowed. As much as she’d regretted dragging him into her mess, she honestly couldn’t say she was sorry he was here with her now.

*There’s no one else I’d rather have by my side. It’s only natural, after all, since –*

Zina shook her head. The thought had drifted into her head, vague and wispy, only to disappear when she’d tried to grab hold of it to examine it more closely. Her stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch as she opened the back of the car, grabbing Trent’s bag. The serum really *was* wearing off at last, but it was taking longer and it was beating her up more than it had in the past – that was part of the reason why she’d been so tired lately.

*Maybe I used too much,* Zina thought, biting her lip as she shouldered both Trent’s bag and her own. *I thought I was overdoing it, but I couldn’t take any chances.*

Being able to sneak around undetectable as a shifter had been just too important at the time.

*At least it’s finally wearing off now,* she thought, as Trent emerged from the reception, twirling the room key on its metal ring around his finger.

“Room 310,” he said with a grin. “Madame, your suite awaits.”

The room actually wasn’t so bad, Zina had to admit. At least it had some kind of reed matting on the floor instead of carpet – which she guessed was because of the sand – the bed

looked freshly made, and there was no smell of mildew anywhere.

“You should get some sleep this time,” Zina said, as she put the bags down on the floor. “You took the last watch, and you’ve been driving all day while I’ve been sleeping. It’s only fair.”

Trent hesitated. “You sure? I don’t mind if –”

“I’m sure,” Zina said firmly. “I *want* you to sleep.”

She was surprised at the depth of feeling that rose up within her. *Yes, he should sleep. He should let us take care of him.*

She blinked. *Was that – finally – my antelope coming back?*

The little flash of instinct had been the strongest impression she’d had of it for some time now. Not being able to sense it didn’t worry her – she was used enough to the effects of the serum by now – but it was a *huge* relief to have it back. Maybe now she wouldn’t feel the need to obfuscate so much with Trent. After so long undercover, the habit of secrecy just wasn’t easy to break, even with someone she trusted.

“Okay,” Trent said, after only a moment longer of hesitation. “To be honest, I could probably use the rest. I don’t want to get sloppy, after all. I’ll go have a shower, we can make a quick something to eat, and then I’ll take a rest. But you be sure to wake me up the moment you get even an inkling something’s not right, yeah?”

Zina nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal.”

She glanced over her shoulder as Trent disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. A moment later and she heard the shower spray start up, and Zina bit her lip, trying *not* to imagine him in there, all naked and wet, slowly running a bar of soap over his shoulders, his pecs, his –

*Okay! Distraction time!*

Jumping up, Zina grabbed the cooler they'd bought and packed with food, pulling out bread, margarine, cheese, sliced ham, and various vegetables.

*I'll make us a salad and a ham sandwich! That'll take my mind off things.*

Zina focused just as hard as she could on putting together dinner for them, chopping the vegetables in a way that was only *slightly* manic, and buttering the bread in a not *completely* frantic way.

She'd gotten so absorbed in it all that she didn't realize Trent had emerged from the shower again until she jumped at the sound of his voice behind her.

"Wow. Looks great. And I sure could eat."

Zina whipped around, still holding the butter knife.

"Oh – well, it's nothing fancy, but it'll get us through until tomorrow morning. Take a seat and I'll bring it over."

Zina turned back to her creation, hoping Trent would think she just wasn't that great of a cook and didn't care about presentation as the reason for the state of the unevenly sliced carrot, the virtually destroyed lettuce, and the cucumbers that looked like they'd been run through a shredder. At least the sandwiches looked okay – bread, after all, hid a multitude of sins.

Arranging them as nicely as she could on some party plates, Zina turned back to Trent.

"Okay!" she said, holding the plates out. "Dinner is –"

She cut herself off mid-sentence, as she realized that Trent, though he was sitting propped up against the headboard of the bed, was also completely and utterly fast asleep.

She blinked.

"Uh, hello? Trent?" she said softly – but he didn't even stir the slightest bit. His arms were resting limp by his sides, his head tilted back, eyes completely closed. As she stared at him, the tiniest of snores emerged from his slightly open mouth.

*Oh. Well. I guess this is all for me, then.*

Inexplicably, Zina felt a wave of... of... *tenderness* welling up inside her as she looked at Trent's sleeping face.

*What? No – that can't be right.*

She shook her head. She didn't have time for that kind of nonsense. She was here on a *mission*. And she'd never felt anything like that before in her life, for anyone or *anything*.

Except, of course, the eggs she'd saved.

Swallowing, Zina sat down and shoved *way* too much ham sandwich into her mouth, chewing with ferocity.

The eggs were a different case – they were *defenseless*, and they'd been in Hargreaves's clutches. Trent, as he'd amply demonstrated, was completely capable of taking care of himself. And he was a fully grown – in fact, somewhat *over-grown* – man.

Zina pushed the thought from her mind. She'd deal with all this confusion once the eggs were safely dropped off at the sanctuary. Until then, her feelings had to take a backseat.

She must have been *very* hungry, because she wolfed down both sandwiches and washed it all down with a carton of iced coffee all the salad she'd made before she'd even noticed – and she still felt slightly hungry even then.

*Don't want to burn through all our supplies, though.*

Sighing, Zina got up and positioned herself by the front window of the room, giving her a view of the driveway, the reception area, and most of the other rooms – not all, though, since the building curved around, and so she couldn't see the parking lot either. But there wasn't a lot she could do about that.

Thanks to her nap, she didn't feel tired, even as the hours slid by one after another. The motel had twenty-four-hour check-in, so the light in the reception area never went out, and Zina kept a close eye on it, but no one arrived. There was nothing outside but sand, starlight, and the clear, dark sky.



That was, at least, until a cold shiver passed down her back, setting all the hair on the back of her neck standing on end.

Zina pulled in a sharp breath, sitting up straighter.

*What was that?!*

Leaning forward, Zina strained her eyes, looking out into the night.

But nothing moved – outside, there was only complete stillness.

Maybe she was just being jumpy, Zina thought as she stood, moving across the window to try to get a view from a different angle.

But even as she thought it, she knew she'd be wrong to ignore her instincts – especially if, as she suspected, her shifter senses were finally starting to come back.

“Trent,” she whispered, not daring to tear her gaze away from the motel driveway. “*Trent.*”

“Huh?” Behind her, she heard Trent jerk awake. “Zina? What’s –”

“I don’t know yet,” Zina said, eyes scanning the darkness. “I just... I just had a *feeling*...”

“No, you were right to listen to it,” Trent said. “What kind of feeling did you –”

Zina blinked, her blood rushing suddenly in her ears, and she didn’t hear the end of Trent’s question.

*Oh. Oh no. I know what this is –*

Just as she thought it, a figure – a huge, *towering* figure, even taller than Trent – came striding around the side of the building, followed a moment later by a car roaring up the driveway.

“Oh *shit*,” Zina muttered, backing away from the window. “Shit, shit, *shit!*”

“Zina, what is it?” Trent sounded alarmed, and Zina didn’t blame him. He *should* have been alarmed. They both should’ve been.

“I don’t have much time to explain,” Zina said, diving for her bag. “In fact, I don’t have *any* time.”

She scrambled through her belongings, looking for the *other* box of things she shouldn’t have, buried inside a hidden inside pocket.

Outside, she heard the squeal of brakes as the car pulled up, followed by a loud *bang*.

“Zina, what’s going on?” Trent asked again, as she finally found what she was looking for. “Are those guys Hargreaves?”

“Yes,” Zina said. “But you don’t know the half of it.”

From outside, she heard another *bang*.

“Uh, well, one of them is kicking in every door in this motel,” Trent said. “Looking for us, I guess – but how the hell did they track us *here*?”

Zina bit her lip as she tore the lid off the box revealing the syringes and tiny bottles within. The bottles containing the serum that would suppress any shifter’s shifted form, though only for a limited time.

*I don’t have much left – only enough for a small dose.*

It’d have to do, though.

“Like I said, I don’t have much time to explain,” she said, as she grabbed the bottles and syringes. “But that guy – the huge one, kicking in doors – they call him the Bloodhound. He’s one of Hargreaves’s special ops guys, and I mean *special*.”

“Well, he’s certainly specialized in kicking down doors,” Trent said, still staring out of the window. “And what the hell does this *Bloodhound* thing mean?”

“It means he can track any shifter, *anywhere*,” Zina muttered, as she jabbed the first syringe down into the foil seal of one of the bottles before pulling the plunger up, drawing the

serum inside. “Once he gets a bead on you, it’s like a homing device – nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. He’ll find you.”

“Oh, shit,” Trent said, glancing at her. Zina could see the clear question in his eyes, but she didn’t have time to answer him now. “Is that –”

“I’ll answer everything later, I *swear* it,” Zina said, standing. From outside, she could hear outraged shouting, followed by another *bang!* as the Bloodhound kicked in another door. “But right now, I just have to ask you – do you trust me?”

Trent blinked at her. “Do I –? Zina, you know I do.”

“But I mean *really*,” Zina persisted. “I mean *really* trust me?”

“Of course I do,” Trent said, his gaze steady as he looked into her eyes. “Do you think I would have done all of this if I didn’t?”

“Okay, good,” Zina said, trying to push down her misgivings. She had to hope Trent would understand once she had time to explain. “Because this is probably not going to be something you’ll like.”

“Zina, what the hell are you –” Trent started to ask, as Zina grabbed his arm, pulled up his shirtsleeve, and then jabbed the syringe with its load of serum straight into his shoulder.

“Zina, what *is* that –”

Zina bit her lip as Trent stared at his arm, then shook his head.

“Wait – Zina – what did you – what – *how* –”

Zina grabbed his arm again, pulling him across the room. “I *promise* I’ll explain later – right now, this is the only way.” She grabbed her bag. “Believe me – it’s the only way to stop the Bloodhound from tracking us. It’s the only reason I ever got more than two steps in any direction.”

“My kangaroo –” Trent said, staggering as she pulled him across the room. “Zina, you *have* to tell me –”

“It’s just temporary!” Zina said desperately, as she opened the back window of the room. She could hear people in the room next door burst into screaming and yelling as the Bloodhound kicked open their door. “I promise it’ll wear off!” Lifting her leg, she kicked out the flyscreen. “For now, please just *come on!*”

Maybe it was the desperation in her voice, or maybe it was the sound of the Bloodhound’s foot against the door of their room – maybe his kicking foot was getting tired, because it didn’t immediately fly off its hinges. But whatever it was, it seemed to jerk Trent out of his horrified daze, and, grabbing the cooler with their food and one of their bags of clothes on his way, he followed her as she scrambled out of the window. Together, they dropped onto the concrete of the motel parking lot. Quickly, Zina reached inside and drew the curtains over the open window with its missing flyscreen, concealing their exit – it wouldn’t buy them more than a second or two, but that could make all the difference.

“Go!” Zina hissed at Trent. The door wasn’t going to hold out forever.

They sprinted across the parking lot to where their rusted hulk of a car sat.

*Let’s hope it starts,* Zina thought, as she yanked open the door. At least they’d discovered early that the locks didn’t work, but they’d figured it wouldn’t be a problem – as if anyone would steal *this* car.

“Oh, fuck,” Trent swore as he sat down in the driver’s side. “The keys.”

“Shit!” Zina glanced over at the window, but she could see people moving around in their room, silhouetted against the thin curtains. There was no way they could go back and grab them now.

“No worries – I can hotwire it.” Trent leaned down under the dashboard. He was so tall, however, that his knees had to practically come up to his ears before he could crouch low enough.

“Well, you better make it snappy,” Zina murmured, her eyes still trained on the window. She clutched her bag, with the eggs inside it, against her chest.

Beside her, she heard Trent swear as he clunked around inside the car’s innards, finding the wires he needed.

*Shit. Maybe I was too hasty.*

Zina clenched her fists. By injecting Trent with the serum, she’d cut him off from being able to shift – if she hadn’t done that, maybe she could have sent him off with the eggs in his shifter form. She could have stayed here as a decoy, while he got them to safety.

But even as she thought it, she knew it wouldn’t have worked. The Bloodhound clearly had the scent of Trent’s shifter animal. It wasn’t her he was tracking, since her antelope still hadn’t quite come back. It could only have been Trent.

“Yes! Fuck! Finally!”

From beneath the dashboard she heard a slight electrical *bzzt!* sound, and then the car’s engine roared to life – and not a moment too soon. Just as Trent popped his head back up and put his hands on the wheel, Zina saw a pair of enormous hands rip aside the curtain – and then found herself staring directly into the eyes of the Bloodhound himself.

Zina’s mouth went dry.

“Drive!” she managed to croak out, unable to tear her eyes away from the man in the window’s ferocious gaze. She knew about him more by reputation than by sight – she’d only seen him at a distance before, across a room or at the end of a corridor during her time at Hargreaves. But even at a distance, he’d been an intimidating presence – a hulking mass of pure muscle, towering over everyone around him, his grim, expressionless face seeming to be carved from pure granite.

And his eyes were locked directly on to them both.

Trent apparently didn’t need to be told twice to drive, however – he floored the gas pedal and the car tore off, as fast as its engine would allow. Trent rounded the corner of the

motel and steered the car toward the driveway, just as the rest of Hargreaves's goons started pouring back out of their room, headed for their own car.

"They're going to block us!" Zina shouted, as the headlights from Hargreaves's car suddenly burst to life, its wheels screeching as it leapt forward, trying to beat Trent to the narrow driveway.

"They're going to *try*," Trent said grimly, as, with an absolutely *painful*-sounding grind of the engine, the car jumped forward, clearly straining itself to do what Trent was asking of it. Zina held her breath, waiting for the whole thing to start falling apart around them – but instead it kept going, clipping the front of the Hargreaves car as it tried to cut them off, before Trent managed to swing it around, tires screeching as they took off down the road.

Zina turned to look behind them, still clutching her bag to her chest.

"They won't take long to follow us," she gasped out, her heartbeat thumping in her chest.

"Maybe not," Trent said. "But I told you I knew this area – well, at least I know it a bit better than these guys. If we can get far enough ahead of them, I might be able to throw them off." He glanced across at her. "But I kind of need you to explain what you injected me with before."

Zina nodded, swallowing. "I'm sorry – I would have explained if we'd had time. I wouldn't usually do that without telling someone first, but we needed to get out of there."

Pulling in a deep breath, Trent shook his head. "I can't – I can't feel my kangaroo."

Zina could hear the slight tremble in his voice as he said it, and she didn't blame him for being freaked out. Not being able to sense your shifter animal was a *weird* thing for any shifter.

It was something they all had to go through, before their first shift – to come face to face with the animal that lived inside them, and know that they could control it and work *with* it, rather than letting it take them over.

Zina knew of some shifters who'd transformed into their shifted form before they'd learned to control their animal sides, and then found themselves stuck there, unable to become human again, the animal having completely taken them over.

She knew of others who, unable to find a balance, had made the decision to push their animal side so far down inside themselves that they'd never been able to feel their presence ever again, and had lost their ability to shift along with it, and had to live as a normal human.

It was all just part of being a shifter. But the fact that Trent was here, with his shifter animal with him, meant that he'd already overcome that struggle and found a way to exist peacefully with the animal inside him, just as she had when she'd been young.

To find it suddenly gone, now –

*Well, he probably feels about the same as I felt the first time I took the serum – but I had the benefit of knowing what was going to happen.*

“It’s a serum my agency developed,” Zina said, turning to face Trent. “It temporarily suppresses your shifter animal – and I *promise* it’s only temporary. I’ve taken it before, and my antelope has always come back. I was freaked out the first time too, but it’s been tried and tested. And I only gave you a small dose – your kangaroo will be back in a few hours. But it was the only thing I could think of to get the Bloodhound off our tail, even for a little while. If your shifter animal is suppressed, he can’t track you. You just feel like a normal human.”

Licking his lips, Trent glanced across at her. “It’s temporary? And – you’ve been on it this whole time?”

Zina nodded. “Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t say anything because I... well, I don’t know. I was being too cagey. I should have just been honest with you, and told you what was up. But I knew they’d send the Bloodhound after me, and it was the only way I could slip under his radar.”

Trent shook his head. “No wonder I haven’t been able to figure out whether you’re a shifter or not,” he muttered. “I couldn’t tell. And no wonder then that you –”

He cut himself off suddenly, his mouth snapping shut with an audible click of his teeth.

For a moment, Zina wondered what he’d been about to say, before he shook his head, turning to look at her again.

“Well, I understand why you did it,” he said. “And I *did* say I trusted you. I *still* trust you. And if it was really the only way to throw the Bloodhound off our scent, then I probably would have made the same decision.”

Zina exhaled, long and slow. She hadn’t realized before now just how anxious she’d been that Trent might have decided trusting her was a mistake, that *all* of this was a mistake.

“Thank you,” she said, when she could trust her voice not to shake. “It means a lot to me. Especially since I haven’t been as... as open as I could have been.”

“Well, I get why you haven’t been,” Trent said after a moment. “And to be honest, I also should have –”

Whatever Trent might have been going to tell her, he was cut off by the sudden blaze of headlights from behind them.

“Shit,” Trent swore, turning around in his seat. “Is it them?”

“Probably.” Zina turned to look out the back window of the car, but all she could see was headlights in the night. But it was a safe assumption to make that Hargreaves had probably caught up with them, given there was nothing here but a flat, straight expanse of road.

She glanced at Trent to see his jaw tightening. “All right. Well, they haven’t really left me a lot of choice, have they?”

Before she could ask him what that meant, Trent had swung the wheel of the car around, sending it bumping and leaping off the road and into the sandy dirt, red, shale-like rock and dense scrub that lined it.



“Uh, is this good for the car?” Zina asked through the rattle of her teeth, clutching her bag to her chest.

“Not even slightly, but we can’t just keep going in a straight line,” Trent said – and Zina had to admit he had a point there. “How long did you say this stuff lasts for?”

“Not long,” Zina said. “Not the amount I gave you, anyway – less than twenty-four hours. And I barely have any left after that.”

Trent pressed his lips together, clearly thinking.

“And after that, you reckon that Bloodhound fella can track us anywhere, right?”

“Almost,” Zina said. “I’ve heard of a couple of times he’s lost the trail, but it’s not a bet I’d take.”

“Right.” Trent nodded, then glanced across at Zina. “Zina, you might not like this, but I don’t think we can take these eggs to Tahnee’s sanctuary anymore.”

Zina instinctively felt a protest rising in her throat – *But you said it would be the only place they’d be safe!* – but just as quickly she realized Trent was right, as much as she wished he wasn’t.

“The sanctuary is a peaceful place,” Trent said. “It doesn’t have any defenses, any way of keeping out people like Hargreaves. The only thing it has is that its location is relatively secret. I can’t lead Hargreaves straight to it. There’re too many vulnerable shifters there – not to mention that Tahnee has poured her heart and soul into making it a safe place. Including for me and my friends. I can’t repay her by bringing people who’d destroy it straight to her doorstep.”

Zina bit her lip, but she nodded. “I understand.”

Her voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, but she truly did understand what Trent was saying.

Trent glanced at her. “I’m sorry, Zina. I know I said I’d take them there.”

“No, you’re making the right decision. I mean, *we* are. Because I completely agree with you,” Zina said. She couldn’t

make *her* decisions any more people's problems than she already had. Still, she couldn't help pulling her bag with the eggs even closer against her chest, closing her eyes and ducking her head down to them.

*I'm sorry, she told them silently. But I promise I'll still do everything I can to protect you.*

"We can still protect them ourselves," Trent said a moment later, as if he'd read her mind. "I won't let anything happen to them, Zina. I promise. Or to you."

Almost despite herself, Zina felt warmth flooding into her chest at his words. It was the warmth of complete trust.

"I know you won't," she said.

## CHAPTER 9

The sky was darkening rapidly. Zina hadn't spent that much time in deserts, but she knew that night usually fell quickly in them, and it seemed like this one was no exception, despite being on the other side of the world.

"I'd better pull over soon," Trent said, glancing out the window. "Usually I'd say we shouldn't stop, but without my shifter senses, I'm not that keen on the idea of driving at night out here."

"Probably a good idea," Zina said, nodding. She'd decided to take Trent's words that he would have done the same thing as she had if their positions had been reversed at face value – aside from anything else, she didn't really think there was much else she could do. In their positions, she didn't think it was a good idea to try to start second-guessing him.

"We should be coming up to somewhere we can camp out in about fifteen, twenty minutes or so, if we are where I think we are," Trent said. "It's not luxurious, but it'll give us a little cover, just for the night. And then we can get going again in the morning."

Zina nodded. She could still feel terror pulling at her – she couldn't stop glancing at the sideview mirror as they bumped over the dirt, looking for headlights following behind them. So far, there'd been nothing – *But how long will that last?*

"So, this Bloodhound guy," Trent said as he drove. "He can find us anywhere, is that right?"

Zina bit her lip. “Well... I don’t know for *sure*. Hargreaves keeps the full extent of what he can do pretty close to their chests. For pretty obvious reasons, I guess, but they definitely *wanted* people to think he was infallible. I did think that *if* he could track us, he’d only be able to track *me* and not the eggs. Which is why I’ve been using the serum since I got here – I was hoping by the time it wore off the eggs would be safe and sound with someone else, so if he’d picked up my scent it wouldn’t really matter by then.”

Trent glanced at her sharply. “Except for the fact that then *you’d* be in Hargreaves’s hands.”

“It was the risk I accepted when I decided to do what I did.” Zina’s fists clenched where they sat on her lap. *I didn’t expect anyone to insist on trying to save me, too.* “I don’t know how he’s picked up on your trail – if that’s what’s happened, and they didn’t just manage to find us some other way.”

Trent was silent for a long moment. “So. Basically what you’re telling me is that I dyed my hair for nothing. I’m blond now for no reason whatsoever.”

Zina could virtually hear her neck creaking as she slowly turned her head to stare at him incredulously. Then she burst out laughing.

“Are you serious?” she asked, once she could get a word out in between her hilarity-induced hiccups.

“Of course I’m serious!” Trent shook his head, casting his eyes to the heavens – or at least the roof of the car. “A man’s hair isn’t something you mess around with on a whim! A new look means a new me! I didn’t have time to consider what going blond would do to my personality. This is going to take some time to get over, let me tell you.”

“Well, they do say blonds have more fun,” Zina said, dabbing at a tear that had welled up in the corner of her eye. “Let’s hope *that* holds true.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out. You’re gonna have to buy me some diamond earrings if you want this kind of thing to

continue – unless you’re not a gentleman, of course.”

Despite everything, Zina could still feel a laugh echoing around in her chest. She’s always thought of herself as a serious person. But she couldn’t help it – no one had ever made her laugh the way Trent did before.

A few minutes more of driving, and Zina thought she could make out what Trent was aiming for rising up before them. In the half-light, it was little more than a few shadows in the distance, but she could see what he meant about them having shelter for the night – the shadows soon resolved themselves into trees, and Trent pulled up at the edge of where they sprang up from the ground, just as the last of the light finally faded on the horizon.

“So... this is like an oasis?” Zina asked as she got out of the car, pulling her bag with her.

“Kind of,” Trent said. “There’s a lake on the other side of the trees, but it’s not the kind of lake you can drink out of. Too salty for that.”

“Oh, right,” Zina murmured. She hoped no weary travelers had ever been deceived by the line of trees, only to find there wasn’t a drop to drink after all.

She followed Trent into the line of stunted, scrubby trees and undergrowth. There wasn’t really much to them, she realized now that they were in amongst it – not much cover at all. But it wasn’t exactly like they could be choosy at this particular moment.

Trent had some blankets he’d pulled out of the car slung over his shoulders, and as soon as they reached a small clearing, he heaved them down onto the ground.

“Here looks like as good a place as any to get some shut-eye,” he said, rolling them out. “Sorry about the dust.”

“It’s no problem.” Zina carefully laid her bag down by a clump of underbrush. She swallowed. “Thanks just for getting us all out of there in one piece.”

Trent laughed, though his voice sounded a little tight. “Of course,” he said. He paused, looking up at her. “Zina, you

really haven't sensed it, have you?" He laughed again, shaking his head. "No – sorry, I'm asking you stupid questions. Now that you've given me some of that serum too, I get it – not even *I* can sense it now."

Zina opened her mouth, then closed it again. Confusion swirled in her chest – *What the hell is he talking about?!*

"Trent, I don't –"

But Trent cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Sorry – I get I'm being a bit mysterious just now. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything at all. It's just – for the longest time I thought I must be going *crazy*, or imagining things, or wondering if you weren't a shifter at all – finding out about that serum has shaken a bunch of stuff into place. I *get* it now."

"Trent, you're really not making any sense." Zina crossed her arms over her chest. "Seriously – I really have no idea what you're talking about."

She *really* didn't need Trent talking in circles at her right now. Didn't they have enough on their plate without *this* too?

Trent looked up at her, his eyes piercing. Zina couldn't hold back the gasp that left her throat – even though it was dark and getting darker by the second, she could see his face clearly, as if it had been the middle of the day. And she could see the pained expression on his face – but there was something else there too.

A look of pure *relief*.

"Zina, I don't know how to say this any other way except just to *say* it. Especially after everything we've been through. And everything we're probably going to have to *keep* going through."

Zina blinked at him. Warmth suddenly pooled in her belly, and her breath felt short in her lungs. She wasn't sure she could have spoken right now even if she'd known what to say – her head swam as Trent walked toward her, eyes trained on her face. His hands were warm when they touched hers, engulfing them entirely as he clasped them, pulling them up to his chest.

“Zina, it’s you. It’s only ever been you. You’re my mate.”

Zina stared up at him, her mouth going dry. Her head felt completely empty of thought.

“That – that can’t be true – I would have –”

*I would have sensed it –*

But even as she thought it, Zina wondered how true that was. Could the serum even have suppressed her ability to sense her mate?

“You still don’t feel it?” Trent’s eyes were searching hers. He looked desperate, and Zina could feel his pain, almost as if –

*Almost as if it’s our own.*

Zina felt a sudden flash of light through her chest. Her antelope had dashed suddenly through her mind, swift and nimble, and disappeared just as quickly as it had come.

She could feel her heart beating swiftly within her chest – and suddenly she remembered all the moments she’d struggled to keep her hands off Trent, all the times she’d felt instinctively that she could trust him, and not just because she’d had no choice. All the moments of *tenderness* she’d felt when looking at him, and not understanding where they’d come from.

*And what was it that made me call him in the first place? How did I know, somehow, that he’d take care of the eggs?*

Suddenly, everything began falling into place. She stared up at him, her heart pounding.

*It’s true. He’s my mate. We’re each other’s mates.*

Zina had never thought much about finding her mate before – she’d been too focused on her work for that.

She’d always imagined when it happened, though, she’d feel the knowledge rushing through her with a blinding surge of light... but somehow, she’d still known. Despite everything, despite the desperate measures she’d had to take, despite all

the danger and the suppression of her shifter instincts, somehow, she'd still *known*.

“How – how long have you –” she managed to stutter out.

“Since London,” Trent told her, his words coming out in a rush. “But there was no time – and now –”

“*London?* All that time?!” Zina shook her head. “Oh my God. I’ve been such an idiot. I didn’t even *think* –”

“You did what you had to do,” Trent said, taking another step toward her, pressing their hands between their bodies. “I don’t blame you, Zina. And maybe I should have said something sooner. So it’s my fault as w—”

Trent didn’t get very far into what he was saying – whatever that might have been – as Zina finally gave in to the pull of temptation that she felt like she’d been fighting off ever since she’d first laid eyes on Trent again, and kissed him.

The spark of electricity that shot straight up her spine seemed to bloom all the way through her body the moment their lips touched – and from there, suddenly, came the burst of golden light Zina had always been told she’d feel the moment when she met her mate.

*He is! He really is our mate!*

Her antelope suddenly burst into her mind, breaking free of the last of the suppressants that had kept it dormant for so long. Zina could feel its joy coursing through her as it kicked up its heels, prancing and leaping, tossing its head wildly. Zina hadn’t felt her antelope in so long that she was left feeling almost winded by the force of its emotions – though it wasn’t as if the kiss was *helping* there, either.

Trent’s lips on hers were warm and soft, and they sent a tingling sensation all through her veins, settling warmly in the pit of her belly.

Zina had never had time for romance – her job had been her life, and she’d always felt it was simply too much to ask of someone to make a long-term commitment to her, when she knew she could get called away for a dangerous mission at any moment.



But now, none of that seemed to matter – not in the face of the mated bond she could feel flowing between herself and Trent, filling her chest with warm, golden light; not when desperate sparks of electricity were flowing between them, setting her nerves on fire, making her skin tingle, and her stomach clench.

Zina pressed forward, wanting to be even closer to him – now that she'd finally given in to what she realized she'd been feeling all this time, she felt she couldn't stand a moment longer without touching him. Groaning into his mouth, she wound her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer, her breasts pushing against his chest. She felt Trent's own arms around her, drawing her even closer as the kiss deepened, sending stars spiraling behind her closed eyelids.

*Yes – this is what we want – what we've been waiting for –*

The joy Zina's antelope felt at being finally free to tell her what it must desperately have wanted her to know for so long enveloped her heart, melting everything else away – everything except the feel of Trent's lips on hers, his arms around her, her arms around him.

Which was why it was such a shock when Trent suddenly pulled back, his breath coming in pants as he looked down at her face.

“Zina – are you really sure –”

“Of course I'm sure,” Zina said, cutting him off. Maybe it was sudden, but right now, Zina had never been more sure of anything else in her life. “Now that I know, I can't believe what an idiot I've been this whole time,” she said after a moment, after collecting her thoughts. “I should have been able to tell. After everything you did for me – after how much I *trusted* you, right from the start – I knew you'd protect them. I knew you'd understand.”

“I'll protect *you* too, Zina,” Trent said, his voice low and husky as his hand came up to cup her cheek. “I'll do whatever it takes, I swear. We'll get the eggs to safety, together. But I won't go anywhere without you.”

Zina gazed up at him, with his kiss-swollen lips, his eyes darkened with desire – but along with the fierce protectiveness she could also feel swelling in her own heart.

“Me neither,” she said, her voice sounding rough even to her own ears. “Wherever you go, I go. We’re in this together. Forever.”

It was as much as she could do to get the words out before crushing her lips against his once again, her need to be close to him overwhelming her completely.

It didn’t matter that all they had to sleep on was a blanket spread out on the bare ground. Right now, the only thing that mattered to Zina – and, she was pretty sure, to Trent as well – was showing him just how much the mated bond meant to her.

Their hands tangled in each other’s clothes, and Zina found her senses lost in the midst of all their heated fumbling. Somehow, she managed to get Trent’s buttons undone and the shirt and the tank top beneath it lifted up over his head, leaving his broad chest and hard abdominal muscles exposed. Zina couldn’t help but run her fingers over them, biting her lip – of course she’d been able to tell how muscular Trent was even with his clothes on, but seeing it in the flesh was a different matter entirely.

*And I can finally get my hands on those tattoos...*

Staring at him, Zina ran her fingers over the spirals of ink that traced their way over Trent’s bicep, rippling on his skin as his muscles clenched at her touch.

A throb of desire shot through her stomach as Trent groaned beneath her touch – even this light trailing of her fingertips over his skin was enough to make him shudder.

“Zina...”

He breathed out her name, and it was all Zina could do to stop herself from throwing herself against him. She wanted to feel his skin against hers – and as her hands found the edge of her t-shirt, pulling it up over her head, his were on the buttons of her pants, undoing them and shoving them down her hips.

As far as she was concerned, she couldn't get naked fast enough.

She'd never felt anything like this before – the desire for him that coursed through her veins was almost dizzying. Zina had always considered herself a little unromantic, but right now all she could feel was heat, running through her veins, making her skin feel like it was sizzling.

*I never thought I could feel like this.*

And it was true – she never had. She'd never thought she'd be susceptible to this kind of desire. Zina had always prided herself on her cool head and sensibleness, but now, Trent was making her feel like she was losing her mind. Just a bit, and in a *good* way.

All the careful walls she'd built over the years – that she'd *had* to build if she wanted to survive – came tumbling down at the touch of his hands on her skin.

*So this is what it means to find your fated mate.*

Zina groaned as, finally free of her own pants, she started on Trent's own. She could see the sizable bulge already pressing against the material, and her mouth watered at the sight.

“Zina –” Trent gasped, as her hands ghosted lightly over it, and when Zina raised her eyes to his face, she found his eyes dark with lust in the low light, his cheeks flushed.

She groaned at the sound of her name on his lips. She had never expected to feel this way – she'd definitely never gone looking for her mate, or thought much about what she might do if she did. It had always seemed like such a remote possibility, and she was *far* too focused on her job to have put any kind of effort into her love life, whether that was with her mate or not.

But now, she could feel it, sitting at the core of her: the *rightness* of this, and how much Trent had come to mean to her. How everything within her told her that this was her *mate*, the one she was meant to be with.

*It's because we were made for each other, Zina thought. We were always meant to be.*

The knowledge sent a line of fire straight through her, and Trent's lips were searing against hers when he leaned down to kiss her again, sending white-hot heat racing through her, all the way to her core. She could feel the hardness at the apex of his thighs pressing against her, and she groaned into his mouth, arching herself up against it.

Trent's hands slid down her sides, sending bolts of pleasure across her skin. Zina groaned again, parting her legs so Trent, now *finally* free of his jeans, could settle between them. She already knew she was wet and ready for him, and now, the only thing she wanted was to feel him inside her – as close as he could possibly get.

The hot jut of his erection pushed against her thigh as Trent lowered his head to her breasts, his mouth ranging across them, teasing out sparks of pleasure with his tongue and teeth. Zina couldn't help herself from crying out, throwing her head back. She could feel herself growing dizzy from desire, heat racing through her like wildfire.

“Trent – please – *please* – I can't wait –”

There'd be time for them to take it slowly in future – right now, Zina knew what she wanted.

Trent groaned, nodding. “Zina –”

His mouth captured hers in a searing kiss. With his hands on her hips, he lifted her as if she weighed nothing at all, pulling her up against his hips, before finally, *finally* he slid inside her, filling her, completing her.

“Oh my God, *Trent,*” she couldn't help herself from crying out as he moved within her, his impressive length and girth filling her completely, making her feel deliciously full, finding the deepest parts of her.

Zina dug her fingers into his back as he thrust forward into her, ecstasy spiraling through her, fanning the flames that spread through her body. Lifting her legs, she wrapped them

around his hips, pulling herself up to meet him with every thrust.

“Zina,” he groaned, his voice desperate. “Zina – I can’t –”

She didn’t know what it was he was saying he *couldn’t* do, but whatever it was, Zina didn’t care. She lifted her head, bringing their mouths together once more as pleasure built within her in waves, higher and higher with every movement, as together they rose to the peak.

Wave after wave of brilliant light raced through her body, until finally, at last, she found herself crashing over the edge. She moaned as she arched up one final time, as pure bliss washed over them both, filling them both completely, body and soul.

Zina could feel Trent’s breath, warm and damp against her throat, as they lay together afterwards, chests heaving, coated in sweat as they came down from their climax.

*Oh, wow. That was... that was...*

Zina wasn’t sure she had the words to describe what that had been. Her head still felt muddled from ecstasy, her body still tingling.

*It’s because he is our mate,* her antelope said, giving her an irritatingly knowing look. *Which we would have known sooner, had you not locked me away.*

Zina didn’t have the energy to feel indignant right now – and anyway, her antelope was right. As if to confirm it, the animal *harrumphed!* in a very fed-up way, before receding into the background of her mind again.

*Well, I’ll just have to find a way to make up for lost time, I suppose.*

Zina exhaled, resting her forehead against Trent’s arm. She felt tired, but in a good way – not the terrified exhaustion of the last few weeks, but simply content and sore in all the best ways.

“Oh, wow – Zina. Look.”

Trent's voice drifted to her as she lay snuggled by his side, and Zina blinked, turning to him.

“What is it?”

“Look up.”

Zina cocked her head in confusion but did as Trent asked, turning her gaze upward to the night sky, only to be confronted with –

“Oh – oh, *wow*.”

Zina had spent most of her life in cities – places where she'd been lucky to see a few stars twinkling in between the skyscrapers, and only the very brightest could ever be seen. But out here in the desert, with nothing around except utter pitch blackness, the stars above them were laid out across the sky like a shimmering, dazzling blanket.

Zina blinked, a sense of wonder filling her. She'd never *seen* so many stars before in her life – the sky was so clear and dark that she could even see the long, shining stretch of the Milky Way, a dense streak of stars that looked almost – almost –

*Well, milky*, she thought.

“That's amazing,” she murmured, unable to tear her eyes away. “Does it always look like that out here?”

“More or less,” Trent said. “This was the view I grew up with as a kid. It's good to finally see it again. And to see it with you.” He turned to her, his teeth flashing in the darkness. “Mind you, the view down here is pretty good, too.”

Zina felt her cheeks flushing as she realized how naked and uncovered she was – but even though they were outside, here with Trent, it didn't seem to matter.

“As much as I'd like to keep enjoying it though, we'll get pretty cold,” Trent said, reaching over and pulling their other blanket over them both. “And I guess we should get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” Zina said regretfully. Honestly, there was nothing else she'd rather do than go for round two, or at least spend

some time curled up next to Trent, stargazing and talking about what their newfound bond meant. Well – newfound for her. It seemed like Trent had known for some time.

*I'll have to ask him about that later,* she thought, as a yawn cracked her mouth wide open. *But for now, I better –*

Closing her eyes, she was asleep before she even finished the thought.

## CHAPTER 10

Trent was woken by the feeling of sunlight flickering across his face. For some reason, however, he didn't snap instantly awake like he usually did – he was a morning person, after all, and once he was awake he was awake, and he didn't really see the point in lying around in bed.

*This morning, however, something felt different.*

“Mmm.”

As Trent turned his head at the mumbled sound coming from beside him, everything suddenly tumbled into place.

*Zina.*

She was snuggled up by his side, her forehead resting against his shoulder, eyes still closed in sleep, her long, thick eyelashes sweeping down over her cheeks. She looked beautiful, of course – but also more relaxed and contented than Trent had seen her look since they'd met up again. His heart thudded in his chest as he looked down at her. He wished she could always look this way: serene, peaceful, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

*Once this is over and done with, I'll make sure she never has to worry about a thing in her life, ever again.*

Even as he thought it, Trent knew that was probably impossible – but it wasn't going to stop him from doing everything in his power to *try*.



Unable to resist, he leaned down, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

*She's mine. My mate. And I'm hers.*

He still hadn't quite gotten over the disconcerting feeling of not being able to feel his kangaroo within him, echoing his thoughts or arguing with him in its irritating way, but he believed Zina when she said it'd be back soon. As strange as it felt and as little as he liked it, he could put up with anything if it was only temporary.

"Mmm... *mmm...*"

Muttering in her sleep again, Zina stirred, before her eyes fluttered open. She seemed disorientated for a moment, but then her eyes swept up, focusing on his face.

"Oh, good," she said after a moment of looking *very* hard into his eyes. "I was worried that was all a dream for a moment. It sure *felt* like a dream."

"Nope. Sorry." Trent smiled at her. "'Fraid not."

Zina shook her head, sitting up and running her fingers over her short hair. "Well, thanks for not taking the opening I just gave you to gloat and smirk, I guess," she said, glancing back at him with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes. "Don't let what I said about it feeling like a dream go to your head, though."

"I would never," Trent said, sitting up next to her. "Don't worry – I'll keep doing my best to try to impress you."

Zina's smile was brief, but brilliant. "Good to hear."

Looking around her, her eyes fell on the bag containing the box with the eggs fitted snugly inside it. Following her gaze, Trent felt a pang of guilt. He didn't feel good about the decision he'd had to make not to take them to Tahnee's sanctuary. But right now, he wasn't sure what other decision he *could* make. If this Bloodhound guy was as dangerous and tenacious as Zina seemed to think he was, then he couldn't risk it. But that didn't mean he couldn't feel terrible about exposing the eggs to more danger.

“Do you want a bit of breakfast?” Trent asked, as Zina reached for her shirt. “We have some bikkies and tea, if that suits your fancy.”

“Uh, sure, sounds great, whatever bikkies are,” Zina said. She swallowed as she stood up, reaching for her bag. “Uh, but before that, I just wanted to say that... that I’m sorry.”

Trent cocked his head, honestly confused. “For what?”

“For... for being so dumb about this whole thing,” Zina said, grimacing. “For not realizing sooner that... that we were mates. I was so caught up in everything I just never thought... I mean, it was *right there*, staring me in the face the whole time. I just never really thought about the whole mated bond or anything like that before. I always just had my job, and that was it. I wasn’t even *looking* for my mate. I always just thought it’d be a distraction. So I guess... maybe I didn’t *want* to see it. But even despite that, it still led me back to you. It led me back to the one person in the whole world I knew I’d be able to trust. Even if I didn’t know *why*.”

Trent’s heart swelled as she spoke. “It’s okay, Zina. I admit, I was kind of confused when you didn’t seem to feel the bond yourself – but then, I was confused as to whether you even *were* a shifter and *would* be able to feel it to begin with. But I understand it now – and to be honest, as happy as I am that’s all been cleared up, we *do* have a few things on our plate just now. Being mates means we know we can trust each other, but we can sort out the rest once we’ve figured out what to do with your little guys, yeah?”

Taking in a deep breath, Zina nodded. “Yeah. One thing at a time, I guess.”

Trent found he couldn’t argue with that. Pulling on his jeans, he made his way over to the car, where their food supplies would be waiting for them. Biscuits and tea wouldn’t be the most amazing breakfast he’d ever had, but it would do for now.

*Oh, bonus*, he thought, as he prized open the Esky and remembered they’d also bought some bananas and apples. So at least they’d have a bit of fresh fruit, too.

He was just collecting their humble bounty together when he heard Zina's shocked cry from where they'd spent the night.

"No!"

His head snapped around, immediately on the alert for danger. But without his kangaroo, his senses felt blunted. It was impossible to make anything out. "Zina?!"

Fear shot through his veins as he raced back to where he'd left her. He found her kneeling on the blanket they'd slept on, her hands wrapped around the sleek black box that housed the precious eggs.

"Zina, what's wrong?!"

She looked up at him, terror etched into every line of her face, her fingers still curled around the box.

"One of the eggs," she managed to get out, her voice strained and tight. "It's – it's broken. I was just checking on them, and I saw –"

Trent blinked, horror coursing through him. It must have happened while they were on the run, and not able to be as careful with the eggs as they should have been, he thought, as he knelt by Zina's side. The box *seemed* secure, but nothing was completely safe, especially with something so delicate and precious.

Swallowing, Trent looked down into the box, expecting to see a shattered mess of eggshell – but instead, on a first inspection at least, nothing seemed amiss. But on a closer look, he saw what Zina was talking about – one of the dark blue eggs had a distinct crack running through it, marring its perfect surface.

*Shit.*

Trent shook his head. He'd thought they were keeping the eggs safe – and he felt guilty enough as it was not being able to take them to safety at Tahnee's sanctuary. Now, to find out that because of his carelessness, they might have damaged one of the eggs, perhaps fatally –

*Wait. Wait.*

Trent squinted, frowning. His eyes hadn't left the egg ever since he'd noticed the crack, and now he was – *almost* – certain he'd just seen it... move.

It had been barely perceptible – just the slightest of wiggles where the egg sat in its snug foam housing.

*But if it's moving – and it's cracked – then does that mean*

–

Before Trent had time to finish the thought, the egg gave another small shudder, and this time it was *definite*. There was no mistaking the movement it made, rocking gently back and forth. And then, with a soft snapping sound, the crack in the egg grew bigger.

“Oh my God,” Zina murmured, clearly seeing the same thing as he was. When Trent looked up at her, he found her eyes were as large as saucers as she stared down at the wiggling egg.

“Zina, I don't think that egg is damaged,” Trent breathed, as the crack widened yet again, and small shards of the egg's beautiful blue shell began to fall away. “I think it's *hatching*.”

Zina didn't answer him with words – she simply nodded her head, her expression bewildered.

“But I guess we don't know what'll come out of it,” she whispered after a long moment of silence, broken only by the sound of the egg cracking. “I have no idea what's inside – not even Hargreaves knew that.”

“Well, I guess we're about to find out.” Trent licked his lips. He hoped it was going to be something as cute as Ruby – Hector hadn't known what he was going to get when *her* egg had cracked open, and now he had a whole adopted daughter out of it. *Unknown* didn't have to mean *bad* – but he still wasn't sure what he was going to do if it turned out to be a wyvern, with scales so poisonous they couldn't be touched, or something along those lines.

*It's not like I brought any wyvern-proof gloves with me on this trip.*

But the only thing they could do was wait, breathless, to see what would emerge.

“It’s... it’s coming out now,” Zina whispered, as they both unconsciously leaned forward to catch their first glimpse of what would hatch out of the blue egg.

The first thing Trent saw was a tiny blue snout, almost the same deep cobalt blue as the egg it was hatching from. It pecked like a beak at the shell, chipping away at it until it had created a large enough hole for it to begin forcing its way out, pushing up into the air outside. It pushed its way out, and then let out a series of small *cheeping* sounds, just like a baby bird.

“Should we help it, do you think?” Zina asked, turning to look at him, her eyes still wide.

“Maybe... maybe it’s better to let it do it itself, whatever it is,” Trent murmured. “It might be something it’s supposed to do itself.”

Zina nodded, turning to look back down at the snout as it snapped at the edge of the cracked shell, revealing tiny, silvery teeth. Finally, the hole it had created was big enough for it to force its entire head out of – and Trent and Zina were confronted with the head of a tiny blue lizard with enormous golden eyes, which it blinked curiously as it came out into the light from the darkness of its egg.

“Wh-what is that?” Zina asked, her voice hushed.

Trent bit his lip as the tiny creature looked around it, blinking its huge golden eyes, almost cat-like.

“It’s a dragon. A baby dragon.”

Zina pulled in a shocked breath. “A *dragon*? But... there aren’t any more dragons!”

“Perhaps not until now, no,” Trent said, shaking his head. “But remember what I told you about my friend and his daughter? There weren’t any more alicorns until her, either. But she’s very much real.”

Zina shook her head, still looking down at the little dragon as it gazed about itself, its body still encased in the eggshell.

At least until the moment it apparently decided it wanted to spread its wings, and then the rest of the egg burst, crumbling away, to reveal the rest of its body.

It really *did* look just like a baby lizard, Trent thought, dazed. A tiny lizard with little spines running down the length of its back, and delicate wings which it was now spreading out, as if it were stretching them after a long period of confinement – which, Trent supposed, was exactly what had happened.

The wings were large in comparison to the dragon's rather spindly body, and when it spread them out each one was the span of Trent's hand. It seemed impossible that all of this creature had been crammed inside one fairly small egg – but then, Trent thought, maybe that's why it had decided it needed to come out: not enough space inside the egg anymore.

*And now that it's here... what do we do?!*

“Uh. Hi,” he said cautiously, leaning down to look at the baby dragon a little more closely. Beside him, he could sense Zina mirroring his actions. “Welcome to... well, the world, I guess.”

The little dragon blinked its wide golden eyes at him, dark pupils widening and narrowing as it apparently got used to using them for the first time. It cocked its head, as if trying to puzzle out what Trent and Zina might *be*.

*God, I wish Hector was here right now,* Trent thought, feeling more than a little frazzled. Dragons were different from alicorns, of course, but at least Hector had *some* kind of experience with supposedly extinct creatures popping out of eggs right in front of him.

“Do you think... do you think it's hungry?” Zina whispered, as the dragon continued to regard them with its luminous eyes, its wings opening and closing gently. “What do you think it even eats?”

“I... don't know,” Trent said slowly. “Um. According to Hector, Ruby only wanted to eat mashed apple baby food

when she hatched. But, uh, I don't think we can assume dragons and alicorns are all that similar."

"No, probably not." Zina swallowed. "I hope it doesn't eat, well, fingers. Or any other body part, to be honest."

"I have some ham in the Esky," Trent said doubtfully. "Along with a few other things. Perhaps we could lay some out in front of it and see which one it goes for."

"Good idea." Zina said, nodding. Then, she took in a deep breath. "Oh my God, a baby *dragon*."

"Yeah." Trent stood, laughing shakily. "I guess we should have considered this possibility? I mean, they *are* eggs. With living creatures inside them. It's not totally unexpected that one might hatch."

"I guess so," Zina said, as the dragon, perched on top of its shattered egg, let out another series of *cheep cheep cheep* sounds, lifting its head and fluttering its wings slightly. "But you could have waited until we were somewhere safe, little guy. It's not like we can carry you around in this box anymore now – and you're gonna be *a lot* more conspicuous! I'm not sure we can just tell people you're some kind of garden-variety lizard."

Trent grimaced as he grabbed the Esky out of the back of the car. What Zina said was true – it was going to be a lot harder to carry a baby dragon around than it had been to carry a box of eggs. And what should they do with the little thing now? He still didn't think they could risk going to Tahnee's sanctuary, but a baby dragon wasn't going to be easy to manage.

*Well, probably not, anyway,* Trent thought as he made his way back to where Zina was sitting. Ruby was quite a handful, and had been since the first day she'd hatched, according to Hector. He had no reason to think a dragon would be any different.

*Especially if they're born knowing how to breathe fire,* Trent thought, a chill running down his spine. He did *not* want to have to deal with a dragon-style toddler tantrum!

“All right,” he said, crouching down on the blanket. “Let’s see what we have.”

The little dragon watched him with bright, curious eyes as he laid out a slice of ham, a piece of banana, and a small morsel of bread on a plate, before lifting it up for its inspection. “Sorry, it’s not exactly the buffet at the Ritz, but hopefully there’s something there you can eat.”

The dragon cocked its head, looking at each piece of food in turn, as if trying to figure out what they were. It didn’t seem inclined to eat *any* of them, however, and Trent was just beginning to worry they might not have anything it could consume when, fast as lightning, the dragon dove down onto the piece of ham, its mouth with its silvery teeth snapping as it devoured it.

“Oh – well I guess that answers that question,” Zina said – just as the dragon dashed across the paper plate to the banana and began scoffing *that* down too, with such ferocity that little pieces of mashed-up banana flew in all directions, spattering onto the blanket.

That done, the dragon spent a moment or two licking banana mash off its jaws with a long, dark blue tongue, before slithering over to the piece of bread. The bread disappeared with the same rapidity as everything else had, and at last the dragon seemed satiated: it flopped down where it stood and began grooming itself in a startlingly cat-like fashion, its tail curled daintily around its body.

“Well. Thank goodness he’s not fussy,” Trent said, mildly stunned. “Hopefully he knows what’s good for him to eat, and wouldn’t touch it if it was dangerous?”

“Not sure they *had* ham back when these little guys were roaming the earth,” Zina said, shaking her head, as together they watched the dragon lay its head down on its front feet and sleepily blink its eyes at them. “But let’s hope so.”

“*Cheep. Cheep.*”

The small, high-pitched sounds drifted out of its mouth as slowly, the tiny creature, its belly now full, began to drift into



a comfortable doze.

“I guess he wore himself out?” Zina said, just as a tiny snore rose up from the dragon’s mouth. “Eating must be tiring work.”

“And hatching,” Trent pointed out, as the dragon’s tail flickered as it slept. He glanced at Zina. “So it *is* a *he*, then?”

She shook her head. “I guess? I just... got this sense it’s a boy. I don’t know why. And I don’t want to keep thinking of it as an *it*.”

“I suppose so,” Trent said, laughing. “Should we give him a name then, too?”

Zina pursed her lips, cocking her head as she looked down at the sleeping dragon, curled up on the blanket. “I’m not sure what would suit him – I’ve never had a pet. Not even a hamster when I was a kid. I’ve never had to name anything before.”

“Hmmm.” Trent looked down at the dragon, considering. “Well, I can’t really say pets were a big thing in my household either – we had a couple of dogs when I was a kid, but my dad named those, Bluey and Twoey – Bluey because he was a blue heeler, and Twoey because he was the second blue heeler we got.”

Zina laughed, flashing him a smile. “Well, that makes sense, at least.”

“But what about... Dustin? Dusty for short?” Trent asked.

“Dusty the dragon? I like it,” Zina said, nodding. “It’s a nice tribute to his birthplace as well – it’s not like there’s much out here *but* dust.”

“You’re just saying that because I haven’t showed you the salt lake yet,” Trent said. “It’s not like we can drink it – like I said, it’s basically pure salt – but it’s worth a look before we go.”

“The salt lake?” Zina asked, blinking at him.

Trent smiled. “Yeah – come on. And bring Dusty. It’s high time we got going, but we probably have time for a quick

look. I can't drag you all the way out here and *not* show you the lake."

He watched as Zina reached out, slowly and carefully cupping her hands around Dusty's small, sleeping body. He wriggled a little and let out another soft *cheep, cheep* sound, but otherwise, he didn't stir as she picked him up, cradling him in the palm of her hand. He seemed to fit there perfectly, with his wings folded neatly around him, his head tucked away beneath one of them.

"Oh, he's really *warm*," Zina murmured, as she pulled Dusty close to her body. "I hope he's not cold-blooded, like a lizard – we don't really have a heat lamp we could put him under."

"Hopefully he'll be warm enough," Trent said, standing, and then helping Zina to her feet, taking the box from her. "Come on – let's go look at the lake, and then get going."

Zina gasped aloud, just as he'd hoped she would, when they made their way out from between the line of trees and scrub, and found themselves looking out over the pink salt lake.

It really was spectacularly beautiful: shimmering with a pink iridescence in the early morning sunshine, a flat, shallow expanse of water stretching out before them as far as the eye could see.

"It's amazing," Zina breathed, as together they stood, looking out over it. "It's... pink? Like really, really pink!"

"Yeah – my dad and I used to have a joke it was where everyone came to wash their red jocks – underpants, I mean – and that's what turned the water pink."

Zina snorted, shaking her head. "Oh, nice. Well, I'm just going to keep believing it's because of the salt content of the water, delightful though your theory is."

Laughing, Trent shook his head. "Well, I guess we ought to get going, though. If this Bloodhound guy is as tenacious as you think, we need to keep moving. And hopefully put together some kind of plan for what we're going to do next."

Biting her lip, Zina nodded, her expression turning serious. “Yeah. I mean, like I said – I don’t know if there’s any limits to what the Bloodhound can do. Hargreaves kept that under wraps, with good reason. Better for everyone to think they’ve got no chance of escape, if they decide to run.”

“Get many runners at Hargreaves, did they?” Trent asked, as they began making their way back to their makeshift campsite.

“Some. But I only know of a couple who got far.” Zina hesitated. “The last one might have been *why* they decided they needed someone like the Bloodhound in the first place. I’m worried it was partially my fault he’s even around to be chasing us now.”

“Oh?” Trent glanced at her curiously as he began packing up their things. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’m the one who helped the last guy to escape,” Zina said simply. “He was... well, I probably shouldn’t say. The less you know about him, the better. Sorry. Just know he wasn’t a bad guy, he just got... caught up. He was a scientist, and he was obsessed with his work. It took him a while to realize Hargreaves wasn’t who he should be helping, no matter how much funding they were willing to throw at him.”

Trent frowned. All of this was starting to sound just a little bit... familiar. *Hey, this scientist you helped escape – he wouldn’t happen to go by the name of Henry Woodson, would he?* he thought about asking – but in the end, Trent decided against it. Zina was right, and it was probably for the best he didn’t know, for now. *But if it is him, then I have someone who’s extremely grateful to you right now.*

His teammate Callan’s mate, Ella, would want to know all about this, since her father had been a Hargreaves scientist who’d escaped their clutches after deciding he could no longer support the terrible things they were using his research for. If that was who Zina had helped escape, then Trent knew Ella would want to thank her personally... except for the *tiny* detail that Trent wasn’t sure right now if he’d ever get to see Ella, or Callan, or any of his other teammates ever again.

That was what happened, he thought, grimacing, when you threw everything in to help the woman you loved.

*But I'd do it again in a heartbeat.*

He looked across to where Zina was carefully stroking a finger down the still-sleeping Dusty's spine, gentle and loving, and he felt his heart expanding. Zina, after all, had thrown everything in herself to try to help these little creatures, and get them safely away from Hargreaves. There was no way he couldn't have stepped up to do the same, no matter what it cost.

Trent finished packing up their things, as Zina cradled Dusty in her hands. Finally, he turned to the box where the other eggs were still sitting in their foam containers – and stopped.

“Uh. Zina?”

Zina looked up from where she was gazing down at Dusty. “Yeah?”

“Uh. Does this... look like another crack in one of the eggs to you?”

“What?”

Zina was by his side in an instant, staring down at the eggs.

Trent knew he wasn't mistaken, though – the other blue egg had a small but distinct crack running through its surface.

“Oh... oh dear,” Zina murmured, as the egg began wiggling in its housing. “Do you think it's going to be another dragon?”

“The egg is almost identical, so... probably,” Trent said. He glanced across at Dusty, still sleeping peacefully in Zina's palm.

*Well... at least he seems pretty tired out for now?*

That was good – but Trent wasn't sure he knew how they were going to handle a trip to Jackson's Ridge with *two* baby dragons in tow.

*Not to mention whatever's going to come out of that other egg, once it hatches.*

Maybe Dusty's emergence had started off a chain reaction – now maybe they were *all* going to hatch, in quick succession.

*That's not exactly going to make things very easy...*

“At least... at least we know what the dragons like to eat now?” Trent said, as another little blue snout began pushing its way through the crack in the egg, all the while making a tiny *cheep cheep cheep* sound.

The sound seemed to rouse Dusty from his slumber. He lifted his head suddenly, yellow eyes opening wide.

“*Cheep! Biiirup!*”

“Whoa!”

Zina made a grab as Dusty leapt up, escaping her fingers easily. He fluttered down uncertainly on his clearly still frail wings – or wings he was unused to using yet, at least – to land on the box, lifting his tiny clawed feet to begin pulling at the hatching egg, helping the little dragon inside to emerge, all the while keeping up his *cheeping*, as if he was encouraging the dragon still mostly inside to come out and join him.

“Oh my goodness,” Zina said. “Do you think maybe they're siblings?”

“Maybe so,” Trent said, nodding, as finally the second dragon popped its head fully out of its egg, looking around with the same wide, yellow eyes as Dusty had.

“It's gonna be tough telling these two apart,” Zina said, shaking her head. Trent would have agreed with her, if at that moment the baby dragon hadn't finished hauling itself out of its egg, revealing the rest of its body.

“Oh – look, this one's spines are different,” Trent said, pointing. They were, too – whereas the spikes that ran down the length of Dusty's back were long and pointed, the second dragon's were diamond-shaped, almost like a tiny stegosaurus, though there was only a single row.

“Okay, well, that does make life easier,” Zina agreed. “Should we try the food test again? Dusty was pretty hungry when he hatched.” She looked down at the new baby. “Are you hungry too? I’m sure you must be. That was a lot of work to hatch like that.”

The little dragon blinked up at her, tilting its head as if it was doing its best to understand what she was saying. Zina wasn’t sure that it *did*, but she hoped it’d take to the food the way Dusty had.

Trent reached into the Esky again, pulling out the ham, bread and banana and laying some morsels down before the new dragon. This dragon didn’t seem quite as bold as Dusty, however – it simply blinked as it looked at what Trent was offering it, seeming to draw back a little.

“It’s okay,” Zina encouraged it softly. “It’s just a little something to eat.”

The dragon didn’t seem tempted, however – at least until Dusty opened his mouth and let out a series of *cheeps*, lower and softer than the ones he’d made before, and the new dragon turned to blink at him instead, as if listening.

“*Cheep. Cheep!*”

At his apparent encouragement, the newly hatched dragon made its way cautiously over to the food, stretching out its neck to sniff at it. Apparently it liked what it smelled, because a moment later it had opened its mouth wide to gobble down first the banana, then the ham, and then the bread, before sitting back to lick its chops in a *very* satisfied way, before it scuttled back to Dusty’s side, curling up beside him.

“*Cheep? Cheep! Brrip!*”

“Do you think he’s telling her that he told her she’d like it?” Zina laughed softly, her eyes still on the baby dragons, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Because she definitely seemed to!”

“Maybe so.” Trent joined her laughter. “So you think this one’s a she, then?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Zina said slowly. “It’s just a feeling I get. I might turn out to be all wrong. Dusty is a name that could go either way, though – what do you think for this one?”

“I got to name Dusty,” Trent pointed out. “How about you name this one?”

Zina nodded thoughtfully. “All right. How about... Goldie? Because of her eyes? And if it turns out she’s a boy, it’s not a big deal.”

“Goldie and Dusty, I like it,” Trent said, grinning. “They sound cute.”

“They *are* cute,” Zina said, her smile still in place as she watched the two baby dragons curl up against each other, Dusty’s head resting against Goldie’s, their tails weaving together. “And clearly, they already love each other. They don’t seem like they want to be apart.”

“You can carry them both like that, can’t you?” Trent asked, as he closed up the Esky again.

“Yeah – they’re so little I can just put my hands together and lift them up.” Zina reached forward, gently scooping the dragons up in the palms of her hands. Neither of them stirred, except to resetttle themselves a little once Zina was holding them.

“I guess we better get going,” Trent said, as together they walked back toward the car. “We should get as far away as possible from here, while the serum still hasn’t worn off. Make it as difficult as possible for this Bloodhound joker to catch up to us.”

Zina nodded. “Yes. And we should try to get to a town, too. The more people there are around, the less Hargreaves can really do without revealing themselves or someone noticing and calling the cops. Not that the human cops would be able to slow down a shifter, of course, but it’s not like they want to advertise their existence to everyone. Right now, I’ll take anything I can get that’ll even *possibly* buy us some time.”

“Too right,” Trent agreed, as he loaded the Esky into the car. He pulled out his mobile phone, squinting at it. “Still no

reception out here – as soon as I get a bar I’m going to call Tahnee too, and tell her we’re not coming.” He glanced over to where Zina was holding the baby dragons against her. “We’ll have to do *something* with those guys, though. We can’t risk someone seeing them, and they’re not as easy to hide as the eggs were.”

“Do you think Tahnee will have any ideas?” Zina asked as she climbed into the passenger side of the car. Trent leaned over her, doing up her seatbelt for her, since her hands were full of baby dragon.

“She might,” Trent said. “I don’t want to risk going out there, but she may have a colleague or someone else who can help us. I can only ask, I guess. If she does, then we can make sure the last remaining egg is safely with her, too.”

“I hope so,” Zina said softly. Trent watched as she gazed down at the little dragons, slumbering peacefully in the palms of her hands. Looking at them, Trent felt an irresistible wave of tenderness rise up within him – tenderness, and determination to protect them all, no matter what the cost.

Of course he’d known the eggs were precious in their own right, but seeing the baby dragons hatching had only driven home just how important it was to keep them safe. They were little creatures – they deserved to grow up safe, with people who loved them taking care of them. Not with people who only saw them as tools, who were only interested in them because of the power and control they might be able to bring them. The last remaining egg – whatever might hatch out of it – needed to be safe until the creature inside wanted to emerge, too.

*I hope so too*, Trent thought grimly, as he walked around to get into the driver’s side door. *I hope so too*.



## CHAPTER 11

Zina gazed down at the baby dragons cradled in her hands as Trent drove on through the desert. She watched as they twitched in their sleep, sometimes stirring to let out more of their tiny *cheep cheep* sounds, just like baby birds, and she wondered what they must be dreaming about.

Whatever it was, Zina felt a swell of love for them rise in her chest – love, and a fierce determination that no harm would ever come to them. She'd already felt strongly enough about it that she'd stolen the eggs and run, but now, seeing Goldie and Dusty sleeping so peacefully, without any idea of what a cruel and terrible place the world could be – and how *they* had almost been used by Hargreaves to make it even crueler and more terrible – she knew she had to do whatever she had to in order to protect them.

*It doesn't matter what it takes. They'll grow up safe and happy. I'll make sure of it.*

Goldie moved a little in her sleep, lifting her head briefly to yawn widely, before snuggling up closer to her brother's side. In return, Dusty sleepily raised one of his wings and then lowered it to cover Goldie's body, in a gesture that was obviously caring, sheltering.

Zina bit her lip, tears springing into her eyes. She didn't consider herself sentimental in the slightest, but there was just something so... *innocent* about the gesture that she couldn't help but feel her heart growing three sizes as she watched.

Next to her, Trent had one hand on the steering wheel, while the other held his cell phone up to his ear – terrible driving practice, but Zina was coming to realize that however Trent had learned to drive, it hadn't been in any kind of driving school-approved way.

*Well, as long as he doesn't crash, I guess it's fine...*

As they'd approached the mining settlements and tiny towns that dotted the landscape out here, Trent's phone had managed to pick up a bar or two of signal – and so, of course, the first thing he'd done was call his friend Tahnee. The first couple of times, the call had dropped as they'd moved in and out of range, but this time, it seemed the call had stuck.

“Yeah,” Trent was saying, when Zina finally managed to drag her attention away from Dusty and Goldie. “No, nothing like that – look, Tahnee, there's no need to worry. I just won't be able to come up there like I asked after all. But... still, I think I have something I'd feel was safer with you. Is there any way you can send someone to us? Or do you have someone you trust in town who could meet up with us?”

Trent paused as he listened to what Tahnee had to say on the other end of the line.

“That'd be perfect. Like I said, I don't want you to worry. I can sort this out myself, but I think that's for the best. You're a gem, Tahnee. Just promise me you'll stay where you are, in the sanctuary. That place needs you.”

Another pause while he listened.

“No – no worries. You take care too, all right? Ta.”

Pulling the phone away from his ear, Trent hung up the call before tossing the phone down on the dashboard.

“That seemed to go well,” Zina said – Trent was a good driver, but she had to admit, she was happier now that he had both hands on the wheel.

“Yeah – she's going to send someone to meet us in Jackson's Ridge,” Trent said, glancing across at where Goldie and Dusty were snuggled. “But they won't be there until

tomorrow morning at the earliest, she said. So we'll still have to keep these little guys safe overnight."

Zina nodded, biting her lip a little. "I don't know how much longer the serum might take to wear off, but it probably won't last the night. If the Bloodhound has your scent – or mine, for that matter, which seems likely – he'll be able to pick up our trail again."

"You don't think we would have thrown him off with our little pitstop?" Trent asked.

Frowning, Zina shook her head. "I doubt it. Maybe for a little while, but probably not permanently. But I don't know how powerful he really is. He *did* track us down before, though."

Trent was silent as he apparently digested this information. "We might have distance on our side," he said after a while. "There's a hundred tiny mining towns all through this area, and all of them are pretty separated from each other. Jackson's Ridge is the biggest one, but if his skills aren't *pinpoint* accurate, then we could be anywhere out here. What we need to do is get into town and try to lie low, make it hard for them to cause a hoo-ha."

"I guess they didn't mind about causing a ruckus back at that motel before," Zina pointed out. "Maybe they won't care about it this time, either. They might be getting desperate enough to get the eggs back that they just don't give a shit *who* sees them."

"That's true," Trent admitted. "But I guess I don't really see that we have much choice. Our options are pretty limited, at least until Tahnee's contact arrives and takes these little guys off our hands."

"You might be right," Zina said grimly. "I guess all we can do is remain one jump ahead. At least in a town there *might* be reason for them to keep a low profile. But if they catch us out here..."

She glanced out the window at the vast, open emptiness of the red-sanded desert. She knew she didn't need to finish her

sentence for Trent to understand her perfectly: *If they catch us out here, no one will ever even find the bodies.*

Well – assuming the Bloodhound and whatever band he was leading had orders to kill them, Zina thought, with a twist of her lips. She didn't really know what happened to people Hargreaves considered traitors. It wasn't like there was a huge sample size.

“Ugh.” Trent blew out an annoyed exhale. “I know I couldn't have, but this would be so much easier if I could just tell my teammates about you, somehow explain everything...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “But the only reason *I* knew you were in trouble was because my agency was told to be on the hunt for you. So it's not exactly like I can just go *ask* them to help.” He let out a small, wry laugh.

“I wouldn't want to drag anyone else into this mess anyway,” Zina said softly. “It wasn't even my intention to drag *you* into it.”

“Hey, I dragged myself, remember?” Trent said, glancing across at her and shooting her a grin. “And I'd do it again. I thought I already made that pretty clear.”

“No, you did,” Zina said, smiling despite herself. “I just wish that –”

What she wished for she never got the chance to say. Because at that exact moment, Dusty woke up.

He seemed to come awake all at once: one moment, he was snoozing peacefully in Zina's hands. The next, he was standing up, eyes wide, pupils dilated, his tail standing straight up like an especially startled exclamation mark.

And then he *yowled*.

Far from the bird-like *cheeping* sounds he'd been making before, this noise was shockingly catlike – and it was the sound of a cat who had found itself in a situation it did *not* much like.

“Hey – it's okay –” Zina started to say – but it didn't seem to do any good.

Dusty let out another *yowl* of horror at finding himself inside a moving vehicle, and then leapt straight up out of Zina's hands.

“Ow – ow!”

His claws felt like needles digging into her skin as he launched himself onto the ceiling of the car, hanging upside down there and blinking in obvious terror before he scrambled his way toward the back seat, still upside-down, his claws hooked into the torn vinyl that – barely – covered the inside of the roof of the car.

“Dusty! Dusty, it's okay!” Zina tried to twist in her seat without jostling Goldie too much, but, it seemed, it was already too late for that.

Goldie had jerked awake at the sound of her brother's first *yowl*, and it was clear she liked being in a large, noisy, moving, mechanical enclosure as little as he did.

Scrambling up onto her feet, she threw herself out of Zina's hands – and straight onto the headrest of Trent's car seat.

“Not a great idea, Goldie!” Trent said, his eyes still fixed on the road, but it was clear that having a baby dragon howling with terror directly into his ear wasn't doing wonders for his concentration. “How about you get down from there?”

“I'll grab her in a second!” gasped Zina, as she unbuckled her seatbelt to twist around and retrieve Dusty from the roof of the car, as he clawed and slithered his upside-down way around it, still yowling at the top of his lungs. “C'mon Dusty, I swear there's nothing to be –”

“*Argh!*”

Zina whipped her head around at the sound of Trent's pained cry, only to see that Goldie *had*, at least, gotten down off the back of his car seat – and was now firmly ensconced on the top of his head, her little needly claws embedded directly into his scalp.

“Oh, my God,” Zina murmured, leaving Dusty where he was for the moment and reaching up to try to coax Goldie

away from direct contact with Trent's skin. "Goldie, honey, come on, that's not nice!"

It was clear that Goldie didn't care about what was *nice*, however – as far as she was concerned, Trent's hair was providing her with cover and protection from whatever she thought might be threatening her, and she obviously didn't intend to leave anytime soon. The more Zina tried to gently prize her away, the more tightly she held on, digging her claws in deeper and deeper.

"Zina, I – *ow* – I hope I don't sound like I'm being critical – *ah* – but I don't think you're – *oh my God* – helping things just now," Trent said, punctuating his sentence with small exclamations of pain.

"Um. Sorry," Zina said, withdrawing slightly. "It's just that. Uh. You're bleeding. A little."

It was true – there was a thin trickle of red starting at his hairline ever so slowly tracing its way down his forehead, as Goldie apparently dug herself in for the long haul.

"Maybe she can just stay up there for now until she's ready to come down in her own time," Trent said, through gritted teeth. "I don't think you're going to convince her without ripping my scalp off. And I just *got* this dye job. I'd at least like the chance to get used to it before it gets pulled straight off my skull."

"Perhaps that'd be for the best," Zina said, grabbing a tissue out of her pocket and dabbing at the bit of blood that had trickled down Trent's forehead. "She does, uh, seem kind of like she wants to stay there for now."

And it was true – whether out of terror at being in the car or because she'd taken a liking to Trent's hair, it was clear that Goldie wasn't letting go of his scalp anytime soon. She crouched amongst the bright yellow strands of his hair, eyes wide, pupils glancing nervously around as if she was trying to look in every direction at once. But at least she seemed like she wasn't going to go anywhere for the moment.

*Unlike Dusty!*

Since Goldie seemed like she was where she wanted to be, Zina turned her attention back to Dusty, who was still hanging upside-down from the car roof, letting out strangely cat-like *brrrs* and *yowls* as he clawed his way over the vinyl.

“Dusty, honey, how about you come down from there?” Zina implored, reaching out for him. She was glad both the baby dragons seemed lively – but they’d definitely been a lot less trouble while they’d been asleep!

It was clear Dusty wasn’t even slightly interested in listening to her: he gazed at her with his yellow eyes a moment, before letting out a loud *yowl* and skittering off to the far side of the car, his tiny claws tearing holes in the vinyl as he went. When he got to the left-side back door, he dropped onto it and began scratching at the glass of the window, leaving tiny scratch marks, and *yowling* all the while.

“Do you need me to stop the car?” Trent asked, glancing around as Zina wedged herself between the two front seats of the car, trying to grab at Dusty before he figured out how to open the car window.

“N-no,” Zina said, trying to wiggle into the backseat. “Honestly, I have really no confidence in this car’s ability to start again if you stop it now. And we should try to make as good time as we can.”

“That’s probably true,” Trent muttered, looking back at the road.

“Hey, sweetheart, it’s okay,” Zina said in as soothing a voice as she could muster, once she’d – somehow – managed to maneuver herself into the backseat. “We’re here, and I promise this weird contraption isn’t going to hurt you! It’s actually kind of helping you!”

Dusty paused in his frantic scratching at the window for a moment and turned to look at her, blinking slowly.

“*Brrrrrup?*”

Maybe it was just her imagination, but Zina thought she could hear a definite tone of inquiry in the little growl Dusty made.

“Yeah – that’s right,” Zina said, nodding encouragingly. “It’s friendly! I promise. I know it must seem a bit weird and frightening, but you won’t have to be in here for long.”

Dusty blinked at her again, cocking his head. He made a few more token efforts at scratching at the window, but either he was responding to her soothing tone, or he’d decided it was a hopeless cause.

“*Brrrrrup. Brrp!*”

His little growls sounded closer to the *cheeping* sounds he’d made when he first hatched now, which Zina decided to take as a good sign. Slowly, she reached out to him. Maybe he’d recognize her hands as the place he’d been peacefully sleeping up until a few minutes ago.

“That’s right, darling. No need to be worried. I wouldn’t ever let you get hurt.”

He took a moment to look slightly warily at them – but then apparently made up his mind to trust her, and, pushing himself away from the window, he unfurled his wings and made a small, stuttering flight to perch on the heel of her hand.

*Oh, wow, Zina thought, as he slowly revolved in her cupped palms, just like a cat readying itself for sleep. Flying already. We’re gonna have to keep a close eye on this one.*

It might have been only a short, jerky flight, but Dusty had only hatched a few hours ago. What would he be able to do by the end of the week? By the end of the *day*, even?

“Everything all right back there?” Trent asked.

“Taken care of, I think,” Zina said softly, as Dusty settled himself in her hands. She could feel the rapid *tap tap tap* of his tiny heartbeat against her palm, and it was clear that he was far from calm – but he trusted her. He was willing to let her protect him from the horrible metal contraption he was, for now at least, trapped inside.

“*Brrrp. Brrup!*”

Dusty seemed to be insistent on something, but for now, Zina wasn’t sure what it could be. He looked up at her



expectantly.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, Dusty,” she told him, in the most solemn voice she could – she didn’t want him to think she wasn’t taking his concerns seriously, after all. “But I’ll do my best to learn how to understand you better, okay? And I promise that nothing will hurt you as long as I’m here.”

Dusty rested his head on her thumb, seeming, for now, to be relatively placid. Perhaps he hadn’t understood her words, but he *had* understood her soothing tone.

“I think he’s okay now,” Zina said, glancing at the front seat – all she could see of Trent, however, was the top of his head... and Goldie still perched on top of it, curled up now as if she was nesting in his hair. Somehow, despite the situation, she couldn’t help but giggle. “Nice hat, by the way.”

“Well, thank you. You wouldn’t believe where I got it,” Trent shot back, but she could hear the humor in his voice.

Sighing, Zina leaned back against the back of the seat. She didn’t really want to risk trying to crawl back into the front now, not with Dusty finally having calmed down. Instead, she looked out the window at the passing desert – red, hot and sandy, and dotted only with the sparsest of trees and pale green grasses. In her hands, Dusty seemed to finally be settling himself a little more calmly, but when she glanced down at him, she found him awake and alert, watching the scenery just as intently as she was.

*He certainly seems very curious about everything, Zina thought, with a surge of affection. I guess when I set out on this... well, this thing, I didn’t really take into account the fact the eggs might hatch while I still had them. They’d been dormant for so long, I didn’t really think it was possible.*

“I wonder why they hatched right now,” Zina said, frowning a little. “There was no sign of them doing it the whole time Hargreaves had them, and who knows how long they’d been sitting around before that. Decades, at least.”

“Hmm,” Trent said musingly. “I don’t really know. But I might have a theory.”

Zina sat up a little straighter. “What?”

“Well, I’m only going off of what my mate – that’s my *friend* – Hector told me about what happened when he and his mate – that’s his *mate* – Myrtle found Ruby’s egg. Like I told you, Hargreaves were trying to buy it off some bikies. But when Hector checked out the egg at first, he wasn’t even sure it was real, or if there was something living inside of it. But then, as soon as he realized he and Myrtle shared a mated bond, it hatched.”

Zina pulled in a gasp, blinking at him. “Then... you mean...”

“A bit more than a coincidence, wouldn’t you say?”

Zina nodded slowly. “Yeah. I guess I see what you mean.”

*As soon as I realized Trent and I were mates, suddenly, the eggs hatched.*

Maybe, somehow, they could sense the connection between her and Trent – and somehow, maybe, that had made them feel safe enough to emerge into the world.

“I guess I can see why that might happen,” she said.

“I hope they won’t mind when we have to give them to Tahnee’s colleague tomorrow,” Trent said softly after a moment. “If they really *did* hatch because they could sense the bond between us, they may not like it much if it’s suddenly taken away.”

Zina bit her lip. “I guess that’s true. Has Tahnee found her own mate?”

“No clue, sorry.” Trent began to shake his head, but at a slight *grrup!* sound from Goldie, he quickly stopped. “All I really know about her is that she runs the sanctuary, and she takes her privacy *very* seriously.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess all we can do is hope.” Zina returned to looking out the window, but she felt a little uneasy. Whatever the case, she knew that the sanctuary was the best place for both the dragons *and* the egg.

“How much longer to go until we hit town?”

“Not long – maybe three or four hours. But it’ll come out of nowhere – it’s just like the whole place was plonked down in the middle of the desert.”

“Three or four *hours*?” Zina asked. “That’s not long?”

“Hey, it’s all relative,” Trent laughed.

*Well, I suppose that’s true,* Zina thought, feeling a small smile creep across her lips despite herself.

Trying to relax, she settled back in her seat to enjoy the next three or four hours, Dusty still curled in her palm of her hand.



“*O*h boy, you weren’t kidding about this place being not there, and then suddenly just... *there*,” Zina said a few hours later.

There’d been no warning at all that they were arriving in Jackson’s Ridge, except for a dusty, peeling sign, and then, suddenly, where there’d been only desert before, there were now some run-down-looking buildings, storage crates, and rusted shipping containers.

“Yeah,” Trent said. “It really is an outback town – there’s nothing for miles, except mining encampments. And they’re kind of hard to spot, and few and far between. And most of the buildings themselves are underground.”

“Underground?” Zina asked, turning to him. “Like... the mines themselves?”

“Well, definitely the mines are underground,” Trent laughed. “But no, I meant the houses – the summer’s too hot and the dust storms can get crazy. So these days most people build their homes underground, though obviously there’s a few places above ground too.”

“Huh.” Obviously, it all made sense – people had adapted their ways to cope with a harsh environment. “So how does

the mining part work out here?” she asked as Trent slowed the car as they moved into the town limits.

“Well, I’m not exactly an expert,” Trent said. “But as far as I know, the land is divided up into claims, and once you’ve gotten your prospecting license you can buy a stake in a claim – or claims, if you can afford to buy more than one. But it’s really a lucky dip from then on. Maybe you strike it rich, and find a seam of opal. Or, more likely, you don’t. It’s all a gamble, and some people go through a lot of money to try to recoup their initial investment.”

“Sounds a bit like a case of the sunk cost fallacy at that point,” Zina remarked.

“Yeah. I’ve only known a couple of guys who spent any time out here, but it was a bit like a fever with them – they were so sure they were only a few inches away from finding a huge seam, every time.”

“And did they?” Zina asked.

“One did. And yeah, he definitely hit the jackpot with it. He made a ton of money – but he spent it just as quick, and the next year he was back out here, looking to do it again. I think for some of ’em, it’s not so much about the money but the chase.” Trent laughed. “Like some kind of really weird adrenaline junkie thing. Adrenaline junkies in slow motion.”

Zina nodded. She guessed she could understand that. She wouldn’t have chosen the job she had if she was totally immune to the call of adrenaline.

As they drove down the main street – or what Zina *assumed* was the main street, anyway, since it was fairly wide and had buildings on either side of it, though it wasn’t paved at all – she noticed a few people hanging around in what shade there was, dressed in shorts and sleeveless tops.

*Okay, well, it’s not crowded, but there might be enough people to – oh! Oh SHIT!*

“Trent!” she yelled.

“What?” He snapped his head around to look at her – and Goldie, still napping in his hair, woke up, raising her head and

blinking her eyes curiously. At least until Zina, leaping forward, jammed a hat down over her, shielding her from the view of passers-by.

“Oh, fuck, that was close,” Trent muttered, as, from beneath the hat, there came a mournful *brrrrrrrup*?

“It’s okay, Goldie,” Zina said as soothingly as she could. “You go back to your nap.”

“*Brrp. Cheep?*”

Thankfully, whatever Goldie thought of being covered by a hat, she seemed content to stay where she was. Looking down at Dusty – who had moved from her hands to her lap – Zina grimaced.

“And what are we going to do with you, young man?”

Dusty didn’t seem to have much of an answer to that, and simply gazed up at her with sleepy yellow eyes.

“I don’t suppose you’d consent to getting in my bag for a little while?” Zina asked him hopefully.

“Worth a try,” Trent said, reaching beneath the passenger’s seat before passing her back her bag. “Perhaps if we put some food in there to lure him in?”

“Good idea.”

Opening the Esky where it sat on the seat next to her, Zina grabbed a slice of bread from the loaf. Dusty hadn’t seemed to have had a preference for any one thing out of what they’d fed him before, and bread seemed the least likely of the three to make a mess in her bag.

“Hey – Dusty. You want some bread?” Zina asked, moving it what she hoped was temptingly in front of Dusty’s face.

Dusty, apparently, was *very* interested in some bread. He got up, nostrils flaring as he sniffed at the bread, following it as Zina moved it slowly closer and closer to the opening of her bag.

“It’s not so bad in there, I promise,” she said. “You were happy in there when you were in your egg – and it’ll just be

for a little while. I'll let you out as soon as we're somewhere private."

Dusty didn't have to be told twice. As she put the bread inside her bag, he willingly followed it inside. As soon as he was in the bag, he opened his jaws and started chomping on the bread, devouring it quickly – Zina just hoped it'd keep him occupied long enough for them to find somewhere to stay and to check in. At least he didn't seem at all worried when she carefully zipped the bag closed again, with him inside. Judging from the way the only sound she heard from inside was that of happy munching, she assumed he was content to stay there for the moment.

"There's a hotel up ahead," Trent said. "Hopefully they'll have a free room."

"Is this place that popular amongst tourists?" Zina asked as they passed yet more windblown, beat-up-looking buildings. She could see in the past maybe these places had been pretty fancy, two stories high with wrought-iron balconies. But now there was no word for them but *run-down*.

"Well, you'd be surprised," Trent told her as he swung the car into a parking lot – which was more like a dusty space out the front of a weather-beaten building. "Lots of people come out to old places like this, out of curiosity or to see something off the beaten track. Maybe find some opals for themselves and set themselves up for life."

Zina grinned. "I guess we should be so lucky."

"*Brrup? Brrp? Cheep?*"

As Trent stopped the car, Zina could see Goldie starting to move around beneath the hat, poking up against it and causing it to move around in a way that definitely was *not* inconspicuous.

"You think she's ready to come down from there?" Zina asked, reaching forward to peep under the hat.

As she did, however, Trent sucked in a sharp breath. "*Ow, ow, ow*. She *really* dug her claws in when you did that."

“Um. It’s gonna be a bit hard to check in with what looks like a living hat on your head,” Zina pointed out. She moved the hat up again – and this time, a tiny clawed foot shot out, grabbing at the brim and yanking it back down into place. “But she does seem set on staying up there.”

“Well... I guess there’s not a lot we can do about that,” Trent said grimly. “It seems like either she stays up there or I lose my hair. And I really wasn’t planning on going bald quite yet.”

Zina laughed. “Okay. Well. Maybe I can do most of the talking.”

She left Trent in the car as she got out, her bag with Dusty inside it balanced carefully on her shoulder. As risky as it was to take him with her, she didn’t think it was fair to leave Trent alone with *two* potentially problematic baby dragons.

The door jingled as she opened it, stepping into a somewhat shabby lobby. Despite how old and worn it looked, again, Zina could tell that once upon a time, this place had been quite fancy.

“Don’t have any vacancies, love.”

Zina jumped at the sound of the voice from her left – she couldn’t see anyone sitting at the checkout counter, until she realized they were sitting *way* back in a recliner chair, a women’s gossip magazine obscuring their face.

“Uh. I see,” she said. “Are there any other hotels in town we could try?”

“Nah. Just us, love. Sorry about that. There’s a boarding house along the road if you wanna take your chances with that lot, though.”

Zina wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that, but if they didn’t have any other choices then she guessed it’d have to do.

“Do they take couples?” she asked. “Me and my – um, my – husband, are –”

At once, the person behind the counter erupted up from behind their magazine. Zina wasn’t sure she’d ever seen

someone with such a deep tan before – combined with such a brassy yellow dye job.

*It's even yellower than Trent's!*

“Oh – you here on a romantic getaway then, love?” The woman blinked at her, a knowing smile on her fuchsia-pink lips.

“Oh, I guess you could say that,” Zina said, trying to return her smile. A little white lie wouldn't hurt, she thought – and anyway, this trip definitely *had* turned out to be more romantic than she'd been bargaining for!

“Well, that changes things then,” the woman said, nodding. “We *do* have just one room free: the honeymoon suite. People don't usually want it, especially not people on their own. But if you're here with your main squeeze, then you can take it.”

“That's completely fine,” Zina said, approaching the counter. “All we really need is a room. But the honeymoon suite sounds great.”

“Wait 'til you see it, love,” the woman said, winking at her. “It's saved more than one marriage in its time. Something about the atmosphere in there – makes you remember why you first fell in love.”

Zina forced herself to laugh along with the blonde woman as she threw her head back with a huge guffaw. Involuntarily, memories of the evening before played through her head – shivering slightly as a warm sensation passed over her, Zina was *pretty* sure she didn't need any reminders just yet of exactly what was good about Trent.

“Pay when you leave,” the woman said, before she turned, grabbing a huge key from a hook on a board behind her. “You never know, you might end up wanting to stay longer.”

“Maybe so,” Zina started to say, smiling – just as at exactly that moment, a little *growl* emanated from the depths of her bag.

The woman raised an eyebrow.



“Oh, um. Gosh, I must be hungrier than I thought,” Zina said, clutching at her stomach theatrically and raising her voice. “My stomach is *really* grumbling.”

The lady behind the counter did *not* look particularly convinced, but just as she seemed to be opening her mouth to express her disbelief, Zina heard the bell on the hotel door jingling as it opened, and saw the woman’s face turn from skeptical to lasciviously appreciative in the space of half a second.

“Oh – that one yours is it, love?”

Zina turned to see Trent coming through the door, loaded down with the bags from the car, and his hat – thankfully – still on his head. Though Zina wondered if the woman behind the counter could see the way it was, very slightly, moving around.

“Uh, yeah, that one’s mine all right,” Zina said, trying to play along, hoping it might distract the woman long enough that she’d forget about her growling bag and Trent’s moving hat.

As she said it, however, Zina was surprised by the force of the emotion saying those words out loud brought up in her. *He’s mine. Forever. Always mine.*

Maybe it was her shifter side coming back, she thought, biting her lip. She wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Sure, it’d be better for her to have her shifter instincts back, but if her antelope was here, then it’d make her much more trackable by the Bloodhound.

*Just a little while longer, she thought. After tomorrow, when we’ve given Dusty, Goldie, and the other egg to Tahnee for safekeeping, then it’ll be all right.*

“I just came to check everything was okay,” Trent said, as his hat did a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree revolution on his head.

“Oh, everything’s fine!” Zina said quickly. “Just... just checking in!” She – only slightly manically – held up the key the lady had given her, jiggling it on its chain.

“I told your gal here you’re in the honeymoon suite,” the lady said, winking, seeming – *thankfully* – to be too caught up perving on Trent to think much about what his hat might be doing. Zina was pretty sure she wasn’t looking at or around his face, anyway.

“Oh, cheers,” Trent said. “Nice one. We better get upstairs and get unpacking, then.”

“Have fun, love,” the lady said, giving him one last lingering look. “Top floor – and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. Which isn’t a lot!”

She gave one last booming laugh before settling back down behind the counter and lifting her magazine again.

Zina was *very* happy to take her suggestion.

Dashing across the lobby, she grabbed one or two of the bags Trent was lugging, and together they hauled them up the three flights of stairs to the top floor, jamming the key in the door and making their way into the room.

“Oh – okay,” Zina said as she gazed around the room. “The lady at the desk said it was a special room, but, uh, not sure what I was expecting.”

The room looked pretty much the same as any other cheap hotel room that hadn’t been updated in a while – brown carpet, beige walls, worn sofa by the wall, a bedroom with some slightly peeling floral wallpaper visible through the open door. What was different about it, however, was a rug with garishly bright red roses on it leading from the door to the bedroom, and the swoops of slightly yellowing gauze that hung from the ceiling.

*I guess it’s a little romantic?* Zina thought. *If you squint?*

The idea, anyway, was nice.

Just as she was gazing around, however, she heard another very determined *grrwllp!* sound from within her bag.

“Dusty! I’m sorry! Let’s get you out of there,” Zina said, quickly unzipping her bag.

Dusty didn't seem too upset, however – he scrambled up to the lip of the bag before looking around his new environs with wide eyes. He seemed curious, but not frightened.

*Thank goodness for that! Not sure what we'd do if he decided kind of cheesy hotel rooms are as scary as cars apparently are.*

“Come on – you get down too, Goldie,” Trent said coaxingly, as he put their bags down on the floor and lifted his hat off his head. Goldie was still sitting on his head, but on finding herself no longer under a hat and no longer in a car, she seemed slightly happier than she had before – at the very least, Trent's scalp didn't appear to be bleeding anymore.

*“Cheep cheep! Brrwwwl!”*

Dusty, feeling brave, had crawled down from Zina's bag and dropped onto the floor, scurrying across the old carpet before climbing onto the dining table in the middle of the room, his little claws making tapping sounds as he scrambled across its Formica surface.

“Do you think he's hungry?” Trent asked, watching Dusty sniff at the table.

“He shouldn't be – he just had a whole slice of bread. But I probably shouldn't feed him that anymore. It might be filling, but it's probably not all that nutritious.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Trent said. “He seemed happy enough with the banana, so we can get him some more fruit, and some meat that's a little less processed than ham. I guess dragons are just born eating whatever they'd eat normally.” Looking up, he jabbed gently at Goldie, who was still nestled on his head. “Okay, little lady. Time to think about getting down, yeah?”

Either Goldie understood what he was saying or she was curious about what her brother was sniffing at on the table, but either way she jumped off Trent's head with a soft *cheep!* and, fluttering her wings clumsily, managed to fly herself to the table.

*“Grrrp! Grrr!”*

But as soon as she did, Dusty spun around, arching his back like a cat and letting out a little growl. Goldie, uncertain, backed off a little, looking up at Trent and Zina as if for guidance.

“Hey now, Dusty,” Zina said, wagging her finger. “We do *not* growl at our sister. There’s enough space on that table for the both of you!”

Dusty seemed to gaze at her skeptically for a moment, before shuffling his way over to where the table’s shiny Formica veneer was fastened to the wood beneath with silver metal studs. Looking defensive, he curled up around one of them as if he was protecting it. He gazed belligerently up at them, as if daring them to make him move.

Zina frowned, not sure she understood what Dusty was upset about – but then it hit her.

*Shiny metal. Do dragons in the real world have a weakness for shiny things, just like they do in books?*

It wasn’t like the studs in the table would be of any value – they definitely weren’t jewels or coins of gold, that was for sure – but maybe, to Dusty, the only thing that mattered was that they were shiny.

“Do you think he’s... trying to make a treasure hoard?” Zina asked uncertainly, still not sure if her theory actually made any sense whatsoever.

Trent blinked. “Oh. You know what? I think he might be.”

Certainly, their theory seemed to bear out as Goldie, too, on noticing the shininess of the metal, scrambled her way over to one of them and sniffed at it intently, clearly investigating whether it was worthy of being part of her hoard.

Apparently, the answer was *yes*, since she too curled up around it, as if protecting it with her tiny scaled body.

“I guess we could do a little test,” Trent said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out some loose change. Reaching down, he put two small gold coins down on the table – Zina recognized them as two dollars apiece.

The effect was instantaneous. Even though the coins obviously weren't *real* gold, Dusty and Goldie didn't seem to care at all. Abandoning their silvery treasure, they hurled themselves across the table at the coins, snapping a little at each other – but both of them ended up with one coin each in the end, Dusty carrying his in his mouth to the far side of the table, while Goldie clutched hers in her front paws, pushing it along in front of her until she'd reached what she deemed to be a safe distance, before throwing herself down on it.

“Huh. Well, I guess that answers *that* question,” Zina said. “Funny how their instincts are already so strong, even though they just hatched.”

“Let's hope they don't start breathing fire anytime soon,” Trent said grimly. “And that they can still get along while they're guarding their hoards. Of two entire dollars each.”

“Hey, that's more savings than I had at their age,” Zina said, laughing. “I'd say they're doing pretty well for themselves!”

“True enough,” Trent said with a grin. Then, he let out a long sigh. “Well, I guess it's been a long day, and I can't speak for you, but I, personally, am starving. I think I need a proper feed.”

“Do you think there'll be anywhere in town to eat?” Zina asked.

“There'll be somewhere to get some grub. But we probably shouldn't risk being out and about too much. One of us should probably stay here, while the other goes and grabs something to eat and brings it back.” He glanced at her. “I can go – maybe I'll try and find out if there's been any strangers through town recently. Find out if we're ahead of your Bloodhound friend or behind him.”

“Probably a good idea,” Zina said, nodding. She glanced across at where Goldie and Dusty were still jealously guarding their two-dollar hoards. “These guys seem happy enough for now.”

Trent smiled, his eyes filling with fondness as he looked at them – and Zina had to admit, she knew exactly how he felt.

“Let’s hope I can find something for them to eat that they’ll like, to help them grow up big and strong.” He looked at her. “You’ll be all right?”

“Of course.” Zina nodded, swallowing. “Will you?”

“Of course.”

He reached out to her, enfolding her in a hug and pressing a kiss to her forehead. Zina closed her eyes, breathing in his scent, and letting herself be comforted by him. It’d been such a long time since she’d been held by *anyone*, let alone anyone she felt truly safe with. Someone who she felt knew her, through and through, with no secrets between them anymore.

“Back soon,” Trent said, when he reluctantly released her, before he turned and headed out the door, sending one last look back over his shoulder as he went.

*Well, let’s hope the lady at the front desk doesn’t eat him alive,* Zina thought, as she sat down at the table. She’d already been pretty much devouring him with her eyes, after all.

Looking down at Goldie and Dusty where they were curled around their coins, Zina felt a surge of fondness for them both swell in her chest.

She knew it’d be for the best – that they’d be safe with Tahnee at her sanctuary, and she and Trent couldn’t be on the run with them forever. Not to mention, it was probably going to take two of them to find the last egg, wherever it was, before Hargreaves did. But still...

*But still, it’s gonna be really, really hard to give you little guys up.*

## CHAPTER 12

Trent didn't think he was out of the hotel room all that long – he'd even managed to avoid being waylaid by the lady at the front desk, whose name, he'd learned, was Lianne, for more than ten minutes – and yet, by the time he got back with his shopping bags and some boxes of Chinese takeaway from the only place in town that seemed to be open, it was clear a lot had happened.

“Oh my God, Trent.”

Zina was sitting bolt upright in the middle of the floor in the living area of the suite, her eyes wide.

“Zina, what's wrong?” He was by her side in a second, shopping forgotten as he dumped it on the floor. “What's happened?”

“No, no – nothing bad. I don't think.” Zina shook her head, pulling in a breath. “I think the last of the eggs is hatching.”

“Seriously?”

Trent felt his chest tightening. As adorable as Goldie and Dusty were, they were already a handful! Not to mention, the last egg was quite different from the two dark blue ones they'd hatched out of. Did that mean it *wasn't* a dragon egg, and some other creature was going to bust out? And if so, what?!

He looked down at the egg Zina was gingerly cradling in her hands, a long dark crack running through its shell. It was deep green in color – a green so dark it was almost black, the crack barely visible.

“I was just checking on it, when I saw this,” Zina said. “I guess it makes sense – if Goldie and Dusty felt secure enough to hatch, then maybe this one does too? It’s just a crack for now, though – it hasn’t moved at all since then.”

“Hmm.” Trent leaned down a little to inspect it more closely. “Would it be better to let whatever’s in there come out in its own time? I don’t want to rush it. It should only come out when it really feels ready.”

*Plus, who knows if I bought any food it’ll like?*

“You’re right,” Zina said, putting the egg back down in its foam casing. She sniffed the air. “Do I smell Chinese food?”

“You absolutely do!” Trent shot her a grin as he stood up. “Want some?”

“God, yes,” Zina said. “I feel like I could eat a whole noodle factory.”

“Probably good, since I just about bought a whole factory’s worth of them,” Trent said, heading over to where he’d dropped the shopping. “Should we see if Goldie and Dusty can be tempted into eating anything that might actually be good for them, too?”

“Sure.”

Zina went to the kitchenette, finding where the plates were kept. The place was well-stocked with all the kinds of things people might need – but then, Trent thought, it seemed like the suite was designed for people who wanted to spend as little time as possible outside of it.

“Here.” Zina laid the plates out on the table. “What did you get?”

“Beef mince, to start with,” Trent said, scooping a little out of a container and placing it on the plate. “Then I got some apple and more banana, since we *do* know they like that. Some broccoli. Bit of chicken mince, too. I thought a whole chook might be a bit too much for them to handle just now.”

“*Grrrup?*”



As Trent placed the food on the plate, Dusty lifted his head, making a sound that was very definitely *interested*.

“Oh, you want something?” Trent said, glancing over his shoulder. “You hungry?”

“*Grrp grrp? Cheep!*”

As soon as he spoke, Goldie too raised her head from where she'd been guarding her treasure, eyes glowing with hunger.

“Well, if you want to eat, you're going to have to leave your little treasures,” Trent said, putting the two plates with their selection of food down on the ground next to the table. “Baby dragons have to prove they have good manners before they can eat at the grown-up table.”

As Trent watched, it was clear that there was a war going on within Dusty and Goldie's hearts – they didn't want to leave their two-dollar coins, but they *also* definitely wanted the food.

“No one's gonna steal your hoard, I promise,” Trent said, with as much sincerity as he could muster. “You can trust us – right?”

“Oh, for sure,” Zina chimed in, nodding enthusiastically. “No one would dream of it.”

Maybe Dusty and Goldie believed them, or maybe their hunger won out. Either way, in the next moment, both of them had left their treasures to scuttle their way over to the edge of the table, throwing themselves down off the edge and fluttering to their plates of food.

They took a moment to inspect what was on offer, and then, without any further hesitation, started eating.

“Whoa,” Zina murmured as she watched them ravenously devouring everything in front of them. Goldie started with the chicken mince, wolfing it down without even chewing, while Dusty seemed to prefer the banana, before moving on to the beef mince. Whatever their preferences, however, it was clear neither of them were fussy, and soon the plates were

completely cleaned, and the two baby dragons were licking their chops like especially satisfied cats.

“Okay, well, that, at least, is easy,” Trent said, shaking his head. “We can tell Tahnee she won’t have any trouble feeding these two.”

“Thankfully not,” Zina agreed.

Now that they’d eaten, Trent couldn’t help but notice both baby dragons were looking a little sleepy – their eyelids drooped, and Goldie seemed to be having trouble keeping her head up. Nonetheless, they both seemed to want to go back to their tiny hoards, if the way they were looking anxiously up at the tabletop was anything to go by.

“Looks like it might be someone’s bedtime,” Trent said, smiling at them fondly. He didn’t really want them on the table, though – he and Zina still had to eat their own dinner off that!

“Come on,” he said, scooping Dusty up in one hand, and Goldie in the other. “Let’s find you somewhere to snooze. Zina, could you grab their, uh, treasures? Maybe they’d be happiest sleeping with them on the sofa.”

Nodding, Zina grabbed the coins, which brought forth a small cry of protest from both dragons, though they calmed down when Zina put them down on a sofa cushion. “You guys are definitely going to have to learn to get along,” she said firmly. “So no touching each other’s stuff, okay? You’ve both got your own.”

Dusty and Goldie seemed to accept this edict, curling up next to each other around their respective coins happily enough. It wasn’t long before Trent heard a tiny *cheeep* and *brrrrrp* emanating from their tiny snouts as they drifted into a deep sleep.

“Okay. I think they’re all right for now,” Zina whispered. She made her way over to the open box that contained the other egg. “No change here – it’s still cracked, but I can’t see anything coming out yet.”

“Hmm. We’ll keep an eye on it,” Trent said. “But for now, make sure you come over here and get something good to eat.”

Zina looked weary, and Trent couldn’t say he blamed her, as he scooped a copious amount of stir-fried noodles, honey chicken, salt and pepper pork ribs, and sauteed green vegetables onto a plate for her.

“If something happens,” Zina said as she ravenously eyed the food he was doling out, “hopefully your kangaroo will be back in a couple of hours, and we could put Dusty, Goldie and the egg into your pouch, and carry them out to the sanctuary.”

“Uh,” Trent said, frowning as he looked at her. “You *do* know I’m a boy kangaroo, right? So I don’t actually have a pouch.”

Zina looked up at him, blinking. “It’s just females? I really thought it was just like... a general kangaroo thing. Like an extra pocket. Something like that.”

“Right, right.” Trent nodded. “Just out of curiosity, what exactly do you think a kangaroo – I mean a normal one – might carry around in its pockets? Business cards? Its collection of Hot Wheels? Snacks? The One Ring?”

“Well, I don’t know, do I?” Zina snapped at him, though Trent could hear the humor in it, and see the smile in her eyes. “How am I supposed to know what your crazy Australian animals do in their spare time? And are you saying it wouldn’t be good if you *did* have a spare pocket?”

“Righto, fair point,” Trent conceded, grinning at her. “I guess it *would* make life easier. Especially with these guys around – it *would* be good just to be able to carry them out of here. And keep a little snack in there for later.”

*Tomorrow, at least, we’ll know Dusty, Goldie and the egg will be in good hands,* he thought, as he carried the food to the table. What would happen then, Trent really couldn’t say. But at least he’d know he’d done his duty, and gotten the little creatures to a safe place.

*But whatever happens after that, my only concern is protecting Zina.*

Hargreaves and this Bloodhound character were bad news, that was for sure – but Trent knew he'd never let anything happen to his mate.

*And hopefully my kangaroo will be back soon. That'll make things a bit easier – in some ways, anyway. Even if I don't have a pouch to carry these little guys around in.*

For now, he just had to hope that the serum Zina had given them was shielding them from detection by Hargreaves's goons.

“What should we do now?” Zina asked a little while later, as they were both crunching on the enormous bag of free prawn crackers Trent had been given with his purchase. “I guess we can really only sit around and wait.”

Trent grinned at her. “Well, I can think of a few ways to spend our time,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her – and he was *very* happy to see his suggestive look returned.

“This *is* the honeymoon suite, after all,” Zina said, with a wicked grin. “It'd be a shame not to use it as nature intended.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Trent told her, as she grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the bedroom.

## CHAPTER 13

“Zina?” was the first thing Trent said on waking the next morning.

Her side of the bed was empty, and Trent felt a pulse of fear run through him as he sat up, at least until he heard Zina’s voice calling out from the living area.

“I’m in here! Quick, come and look!”

Getting out of bed and quickly pulling on a pair of shorts from his bag, Trent made his way out of the bedroom, and found Zina sitting cross-legged on the floor by the couch, Dusty and Goldie by her side, looking curiously up at her.

Trent could see right away what she held: it was the egg that had started cracking open yesterday.

“Did whatever’s in there hatch out yet?” Trent asked, as he came to crouch by her side.

“Not yet.” Zina shook her head. “But look – it’s a little wider today. I guess it must just want to take its time and really make sure everything’s safe?”

“I suppose so,” Trent said.

He leaned over, looking down at the egg where it was cradled in Zina’s hands. The crack really *was* wider, but there was still no clue as to what exactly might be going to hatch.

“I wonder what’s in there,” Zina murmured, as she gently placed the egg back down in its box. “Another dragon? Something else?”

“Could be,” Trent said, shrugging. “Hopefully it’s not a wyvern or something like that. I could do without having to explain how this beautiful suite got acid damage.”

Zina laughed. “Well, hopefully wyverns are like these little guys – they don’t start breathing acidic venom until they’re a little older. Hopefully these ones have a little more growing up to do before they start breathing fire.”

“That has its good and bad points,” Trent mused as he stood up, heading toward the kitchenette. “I *really* can’t be bothered making breakfast just now – it’d be nice to just hold a piece of bread on a fork and let them do the toasting.”

Laughing, Zina came over to join him in the kitchenette, Dusty and Goldie following closely at her heels. Now that he looked at them, Trent could see both of them were holding the two-dollar coins he’d given them yesterday in their mouths, just like tiny dogs with a favorite toy.

They scampered across the floor, ducking and weaving between Trent and Zina’s feet as they got their breakfasts together. Whatever discord had been between them yesterday seemed to have been forgotten, Trent thought with relief. Maybe they’d just been hungry and sleepy – or maybe they’d come to an agreement during the night not to touch each other’s stuff.

“Here you go, little guys,” Trent said, as he put their breakfast plates down on the floor. “Eat up.”

He watched them, amused, as they both realized they’d have to put their treasured coins down if they wanted to eat – Goldie seemed to figure it out first, carefully placing her coin down by her side, before starting to devour her chicken mince. Dusty seemed a little more reluctant, but then, the lure of broccoli overcame him, and he placed his coin down on the plate before snapping it up in his jaws.

“I got some eggs,” Trent said, turning to Zina, as she rummaged in the mini-fridge.

“I’m *way* ahead of you.” She grinned as she emerged, holding them. “I can’t really say I’m that well-known for my

cooking, but I make a mean scrambled egg. Well, I think so anyway.”

Trent smiled at her, feeling his heart flood with affection. “Then let me handle the toast.”

Fifteen minutes later and they were happily scraping up the last of their – truly amazing, Trent had made sure to tell Zina – eggs, while hot coffee steamed on the table. Trent hadn’t realized how truly ravenous he’d been until he’d started eating.

“Wow. That was amazing. I feel like I could go another round,” Trent said, leaning back in his chair.

“I remember someone saying exactly the same thing last night,” Zina said, smirking at him a little and raising an eyebrow at him – though Trent could see her coloring a little as she said it. “Sorry, that was super cheesy. I don’t know why I said that.”

She covered her face up with her hands in embarrassment, but Trent couldn’t help but be charmed. Zina had seemed so stoic, so serious. She was clearly no-nonsense, and took her work incredibly seriously. So it was *fascinating* to see her playfulness come out – even if it *was* kind of cheesy.

“Hey, no need for embarrassment,” he said, laughing and reaching out to her, gently pulling her hands away from her face. “That was cute – you made a joke!”

“Not a very good one,” Zina muttered, still blushing a little. “I clearly need more practice.”

“Well, I think bad spontaneous jokes are better than good rehearsed ones,” Trent said truthfully. “What’s life without a little cheese?”

Zina laughed, even if it seemed a little reluctant. Then she glanced over to where Goldie and Dusty were still finishing the last of their breakfast.

“I guess we better start getting ready to take these guys to their new home,” she said, her voice suddenly tense.

Trent could understand why, but he was still disappointed at how quickly her smile and playfulness had disappeared. Looking down at where Dusty and Goldie were gazing up at them with their wide, golden eyes, expectant and hopeful of getting more food, probably, he felt his own sense of humor shrivel a little within him.

“I’m gonna miss these little guys,” he said softly, and he reached down to tickle Goldie under her chin. She reacted with an exuberant little *cheep cheep! Grrrup!* and rolled onto her back, clearly expecting more where that came from.

“Tahnee couldn’t be very precise about *when* the contact would be showing up to collect them, but she did tell me *where* they’d be,” Trent said as he tickled Goldie on her surprisingly soft belly as she wiggled joyously about on the carpet. “There’s a small pub on the main street called Joy’s, and it shouldn’t be too far of a walk from here. I can go wait there until they show.”

“Alone?” Zina asked, voice apprehensive.

“I think it’d be for the best.” Reluctantly, Trent straightened up. Goldie let out a little *grruppp!* of protest, but then she got to her feet, picked up her coin, and started wandering around the room sniffing at random objects as if she was investigating. “It’d be safest for you to stay here and keep an eye on these guys – there’s no way we’d be able to keep them quiet if we have to wait a while, and besides which...”

Trent trailed off, unwilling to worry Zina more than she already was, but he could see from the look on her face that she understood him perfectly.

*And besides which, if the Bloodhound and his offsidiers show up, it’s better if you, Dusty, Goldie and the egg are mostly out of harm’s way.*

“But if something happens, how will I know to come looking for you?” Zina said. Her tone was measured, but Trent could still hear the anxiety that throbbed just below the surface of it.



Trent gave her a small smile. “I’ll text you?”

“Be serious,” she snapped, and then sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I’m worried about how this is going to go. Besides being sad to see these guys go. Even though I *know* it’s for the best.”

“There’s nothing to say you can’t visit them once this is all done and dusted,” Trent said, standing up. He knew that it may not be that easy – well, it *definitely* wouldn’t be that easy. Zina was still a wanted woman. Her agency had put out a burn notice on her. It was entirely possible that Hargreaves weren’t the only ones who were trying to hunt her down right now – in fact, it was more than likely they had more things to worry about than that. Trent himself should have taken her in the moment he first laid eyes on her again. He didn’t know *how* that situation was going to shake out, but right now, he thought he should focus on one problem at a time. Right now, his priority had to be Dusty, Goldie and the egg.

“Maybe so,” Zina said softly. “But still, I need to know what’s happening. Even if only so I can get these little ones to safety if the Bloodhound *is* in town.”

“We’re mates, aren’t we?” Trent gave her a lopsided grin, doing his best to put a brave face on the situation. “From what I’ve heard about the mated bond, if I get into any trouble you’ll be the first to know about it. But *if* that happens, I want you to promise me, Zina, that you’ll run. I can take care of myself. But these guys need you.”

Zina looked up at him, her eyes wide. He could see the protest forming on her lips, but then she simply looked down, giving a quick, jerky nod. “Okay.”

As he came over to where she sat to kiss her goodbye, Trent wondered if she’d really stick to her promise, and leave him where he was and get the baby dragons and whatever might be in that egg to safety. He hoped so – she’d risked so much to keep them out of Hargreaves’s hands, and he’d really meant it when he said he could look after himself. He’d been in sticky situations before and lived to tell the tale.

*Well, I guess I better find this Joy's place,* he thought a few minutes later as – having dodged Lianne's questions about where he was off to, leaving his beautiful bride all alone – he walked down the main street. It wasn't as if anywhere in Jackson's Ridge was going to be difficult to find – there was one big road, and the rest of the place was just dotted with the small houses of the people he assumed owned businesses there, or had turned opal mining into their permanent occupation, as opposed to the ones who thought it'd be temporary, who mainly lived in shacks dotted around the hills, to save money on rent that they could then pour back into excavating their claims.

Joy's wasn't hard to find – the sign was right out the front, painted in red, swooping letters, the paint peeling under the harsh glare of the sun.

Glancing in the window to check it out without making it seem obvious what he was doing, Trent could see only a few occupied tables – he supposed most people were out working, and not sitting around drinking beer in the middle of the day. He *definitely* couldn't see any sign of the Bloodhound, but still, without his kangaroo's instincts to warn him of danger, he took extra caution as he entered the bar, choosing a seat with his back to the wall, facing the doorway, and with as close to a complete view of the rest of the room as he could get, while still being close enough to the toilets that he could slip inside if he had to get out of sight in a hurry.

He ordered a beer at the bar so as not to stick out too much, and then returned to his seat to wait, trying to look as much like a dozy tourist seeking shelter from the sun as he could.

*C'mon, Tahnee's contact. Where are you?*

He realized he could be waiting here a while – Tahnee had been oddly unspecific about *when* her contact would be able to make it. Which was odd considering her sanctuary really wasn't *that* far from Jackson's Ridge, relatively speaking, and it was so remote that any flying shifter she knew would be able to make it out here by wing almost all of the way without having to worry about being spotted by humans on the ground.

He took a sip of his beer – fresh and cold, and perfect in the rising heat of the day. It was while he was placing his beer back down on the table in front of him that he saw the silhouettes of people passing by the front window of the pub, and he stiffened, his senses on high alert – or as high as they would go, given his kangaroo-less state.

*I still can't quite get used to it,* Trent thought, grimacing a little. He trusted Zina when she said the kangaroo would be back, but it still felt odd and unpleasant to be without it, like having a phantom limb, only the phantom limb was inside him, and was an eight-foot-tall prehistoric marsupial.

Still, his human senses were enough for this. He kept his eyes trained on the door as he lifted his beer to his lips again, not taking a sip but only letting the liquid touch his lips as a cover – until the group of men he'd glimpsed through the window walked in through the door, and it took all of Trent's self-control to not choke on the beer he hadn't actually even drunk.

*Hector?!*

Trent froze.

*What the fuck is Hector doing here?!*

And it wasn't just Hector: now that the other figures were in plain sight, he could see Euan's hulking form too, and now Hector's younger brother, Rhys, crowding in behind them. In other words, every member of his team at the Agency, except Callan and Brooke, who, Trent assumed, must be staking out the back door in case he decided to make a run for it.

Trent's mind raced. *Fuck. They must've tracked me somehow. Robb must've sent them to drag me back to headquarters to explain myself.* They hadn't glanced over to the darkened corner where he was sitting yet. He took half a second to glance at the toilet door – it was only a few meters away, and he could get to it if they didn't look his way, but if they did, there was no way he could make a run for it in his current state. Hector and Rhys were griffin shifters, and Euan was a marsupial lion. They could *all* move faster than him.

In any case, in the next moment, Hector's head turned toward him, and the entire question was moot.

"TRENT," he bellowed, storming toward the table.

Trent tensed, getting ready to throw his beer if he had to – he hated to do it, both in terms of wasting good beer *and* it being a dirty thing to do to a mate – but there was no way Trent was letting them drag him back home, leaving Zina, Goldie, Dusty, and the remaining egg unprotected.

"You... you *absolute drongo*," Hector hissed, having apparently somewhat gotten a hold of himself since his earlier outburst – but that was Hector for you. He'd calmed down somewhat since he'd met his mate Myrtle and they'd started raising Ruby together, but he was still a hothead. "What the hell d'you think you've been playing at? And what the *hell* have you done to your hair?"

Trent tensed, getting ready to do whatever he had to do to escape, if it came to that.

"What I had to," he said, as Euan and Rhys came to stand behind Hector, similarly stormy expressions on their faces. He meant escaping with Zina, of course – not his hair.

"You *had* to disappear off the face of the earth without telling anyone where you were going?" Rhys cut in, shaking his head. With only a year between them, he and Hector could have been twins – and Rhys was just as big a hothead as his brother had been before he'd found his mate. "With someone who's gone rogue and has a burn notice out on her?"

Trent couldn't help the snarl that crossed his face – and within him, he felt his kangaroo twitch to life a little. It was nothing more than the slightest sense, but it was definitely *there*. It must have been at the mention of Zina – if anything was going to awaken his shifter form, Trent thought, it was any threat to his mate.

"You don't know anything about it," he growled, his hands bunching into fists on the table in front of him. "And if you think I'm going to let you take her in, then you've got another

one coming. I'll do whatever I have to to protect her. You're *not* dragging her back to get handed over to –"

"Wait, wait," Euan said, holding up his hands. Trent had never really gotten along with Euan in the past – he thought he was too grumpy, too staid, and it seemed like he hated fun. Trent couldn't blame him for *all* of it, since a lot of Euan's grumpiness had come from the fact that he had lost his ability to shift – permanently, he'd thought – but still, given Trent's laid-back, joking nature, they hadn't had a lot in common. Since Euan had gotten his marsupial lion back – and with it, his sense of humor, such as it was – Trent had started to get along better with him, even though his face still looked like it was carved out of an especially cranky block of granite most of the time. "Why exactly do you think we're here?"

Trent paused, frowning. "You've come to take me back to headquarters to get poleaxed by Robb – and to turn Zina in," he said slowly. "Why else would you be here? Like you said, she has a burn notice. Obviously that's what you're gonna do."

"Mate, you really *are* as stupid as you look." Hector shook his head, throwing up his hands. "What the hell is the point of knowing someone for ten years and going through the academy with them and then being on a team with them if you don't fucking *trust* them?"

Trent blinked, trying to process what Hector was saying. "Huh?"

Hector and Rhys both rolled their eyes in unison, leaving Euan to take over the explanation.

"We haven't come to take you in, Trent," Euan said, with what was clearly as much patience as he could muster – which wasn't a lot. "We've come to *help* you."

Swallowing, Trent looked from Euan, to Rhys, to Hector, not sure whether or not to believe his ears. "You *what*?"

"Help you, idiot," Rhys helpfully clarified. "You know – that thing friends do for each other? If they *let* them? Instead of running off into the middle of nowhere like a dingbat and leave everyone guessing as to what exactly's going on?"

Trent blinked again. He knew his mouth was hanging open and that if he didn't shut it soon he was going to end up swallowing a fly, but right now, he was finding it a little bit difficult to regain control over literally *any* of his faculties.

“Does... does Robb know you're here?” he finally managed to get out, his whirring mind unable to come up with anything else to say.

“Idiot.” Hector shook his head. “Who do you think gave us leave to come out here and *find* your dumb arse?”

“Then... he knows?” Trent asked, finally managing to shut his mouth and keep it shut.

“Obviously, he knows,” Rhys said, sliding into the chair opposite Trent. “He said he knew something was up with you from the moment you saw Zina Alden's photo and saw her burn notice. Just how stupid d'you think he is, anyway? You know what his job title is, right? You know how he gets *paid* to notice stuff, right?”

“All right, all right,” Trent said quietly. He looked down at his hands. He realized that he was – not without good reason – starting to feel exactly like the dumbarse Hector had accused him of being. “I just thought...”

“Yeah, that's your problem. You *don't* think,” Euan said, shaking his head as he too sat down at the table. “You just run off without even *checking* if maybe your mates might want to help you out of a tricky situation. We have to come to *you*.”

“It's more complicated than that,” Trent said hotly. Though even as he said it, he knew he wasn't completely sure that it was. “Aside from anything else, I *knew* the risk I was taking, and I was willing to do it. Was I supposed to assume you guys were all willing to take on that risk too? It's not a fucking joke.”

“Oh please, give us a bit of credit,” Rhys said. “Maybe you could have at least tried. And anyway – what's so complicated? Tahnee said –”

Trent shook his head, cutting him off. He'd been so flabbergasted by first their appearance and then their telling

him off for not dragging them into his mess that he hadn't thought through *how* they'd found him yet – but of course, that must have been it.

*Tahnee told me to come out here – and then they show up. She set this whole thing up.*

“What exactly did Tahnee say?”

“She said you were supposed to come up to the sanctuary, and that it sounded important,” Rhys said. “But then the next thing she knew, you'd said you couldn't come – she assumed it had to be because you were in some kind of trouble, since you weren't specific, but she said that you made it sound like there was something happening that was *preventing* you from coming, not that you suddenly didn't want to or didn't need to anymore.”

A crooked smile curved over Trent's lips. Tahnee was a sharp one – he'd give her that.

“She was right,” he said, finally conceding. “I've got some nasties on my tail, and I couldn't risk leading them right to her. That sanctuary is supposed to be a haven, after all.”

“And I know she appreciated that,” Hector said. “Which is why she was so concerned. And that was why she called us. She knew – unlike some people – that we could be trusted to do the right thing by you and come see what was happening.”

“All right, all right, I'm sorry,” Trent said. “I'm the world's biggest dumbarse and also a bad friend. Happy now?”

“Not really,” Rhys said, but his tone was fairly peaceable. “I'd probably cheer up a bit if you told us the full story of what was going on, though.”

“Easier said than done,” Trent said, grimacing. And besides which, he knew he ought to get back to Zina, waiting for him at the hotel. She'd probably be worrying about him. “Perhaps it'd be better if I just *showed* you instead.”

## CHAPTER 14

Zina looked up at the sound of the key in the hotel room door. She tensed, preparing herself to run or fight if she had to – but she couldn't sense any danger from the other side of the door.

Her antelope senses had been flickering slowly back to life over the past hour or so – she felt flashes of its heightened instincts, and felt it within her, stretching its legs and preparing to emerge from wherever it had lain dormant inside her. It *wanted* to come out, and Zina knew it was only a matter of half an hour or so before it came roaring back to full life.

*So it's just as well Trent's back now, before I – and he – become trackable again...*

She *knew* it was Trent even before he'd fully opened the door, a flash of instinct and the words *my mate!* racing through her before she'd even had the chance to think. Hopefully he was here with Tahnee's contact, and they'd take Dusty and Goldie, still sleeping peacefully on the floor, and the last remaining egg away to safety right away.

"Zina? It's just me," Trent said, as he stuck his head around the door. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah," Zina said, standing up. "No sign of anything – it's been all quiet."

"That's good. I'm bringing some people in with me, but I'll vouch for all of them... well, mostly," Trent said, as he entered the room fully.



“Oh, that’s gratitude for you,” groused one of the men who immediately after followed him into the room, looking around. On his heels were two other men, and Zina felt her eyebrows rising.

*Okay... those are... some pretty big guys...*

It was true – two of the men were tall and obviously extremely muscular, with the same lightly curled, light brown hair and extremely dark eyes. They must have been brothers, if not twins, Zina thought – not only did they look extremely alike, they moved in the same way, and they had the same relaxed but obviously observant manner, their eyes scanning around the room and taking in everything, including her – and the baby dragons asleep on the couch.

“Whoa,” one of them said, as his eyes fell on them. “Are those...?”

“Yeah,” Trent said. “Here be dragons.”

“I get what you mean about this being hard to explain,” the third man said in a deep, gruff voice, after a moment of silence. He was noticeably broader than the other two, and a lot more muscular as well – he was built for power. He looked dark and stormy, Zina thought – she wouldn’t have called his expression *grim*, exactly, but if she’d seen him on the street she might have decided he was someone she didn’t exactly want to mess with, shifter or not.

But all three of them were *definitely* shifters – with her antelope starting to come back, she could sense it immediately. She couldn’t tell what, exactly, they shifted into, but she assumed they were something strange and Australian, just like Trent was.

Pulling in a deep breath, she decided she’d better introduce herself.

“Hi,” she said, holding out her hand to the closest man. “I’m –”

“Zina Alden, rogue agent with a burn notice on her head,” the man said, nodding. “We know.”

“Rhys, don’t be so fucking rude,” the man who was obviously his brother snapped at him. He turned back to Zina. “Sorry about him, he’s a dickhead. My name’s Hector Richardson, and we’re here to help.”

He took Zina’s hand, shaking it. Zina, still feeling a bit too frazzled to really mind the man’s – Rhys, apparently – rudeness, just nodded her head. “Nice to meet you.”

“Euan Hawkins,” the dark and stormy man said, taking her hand next. He left it at that.

“Rhys Richardson,” the man who’d spoken up first said, directing a quick glare at his brother. “I’m not actually a dickhead.”

“You’re the ones Tahnee sent to pick up the eggs... two of which aren’t eggs anymore,” Zina said, looking around at each of them in turn, and deciding she was pretty sure she could trust them to get them to safety – they definitely looked like the kind of guys who could handle themselves. She felt the egg and the dragons would be safe with them, as much as it tore at her heart to let them go.

*It’s for the best,* she thought, looking down at where Goldie and Dusty lay snugly on the couch, side by side. When she looked back, she saw the three men exchanging glances, however.

“Zina, I feel like I’ve got some explaining to do,” Trent said. “Both to you and to them.”

A cold feeling clutched at her stomach. “What do you mean?”

“These guys aren’t exactly from Tahnee’s sanctuary,” Trent went on, motioning for everyone to sit down. “They’re from my agency – they’re the other agents in my team, or some of them anyway, and they’re here to help us.”

Zina blinked, swallowing. “*What?*”

*Other agents?*

Immediately, she felt her instincts going into overdrive.

*How can I trust them? What if they're here to turn me in and take the egg? And Goldie and Dusty?!*

“Hey, hey, don’t worry,” Trent said, as if he could read her mind. “It’s not like that – I promise. They’re my friends. They really are here only to help.”

Zina nodded stiffly, chewing her lip as she looked around at each of them in turn again. She didn’t know them and therefore she didn’t know that she could trust them.

But she *did* trust Trent.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and made up her mind.

“Okay,” she said, looking around the table. “Let me tell you everything, then.”

Explaining it all – from the first moment she’d found out about what Hargreaves were doing in searching for the eggs in the first place, to carefully combing their systems to find out how many they already had, to her decision that she simply couldn’t allow the defenseless creatures growing inside them to be left in Hargreaves’s hands – took some time. But none of the men interrupted her as she spoke, listening to her intently with serious expressions on their faces.

She finally got to the part where, running out of options, she’d decided she had no other choice but to call on Trent – thinking she’d just offload the eggs on him and then keep running until Hargreaves almost certainly caught up with her – and this was where, finally, Hector put up a hand to interrupt.

“Wait – why was it Trent you thought of? Hadn’t you only met once before?”

Zina nodded, swallowing. She glanced at Trent, not sure how much she should say. But she knew she needn’t have worried.

“Because she’s my mate,” Trent said evenly. “I’ve known it for years now – ever since we met in London back then. But it’s taken a while for Zina to catch up and get on board with the idea, too.”

Zina could see the looks of confusion that spread across Hector and Rhys's faces, but Euan didn't look particularly surprised at all.

"I know what that's like," he said softly after a moment or two. "I'm sorry if this is a personal question, but was it because there was something interfering with your ability to shift?"

Zina raised an eyebrow, surprised that he'd guessed correctly. "You could put it that way – I'd temporarily suppressed my ability to shift, so I wouldn't get clocked as a shifter by anyone on the mission. It meant back then – or now, actually, until a few days ago – I couldn't tell Trent was my mate." She paused. She felt self-conscious talking about something so personal to people who were, really, strangers to her. She was, after all, a very private person. But she felt they should understand the situation. "But I *did* know, even back then, he was someone I could trust. I think that's why I came to him now."

"Good choice," Hector said, nodding approvingly. "Trent might be a clown at times, but I've never known him to botch a job. So you can rely on him for that, if nothing else."

"Can we please," Trent interrupted him, shaking his head, "stick to the topic at hand? Which is what exactly are you guys planning to do next?"

"We only had orders to find you and help you in whatever way we thought was best once we were here," Hector said. He glanced over at the sleeping dragons. "And it seems like you have your hands full. The other egg still hasn't hatched, though?"

Zina shook her head. "No. Not yet. And I still have to find the last one that Hargreaves have been searching for in the mines out here. I have no idea where it is, though, or even where their claim – or claims – are exactly, only that it's somewhere here in Jackson's Ridge. I was hoping once I told Trent what they were up to he'd be able to take the intel back and look into it more thoroughly from there."

“But instead he decided to go on the run with you,” Rhys said, shaking his head. “Okay?”

“Hey, you see how *you* feel when your mate comes to *you* in trouble,” Trent snapped at him. “See if *you* just abandon her to whatever might be out there looking for her. Assuming you ever actually *do* find her, and she can put up with you for more than five minutes.”

Zina could see Rhys’s ears turning red, but before he could say anything, Hector spoke up.

“Kind of deserved, Rhys. You haven’t found your mate – you’ll understand when you do. I mean, like Trent said, as long as she can put up with you for more than five minutes.”

“All right, all right,” Rhys muttered. “Point taken.”

“So, I guess the question then is – what *do* we do next?” Zina said, keen to keep the conversation on track. “We probably only have a limited amount of time now before Hargreaves catches up with us again. It’d be my preference to find that egg and get out of here before they do. And before the last egg hatches, as well. We have our hands full enough with Goldie and Dusty over there. If there’s *another* dragon in the other egg, then we’re gonna have to –”

She was interrupted by the sound of a sharp, sudden *crack!* that made everyone in the room jump in their seats, heads snapping around to search for the source.

“What was that?” asked Trent, standing. “I don’t *sense* any danger...” He tilted his head. “Huh. I guess my shifter senses are starting to come back – I just felt a twitch. Still no danger though.”

Zina frowned – neither did she. It was only then that she realized that she, just like Trent, *could* use her senses in that way again, and that everything in the room seemed to be suddenly clearer, her instincts flooding back in a rush.

*Oh*, she thought, as her antelope frolicked to the forefront of her mind, kicking up its hooves and shaking its head, as if awakening from a long sleep. *You’re back.*

The antelope did *not* seem as pleased to see her as she was to see it – it looked at her reproachfully with its large, dark eyes, before turning up its nose and trotting off the way it had come, tufted tail in the air.

*Wait!* Zina tried to call after it, but it was clear that the antelope had gotten the message it wasn't either wanted or needed. It had always been flighty and temperamental, but in this instance, Zina knew she couldn't blame it for being out of sorts. She'd suppressed it for a much longer time than she ever had before. Maybe, to it, it was like being stuffed in a shoebox under a bed.

*I'm sorry,* Zina offered, hoping it'd make the antelope forgive her faster. She'd just have to wait and see, she supposed.

Shaking her head, she forced her focus back to the hotel room.

“Zina,” Trent called to her, from where he was crouching by the case with the remaining egg. “You better come and see this.”

Standing, Zina went to join him, crouched by the case.

“Oh,” she said, leaning in. She saw what he was talking about immediately. “It's – it's hatching!”

Immediately, she sensed the other men in the room coming to lean over behind her, everyone peering down as the crack in the dark green egg grew wider and wider, and it wiggled around in its foam casing.

*“Brrrup? Cheep?”*

Zina glanced down at the soft sounds from the floor next to her feet to see that Goldie and Dusty had awoken, and were gazing eagerly at the cracking egg, their yellow eyes wide, their coins clutched in their front paws.

“Oh,” Hector said, glancing down at them. “Aren't you guys cuties? You should meet my Ruby – you'd get along like a house on fire. Which, on second thoughts, is probably why you *shouldn't*.”

If Goldie and Dusty understood anything of what was being said to them, it didn't show: they scampered about on their back legs, falling over every now and then, as they tried to get a better look at what was emerging from the egg.

"Another dragon, do you think?" Trent asked, cocking his head, as they caught a glimpse of some shiny scales within.

"Maybe," Zina breathed, leaning in closer. It was just as her nose was *almost* touching the egg itself that it finally broke apart completely, revealing the creature inside. "Oh!"

Zina leaned back in surprise, as a small, silvery-scaled snake writhed free of the broken pieces of its shell. Zina tilted her head, looking for wings, but she couldn't see any – just three sets of tiny legs, which didn't look big enough to support the creature's weight. When it opened its eyes, they were dark, liquid and huge – they reminded her of a seal's eyes.

"What are you?" Zina asked it softly, leaning forward again. "I don't think that's another dragon..."

"Nope," Trent confirmed, leaning down next to her shoulder. "No wings. And six legs."

Goldie and Dusty didn't seem to know what to make of the newcomer either – they blinked their big yellow eyes, heads turning first one way and then the other as they apparently tried to puzzle out what they were seeing.

"I know what that is," Hector said after a moment, during which the silver snake wiggled its way free of the last of its shell and then sat, blinking up at them. "That's a basilisk."

"A basilisk?" Euan asked, turning to him. "You mean... the thing that can turn anything to stone with just a look?"

Hector nodded. "Yeah – but from what I read, they have to *want* to do it. Just looking at something won't do anything. It's a self-defense mechanism they can use, but it won't happen unless they intend to use it."

"Probably just as well," Trent murmured. "Otherwise all of us would be statues right now."

“Yeah,” Hector nodded. “The info I got was a bit confusing and muddled up, but it seems like it’s something they have to *learn* how to do – like Ruby with her healing powers. Though I wouldn’t do anything to startle this little fella – or lady – they might get a fright and not realize what they’re doing.”

“Righto, well, I’ll keep that in mind,” Trent said. “No sudden movements around the basilisk.”

“How d’you know all this, anyway?” Rhys asked, turning to Hector.

“I was trying to find out more about Ruby and what to expect as she gets older,” Hector explained, as Zina reached out to gingerly stroke the basilisk’s surprisingly soft scales. “So I was looking through some old books about ancient shifters and things like that. I read all sorts of stuff – about dragons, basilisks, unicorns, all those kinds of things. Still didn’t find out much about alicorns, though. So I guess Myrtle and I are still flying blind a bit there.”

As Zina petted the basilisk’s side, it blinked its huge eyes at her, before letting out a soft purring sound.

“Oh – it sounds a little bit like a kitten,” she said in surprise. As the purring sound emanated from the basilisk, Goldie and Dusty seemed to feel a little more confident, and climbed their way up to it, nostrils twitching as they sniffed at their new companion.

Evidently, they didn’t seem to mind what they smelled, because Dusty opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, licking at the basilisk, like a cat grooming a kitten.

At this, the basilisk’s purring sound grew even *louder* – which Zina hoped meant it liked the attention, and that they would be friends.

“So... we’ve got Goldie and Dusty the dragons, and... Untitled, the basilisk,” Trent said. He glanced at Zina. “What do you think we should call them?”

Zina frowned. “Not sure.” She looked down at the silvery creature again, trying to think of what kind of name might suit



it. “Quicksilver? No, that’s silly.”

“No, I like it,” Trent said. “Sounds like a fast horse.”

“I guess so,” Zina said, smiling. “Not sure this little one will be winning any races with those tiny legs, though.”

As she spoke, Quicksilver finally seemed to figure out which way was the right way up for its body, and wiggled its way onto its belly. In the next moment, quick as a flash, it had slithered its way up onto Zina’s lap, curling itself up and making itself at home, just like a little kitten.

“Whoa! I guess you *are* fast after all!” Zina said in surprise, as Quicksilver blinked up at her, clearly content. “I wonder what you eat? Dusty and Goldie seem to like everything, so hopefully you’re not fussy either.”

“Oh, I can tell you that, easy,” Hector said. “Basilisks eat stone.”

Zina looked up at him in surprise. “Stone?!”

“Yeah – regular old stone. I can go grab a few pebbles from the carpark if you like – I’m sure Quicksilver’ll love ’em. But that’s literally all they eat. No idea if they have a preference, or if some stones are like, breakfast stones and others are dessert stones, or something like that.”

“I’ll go grab some,” Euan said, as he turned toward the door. “In the meantime, we better figure out what our next move is.”

“He’s right,” Trent said, as Euan shut the door behind him. “As much as I hate to say it, we can’t afford to sit here playing doting new parents. We need to find that last egg and then get out of here. And you guys need to take these guys back to Tahnee’s.”

“Not until we’ve helped you guys first,” Rhys said firmly. “From what you said, there’s a ton of Hargreaves guys on your tail, and you have some searching to do, and no idea how much area you have to cover. That’ll take more than just the two of you.”

As reluctant as she was to admit it, Zina knew Rhys had a point there. She ran her fingers gently over Quicksilver's long, sleek body, as Dusty and Goldie *chirrup!*ed and *birrup!*ed at her side, clearly still curious about it. Unlike with Dusty and Goldie, Zina didn't get much sense of Quicksilver's gender – it simply seemed to be itself.

“You'll have a delicious snack of rocks soon,” she soothed it, as it wriggled around in her lap, trying to get comfy. “I didn't see any huge teeth when you yawned, though. Maybe you can just eat tiny pebbles for now?” Pulling her attention away from Quicksilver, as difficult as that was, she looked up at Trent, Rhys and Hector. “I wasn't able to get much information about where exactly Hargreaves had narrowed its search area to, except that it was this mining settlement. If I'd had even a couple of extra days, I might've been able to find out more, but I think they were already starting to cotton on that someone was digging around in their systems, so then it was only a matter of time until they figured out it was me. I had to make my move and get the eggs out right away.”

“So... you're saying that if you could get back into their systems now, you might be able to find out more?” Hector asked.

Zina nodded. “Probably – well, *possibly*. Hargreaves's systems are tricky, but I have insider knowledge. I mean, they *probably* haven't had time to change everything yet since I last managed to get in. I'd have a shot, anyway. Hacking and digital espionage *is* my area.”

“If that's the case, we have tech,” Hector said. “We brought some stuff with us to keep in touch, covertly, with Robb at headquarters. If you can use that, you're welcome to give it a go.”

Zina's heart leapt in her chest. If she could get back into Hargreaves's systems – which she wasn't sure she *could*, but it was worth trying – then she might be able to give them a leg up in their search.

“I can try, at least,” she said, just as Euan reappeared, a variety of rocks and concrete in his massive hands.

“All right,” he said, as he kicked the door closed gently behind him. “I got a selection. Just in case it has preferences.”

He spread the rocks out on the floor, and Quicksilver raised its head, sniffing. After a moment, it jumped up, shuffling its way over to the rocks for a closer look. After taking a few moments to make its choice, it opened its jaws wide, and a series of long, silvery teeth unsheathed themselves from its gums, which it immediately used to start chewing with gusto on the nearest stone, a nondescript gray lump of rock.

“It seems to like it,” Trent said, smiling. “I guess it won’t be too expensive to feed – we can just get a bag of gravel for it to snack on.”

“Well, while it’s eating, I’ll go get our gear,” Rhys said, heading for the door. “And hopefully, we can get in and out of here as quickly and quietly as possible.”

“That’d be for the best,” Zina agreed. She scarcely dared to hope it’d be that easy – in fact, now that her antelope was back, she had a distinctly *uneasy* feeling.

*There is some danger here, her antelope said to her, ears twitching. Something lurking. But I cannot tell what...*

Zina drew in a deep breath.

*You’re probably right, she told it. But for now, we can only keep going. I can’t leave that egg for Hargreaves to find. We’ll just have to be as careful as we can.*

But try as she might, Zina couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss. She just wasn’t sure she had the time to try to figure out what.

## CHAPTER 15

*T*hough Trent had seen Zina get through Equitix's digital lock three years ago in London like it wasn't even there, he'd never really seen her *work* before – not with this kind of intense focus. Her fingers flew over the keyboard of the laptop Rhys had brought up from their truck, her eyes intent on the screen, barely even blinking.

Trent had some experience with codebreaking, and of course he could do some very simple hacking – but not like this. Zina was rattling off keyboard commands like it was nothing, and Trent watched as a stream of data overflowed from the screen of the laptop she was using and onto the screen of the one she had hooked up next to it – thankfully, Hector, Rhys and Euan had come prepared.

“So where's Callan and Brooke?” Trent said softly to Hector as they watched Zina work. “I just assumed they were staking out the back entrance of the pub in case I got away from you.”

Hector shook his head. “Nah. Three of us going missing – or four, rather, with you – was about as much as Robb could cover for. Callan and Brooke are holding up the fort back home. Pretending like everything's normal and we're just out getting pies or on an extra-long smoko or something.”

He'd have to remember to thank them when he got back, Trent thought – well, and Hector, Rhys and Euan too, for coming all the way out here to find him.

“You don’t smoke, though,” he pointed out, as Zina did some more machine-gun-fast typing.

“I could take it up, with the amount of stress you’ve put me through,” Hector retorted. “I couldn’t believe it when Robb said you’d gone haring off on your own without so much as a by-your-leave. What the hell were you even thinking?”

“All right, all right,” Trent muttered. “Don’t you think I’ve gotten enough grief for now?”

“Not really,” Hector said, just as Zina glanced over her shoulder at them, eyebrows knitted together.

“Hey, I’m trying to concentrate here.”

“Sorry,” they both murmured, exchanging a contrite glance. Clearly, Zina was in *work mode* – Trent had seen it before.

“If you want something to do, grab me that sequencer from the bag,” Zina said after a moment, as more code squiggled across both laptop screens. “I don’t need it just yet, but I want to try something out.”

“Right,” Trent said, nodding, before going to the bag Rhys had brought up from the truck. The sequencer was a small, smooth, black box – Trent wasn’t sure what Zina was planning to use it for, but right now, he knew better than to ask.

“Thanks,” Zina said absently as she took it from him, sorting through the collection of cables she’d pulled out earlier, until she found the one she was looking for. “All going well, I should know if I’m in in a second or two.”

Trent stood back, watching the screens, his shoulders tensing. Zina was chewing on her lower lip as she watched whatever code she’d been manically writing compile. And then, the laptop screen went blank.

*Is that bad?* Trent wanted to ask – but he managed to hold himself back and wait until Zina reacted. She didn’t, though... not at least until something new flashed up on the screen, a sleek, modern graphical user interface with Hargreaves’s slick corporate logo behind it.

Zina breathed out, long and slow. “Okay. I’m in.”

Trent leaned forward, unable to help himself. “So... what now?”

“Hmm.” Zina clicked on one of the icons. “They don’t leave the details of their egg hoarding program just lying around. I’ll have to do a little digging. But... that was surprisingly easy, I gotta say.”

Trent glanced at her. “Easy in a bad way?”

“Hard to say.” Zina’s voice was a little distant as she typed commands into a search field. “They put in a few more tricks and traps than the last time I did this, probably *because* I was able to do it. But nothing I couldn’t handle. Maybe they were just meant as stopgap measures until they could come up with something more permanent. If I know Hargreaves techbros though, they would have been *steaming* someone got through their security.”

“I guess you’re just that good,” Trent murmured, looking down at her and feeling a swell of affection. *Smart. Beautiful. Amazing. Talented. Funny... well, not that funny. But her bad jokes just make her all the more adorable.*

Zina flashed him a quick smile as she typed. “Maybe I am.”

At the sight of her smile, Trent suddenly felt his kangaroo sitting up and flickering its ears, clearly *very* interested.

*Oh, you’re back, are you?* he asked it, as it yawned widely and scratched its chest with one clawed forepaw. *Welcome home.*

*I would not have gone anywhere if you hadn’t sent me away,* the kangaroo said, sounding mortally offended. *Why was I sent away? Especially at a time when our mate needed us the most?*

*Sorry buddy, it wasn’t personal,* Trent told it, genuinely contrite. *It was just the need of the moment.*

The kangaroo did *not* seem best pleased with that explanation, but at least it didn’t try to argue with him

anymore – instead, it simply looked away in disgust. Which was how Trent knew it was *really* pissed off.

Well, it'd just have to get over it, Trent thought, as Zina rapidly typed in a few more lines and then said, "I got it. I think."

Leaning down, Trent found himself looking at a map, with a satellite photo next to it. "This is where Hargreaves have their claim?"

Zina nodded. "Looks like it. Quick, take down these co-ordinates."

Trent grabbed a pen and paper as Zina read out a series of latitudes and longitudes, and Hector did the same, so they'd have something to verify them against.

"That's a lot of area," Hector said, studying them, once Zina had finished reading them out. "A *lot* of area."

"They probably don't know exactly where to –" Zina started to say, before the laptop screen blinked once, and then went completely black. "Oh. Huh."

Picking it up, Zina shook it. Then she shook her head, dropping it back to the table with a *thud*.

"Sorry. It's bricked. They must've figured out someone was nosing around in their system. Whatever bricked the laptop will be automated, but it will have sent an alert to whoever's monitoring the system. We probably don't have a lot of time. And, like you said, that's a lot of area to cover."

"And probably heavily guarded as well," Hector said grimly. "But between us, we've probably got enough to cover it. Two griffins, a marsupial lion, a kangaroo and... well, what do you shift into, Zina?"

"An antelope," she said, with a small grin. "Not much firepower, but I'm pretty fast."

"Then I think the next thing we should do is come up with some kind of strategy for how to find the opening to Hargreaves's mine, get that egg out of there, and then get the fuck out of here," Hector said, nodding.

“Wow,” Zina said. “Are all Aussie men this eloquent, or just you?”

“Oh, Hec’s a special one,” Trent said, grinning. “He can charm the birds out the trees with that mouth.”

“Hey, I drag my arse halfway across the country to help you out of your sorry mess, and this is what I get,” Hector said, throwing his hands up. “You wanna deal with this on your own or something?”

“Not me.” Trent held his hands up peaceably. “And like you said – we’ll need a strategy. All we have right now is the location of a bit of land. Whether it’ll be guarded and how heavily, and how *we’ll* find this egg when Hargreaves apparently hasn’t... that all sounds like a bit of hard work to me.”

“I’m up for it if you are,” Hector said, grinning. “And I’m sure these two are as well, once they get up off their lazy arses.” He jerked his head to where Rhys and Euan were sitting in the middle of the lounge area, playing with Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver.

Trent had to admit it made for a pretty cute sight: two fully grown men, both the size of a fair-sized barn door, letting two little baby dragons and a baby basilisk scamper over their shoulders and forearms as if they were some kind of living playpen.

Rhys looked up, scowling – *definitely* not a very fun and playful expression, Trent thought, though the effect was somewhat undermined by Goldie clambering about in his hair, her tail curled under his nose like a moustache.

“Hey – you want these guys climbing around all over you while you’re trying to work?” he snapped, as Goldie stuck the tip of her tail up his left nostril.

“Thanks for the babysitting services,” Trent said diplomatically, watching as Quicksilver slithered its slow way around Euan’s forearm. It wasn’t *quite* as sprightly and fast-moving as Goldie and Dusty, but, Trent thought, that was probably for the best. “Zina thinks she might’ve found out



where we need to go to put a stop to Hargreaves's operations – or hopefully, anyway. So we probably need to start talking strategy.”

“I can multitask,” Rhys said, a little nasally, as he pulled Goldie's tail out of his nose.

“Me too,” Euan concurred. “So let's talk.”

“First is surveilling the area, obviously,” Hector said. “Rhys and I can handle that from the air. That'd be the safest bet, and we can cover a lot more ground that way. Find out where the entrances and exits are, and how many guards we can expect to deal with. What the lay of the land is like.”

Rhys nodded. “Sure thing. Can do.”

“And we need someone to stay back here and take care of these guys,” Hector said. “Rhys, once we've done our surveillance, I think that should be you. You can get them out of here the fastest if the need arises, and we might need Euan if it comes to a fight. I can handle any air support that's needed.”

Rhys nodded without arguing, which Trent appreciated. He knew Rhys and Hector argued and needled each other like brothers did, but when it came to their jobs, they both took them deadly seriously. Hector was the most senior member of the team, and so he was in charge for the moment, and Rhys would follow his orders.

Glancing out the window, Hector continued, “It won't be dark for a good while yet, but I think Rhys and I should get started looking over the area as soon as possible. It's a long way out, so the only way we can get there is either by truck or in our shifted forms – so obviously you know which one we'll be doing.” He glanced at Zina. “You reckon we got enough of a head start on this Bloodhound character you were telling us about?”

“I don't know,” Zina said, shaking her head slowly. “He hasn't shown up yet, and last time he didn't exactly take a subtle approach when he caught up to us. So the best thing we can do for now is try to move fast, and be out of here quickly.”

“I agree,” Trent said. “I think if he were here, we’d know about it.”

*Unless he’s laying low, because the last time he came in kicking doors down, things didn’t exactly go his way...*

Frowning, Trent knew that was a possibility – but they also couldn’t sit around waiting for him to show up and announce himself, either.

“All right then,” Hector said, nodding. “I think we have as much as we’re going to get, then.” He turned to Rhys. “Let’s get into the air.”

## CHAPTER 16

Night fell early out here in the desert, and it fell quickly and completely.

Zina blinked in the near-total darkness as she, Trent and Euan trudged out over the red sand, knowing that without her shifter eyesight, she'd probably need some kind of military-grade infrared goggles to see a foot in front of her. As it was, even her antelope's sensitive eyesight and instincts needed time to adjust – or maybe it was just because they'd gotten a little rusty from disuse.

*You did keep me away for a long time this time,* her antelope said, sounding just a *little* annoyed. *I could have helped you. You needed me!*

*I know, I know,* Zina told it soothingly. *But I need you now as well. I couldn't do this without you.*

The sweet-talking seemed to help calm the antelope down – it was a sensitive, flighty creature after all, and occasionally liked to have temper tantrums if it felt it wasn't being appreciated as it should be. Zina had had a somewhat difficult time with it growing up, learning how to work with its moods and capricious nature, and she'd wondered for a while why she'd gotten stuck with such a temperamental creature – well, until the day she'd met a cat shifter, and then she'd realized how lucky she really was.

“We can shift now, I think,” Trent said, glancing over his shoulder. “And we stick to the plan. Euan, you're on sentry duty. Zina and I will explore the mine. Hector will stay in the

sky, keeping watch for anyone approaching. Hopefully this won't take too long."

Euan nodded, face impassive. "If anything happens, I'll be in to get you out quickly," he said. "Hector and Rhys seemed to think the place was lightly guarded, but..."

Euan trailed off, and Zina knew what he meant. Hector and Rhys had returned from their flyover of the area marked out on Hargreaves's map, and had seemed puzzled by the lack of heavy-duty firepower at what was, after all, something Hargreaves had spent a lot of time and money pursuing.

*Decided it's a wild goose chase and moved on already?* Trent had suggested, but Rhys and Hector couldn't say.

*There are a few trucks and pieces of equipment parked around the site,* Hector had said. *Some excavation tools and some stuff for hauling away waste. But not the kind of thing you'd expect to see from a Hargreaves operation.*

*Maybe not,* Trent had said, *but right now it's all we have to go on.*

Zina wished she could settle the swirling feeling of unease in her stomach. But right now, she wasn't sure whether it was normal unease at heading into a mission with less than perfect preparation, or if there really *was* something amiss here.

*I'll just have to keep us both on our toes,* her antelope said with a light kick of its back legs – and Zina had to admit, she was grateful to have it back.

Trent unclipped the backpack he was carrying, placing it down on the ground. It contained water, flashlights, goggles, and a hand-held excavator – things they might need once they were down in the tunnels, since they weren't sure if they'd be able to stay in their shifted forms down there. Trent, at least, as a giant kangaroo, was likely going to need more headroom than a mineshaft was likely to provide.

"Okay," he said. "Here I go."

As Zina watched, his skin rippled, becoming dark brown fur. Trent was already *tall* – but now he grew taller still, shooting up to eight feet high, as a thick, heavy tail swung out

behind him. He kept his powerful shoulder muscles, however, even as his hands became clawed forepaws, and his legs long, powerful jumping machines. Zina had never seen him in his shifted form before, and she had to admit, it was kind of impressive. She usually thought of kangaroos as being kind of cute and fuzzy, but there wasn't much that was cute and fuzzy about Trent right now – he was a tall, broad, heavily muscled beast, and she couldn't imagine there would be much, aside from other giant prehistorical Australian animals, that could do him much damage.

“Okay. Let's get this back onto you,” Zina murmured, lifting the backpack. “*Oof*. This is heavier than I expected.”

Trent didn't answer – he just swung his head toward her, twitching his ears. *At least he kept his nice long eyelashes*, she thought as she clipped the pack back around him – and at least he was *kind of* the right shape for it.

“You know, we wouldn't need this if you had a pouch like a proper kangaroo,” she informed him, which *did* elicit a soft, slightly annoyed clicking sound from Trent, and a quiet chuckle from Euan.

“All right,” she said, once the pack was secured in place. “Here we go.”

Her own shift felt natural and smooth, thankfully – her antelope came forward as easily as it ever had, ever since she'd learned how to shift properly and work in harmony with it when she was a teenager. Even though her senses in her human form were heightened, they were nothing compared to how sensitive they were in her antelope form – as she shifted, the night suddenly came alive with scents and sounds, from the distant smell of diesel from the trucks used to haul away excavated rock, to the sounds of nocturnal animals shuffling around on the sand and through the sparse vegetation.

She looked across at Trent – and Euan, who had shifted into his own form of a marsupial lion – and then kicked up her heels, and *ran*.

It had been a long time since Zina had had the chance to really let loose in her antelope form, and now she found the

exhilarating thrill of it almost getting the better of her, her antelope forgetting for a moment that they were here on business and simply glorying in the feel of speed and power, bounding over the sandy hills and over the brush and scrub as if nothing could ever slow it down.

She leapt, she bounded, she threw up her back legs in joy – until she realized that she was leaving Trent and Euan far, far behind her, and she forced herself to slow down, limiting her speed to something they could more easily keep up with.

Not that Trent was any slouch – Zina might have been *fast*, but he was powerful and could move at a pretty good pace, taking massive bounds across the landscape, his long feet perfectly suited to moving through this kind of terrain. And he was surprisingly maneuverable as well, changing directions to avoid obstacles he couldn't leap over, like the occasional gum trees that grew here and there.

At the speed they were going, the dark shapes of Hargreaves's mining equipment loomed up after only a short time – or what *seemed* like a short time to Zina, but maybe that was just the adrenaline of her run, and the joy of being back in her antelope form, despite the seriousness of the reason they were here. She detected Euan veering off from them, bounding off toward the parked vehicles, presumably to begin his sentry duty. She knew, somewhere above them, Hector was flying in his griffin form, ready to tell them the moment he saw anyone approaching from the dirt track that led to Hargreaves's operation.

*Well, I guess it's pretty much all up to us now, Zina thought as she began to slow her run. Trent and I will have to go down the mine, try to see if we can figure out what's going on – and hopefully find this egg.*

She didn't know how they'd succeed – Hargreaves hadn't found it, after all, even after all their looking. But she knew they had to try.

In a few more long bounds, she came to the semi-concealed entrance of the mine, covered in a rusty sheet of corrugated iron. Clearly, Hargreaves were trying to make this

look like nothing too special – just a normal prospector, digging and hoping for a stroke of luck.

Trotting to a halt, Zina shook herself, sending a cloud of dust flying from her hide.

*More – please, let’s run some more!* her antelope insisted, twisting suddenly and prancing over the ground, still wild with delight at their frantic run.

Zina forced the antelope back under her control before it could set her off at a run back the way she’d come – or farther out into the desert.

*Later, she promised it soothingly. Once this is taken care of, I promise we’ll run until we drop, okay?*

Zina *hoped* it’d be a recreational run, but, as her antelope sulkily complied with her wishes and let her shift back into her human form, Zina couldn’t help but wonder if it might be a run for her life.

*No pessimistic thoughts,* she told herself firmly. She’d always gone into every mission without any expectations whatsoever. Too much defeatist thinking or too much overconfidence, and you were setting yourself up for failure. She had trained herself carefully to simply take every mission as it came, and deal with situations as they arose.

“You good?” she asked Trent, turning to where he towered over her, still in his kangaroo form. The only answer she got was a whickering sound and then a loud snort, so Zina decided that that meant *yes*.

“Hold still,” she said, reaching up to unclip the pack on his back. She held it as he shifted back into his human form.

“I was worried for a moment there I wasn’t going to get my human side back,” Trent said, shaking his head. “Not that I necessarily blame the kangaroo, after getting shut away like that.”

“I know what you mean,” Zina said, nodding. “When this is all over, I think I’ll spend a week in antelope form, just having a good old frolic.”

Trent let out a low laugh as together, they made their way toward the sheet of rusted iron that covered the entrance of the mine. “Sounds like a good time. I might come frolic with you. I mean, if you want company. I’d say frolicking might even be better with two.”

Zina rolled her eyes, but there was a fond smile playing on her lips. This was exactly like she remembered it, even from three years ago. Even in the midst of a mission, Trent would still crack a joke.

Trent pulled away the large sheet of corrugated iron as if it weighed nothing at all, revealing a door behind it.

“Huh,” Trent said, leaning down. “Locked. Of course. But that’s why we brought bolt cutters.”

The bolt cutters were slipped into a side pocket of the backpack, and once he’d pulled them out they made short work of the lock, snipping through the bar easily.

Once again, Zina had the strange sense that all of this just seemed way too *easy*. Were Hargreaves really just going to put such an easily destroyed lock on the door of their mine? Was that how they usually did things?

*No.* Zina could answer that question for herself. She’d worked there for years – she knew how careful and fastidious they were.

*So why? Why has everything so far been so easy?!*

“You ready?” Trent asked, as he pushed open the door – and Zina knew that no matter what kinds of questions she might have, it was now or never. Maybe the only way she’d get any answers about any of this was by stepping inside.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding, before following him in.

Beyond the doorway there was just enough ground to stand on, and then the drop of the mineshaft, leading straight down. There was a ladder affixed to the side of the shaft, and, as her eyes adjusted to the dark, Zina watched Trent test it gingerly with his foot before deciding it’d hold his weight, and then start to climb down, Zina following after him.



“Getting pretty dark,” Trent remarked as they went down. “They probably have a generator down here to give them light while they mine – though whether we want to risk switching it on is a good question.”

“We have the night vision goggles Hector and the others brought,” Zina said. “We can just use those. Better than stumbling around in the dark looking for a generator that may or may not exist.”

They continued on, descending lower and lower, until finally Zina heard Trent say, “Huh – found the bottom. Here we are.”

Cautiously, Zina stepped off the ladder, feeling solid ground beneath her feet. Even though it was dark, it seemed, somehow, a little lighter down here than it had in the shaft with the ladder – perhaps there was some light source farther down the cavern. At any rate, she could definitely see more clearly down here, for some reason. Zina decided they’d have to be careful. There might be guards waiting for them down here.

“Should we head off, then?” she asked, and saw Trent nod.

“Let’s go.”

*I do not like this underground place,* her antelope said with a shudder, as they made their way through the shaft, hand on the guide line that had been hammered into the stone wall. *It is dark and unnatural. Who would build such a thing?*

Zina wasn’t sure if explaining mineral mining would have any effect – her antelope was entirely indifferent to material wealth – so she simply ignored her antelope’s complaints for now. It made it a little harder, however, to sort out what was just the antelope’s unease at being underground, and any sense of genuine danger.

“This place feels very... labyrinthine,” Zina remarked, as they made their way through it. A gust of wind blew against her face, and when she turned her head, she found herself staring down a forking branch of the tunnel, leading, presumably, to another part of the mine.

“Perhaps we should just stick to the main tunnel for now, as far as we can go,” Trent suggested. “See what’s at the end of it, and then pick a direction. This should open up into a main excavation area at some point. That’s probably where the light is coming from.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The farther into the mine they went, the more the musty smell of earth and rock increased, and the more nervous Zina’s antelope became.

*I dislike it, it said, skittering nervously. I cannot feel things as I ought.*

*I know, I know, Zina tried to soothe it. Sorry – just hold out for a little longer.*

She wasn’t sure if Trent’s kangaroo was feeling similarly nervous, but she could pick up on his vague feeling of unease – now that her shifter senses were back, she was finding she was a lot more sensitive to his presence in general. She could *feel* him behind her, the aura of his body heat, the general sense of his moods and thoughts. It was both distracting and fascinating, and Zina wished they were in a situation where she could get used to it a bit more easily.

Another gust of wind passed over her face, and suddenly Zina realized she was standing at the entrance to a large cavern – the tunnel had opened up into a wide, relatively spacious room.

“I think we hit the main area,” she said, edging her way out into it. Over in the corner, she could see the source of the vague light they’d been picking up on – one battery-powered lantern sitting on the floor, forgotten or deliberately left behind for some reason. Clearly the battery was on its last legs, and the light it gave off was dim and flickering.

*Something still doesn’t feel right, though... maybe I’d feel a bit better if I could see more clearly...*

“Maybe we should get out the night vision goggles,” Zina said, as they passed under the massive beam that was

supporting the ceiling, and stepped into the cavern. “We need to start looking around in more detail.”

“Good point.” Pausing, Trent hefted the large pack off his shoulders and started to unzip it. In the darkness, Zina heard his sudden intake of breath, as if he was shocked.

“What is it?” she asked, as, at exactly the same moment, she heard a small *brrup?* sound.

*Oh my God. No. Don't tell me –*

“I think we might have a couple of stowaways.” Trent’s tone was grim, and Zina shook her head, trying to clear it of surprise and fear.

*Fear's no good to me! I have to keep a level head!*

Crouching down next to Trent, Zina strained her eyes to see what was going on – and saw two – *no, three!* – pairs of luminescent eyes blinking at her in the darkness.

*“Birrup? Cheep?”*

She couldn’t make out if that had been Goldie or Dusty, but, she supposed, it didn’t really matter.

“How did you guys get in here?” she asked, trying not to let her tension show in her voice. “*Why* did you guys get in here?!”

“Here, take the goggles,” Trent said, pressing them into her hands. “We’ll have to go back, and quickly. We can’t have these guys with us. It’ll be a waste of time, but we can give them to Hector or Euan to take them back to the hotel.”

Zina put on the goggles, snapping them down over her eyes and activating them. In the newly lit-up cavern, she could see Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver poking their heads out of the bag, looking around with great curiosity.

“I thought we left them sleeping on the couch,” she said, gathering up Goldie and Dusty. “Why would they even climb *in* here?”

“I don’t know,” Trent said, shaking his head as he activated his own goggles. “Maybe it’s a dragon thing? Some

of this equipment is pretty expensive.” He carefully lifted Quicksilver up out of the bag, tucking it under his arm. “They might have been trying to claim it for their hoard, if they could sense it was worth a lot of money. And maybe Quicksilver was just following their lead.”

“Oh, honestly,” Zina said, shaking her head. “If Goldie and Dusty jumped off a cliff, would you follow them, Quicksilver?” she asked, before realizing she sounded *exactly* like her mother asking her the same thing when she’d been a kid.

*Well, now that I’m an adult I realize what a good question that is!*

“Or maybe they were just curious,” Trent said, standing. “Either way, we *really* have to get them back to the surface. This is no place for kids.”

“It sure isn’t,” Zina said, joining Trent in standing. She was about to follow him back the way they’d come, when, within her, her antelope suddenly raised its head, muscles tensing, ears pricked, every sense suddenly on high alert and ready to flee.

*What? What is it?* Zina asked – but then she heard it too. A scraping sound from somewhere farther down the mine, from a tunnel leading out of the other side of the cavern –

“Trent,” she started to say, as fear clambered up her throat, “I think we might –”

She never got to finish her sentence. At that moment, she heard a chain of small *beep beep beep* sounds – and then the mine shaft in front of her exploded, sending rocks and rubble pouring from the ceiling and dust swirling through the air, clogging up her lungs, making it impossible to breathe –

“Zina!” she heard Trent shout, just before the tunnel in front of her was sealed completely shut by the falling rocks – leaving Trent on the other side.

## CHAPTER 17

*T*rent!!

Zina staggered back, trying to call his name – but every time she tried to take a breath, it felt like she was inhaling nothing but dust and small shards of rock, and she only ended up coughing and heaving until she felt like she was going to throw up.

*I have to find some clean air – I have to find my way back to Trent –*

At least her eyes had been protected by the goggles, she thought, as she reeled away from the wall of rubble that now sealed off the path they'd taken into the mine. And it seemed like she'd only been grazed by the falling rocks – nothing had hit her on the head, and aside from the coughing fit and feeling like her lungs were full of stones, she wasn't hurt.

*Oh my God – Dusty – Goldie –*

The only thing she knew was that they weren't in her arms anymore, and panic lanced through her – until she felt something moving against her chest, and looked down to realize that Dusty and Goldie must have tucked themselves away inside her shirt, trying to take shelter against the explosion.

*Are you guys okay?!*

Trying to talk to them only resulted in yet more coughing, so Zina had to satisfy herself with the fact that, despite the fact they were clearly scared, they *seemed* unharmed. At least they

were looking up at her and blinking, their eyes wide and pupils dilated.

*It's okay. It's okay.*

She had to hope that they could somehow sense what she was trying to send to them with whatever latent psychic powers she might have – however, more than her lack of telepathy was the issue that everything was *not* okay.

She was stuck down a mine. She was separated from Trent. And, more than anything else, that cave-in had *not* been a natural occurrence.

Flattening her mouth into a grimace, Zina replayed the last few minutes over again in her mind. She'd heard something from the tunnel opposite. And then there'd been the *beep* of a small explosive device. And then the tunnel had collapsed.

*Trent and Quicksilver... what if...*

She shook her head against the panic that rose up suddenly within her. She couldn't let herself believe anything had happened to them – she was *sure* she'd be able to sense it if Trent was badly injured, or worse. But she didn't feel any difference in her bond with him – no cold, creeping horror that he was trapped or too badly injured to help himself.

*Our mate! Our mate! We have to find him! Help him!*

That knowledge didn't seem to calm her antelope down even a little bit, however, as it shook its head and kicked its heels in anguish, agitated beyond anything Zina had ever felt in it before. It was desperate – and it was trying to take over Zina's mind, its instinctive animal panic pushing out her rational ability to think things through.

*Calm down, Zina told it, as she looked around the cavern as the dust finally began settling. We won't get anywhere if you're just going to panic and exhaust yourself. This is a big mine, and Hector said he thought he saw multiple exits and entrances. If we follow the tunnel, chances are we'll find our way to one... as long as we don't run into whoever set off that explosion first.*

A chill ran down her spine as she turned toward the tunnel leading out of the cavern.

*It might have been automatic, Zina reasoned as she cautiously approached it. It might have been set to go off if any non-Hargreaves personnel came down here. I didn't see anything to disable it on the way in – no keypass or code box – but it could have been cleverly concealed.*

Looking back at the pile of rubble that now sealed the other tunnel, Zina could see that there was no way she'd be able to dig through it with her bare hands – the rocks were too big, and there was too much of it.

*Oh – but –*

A ray of hope shone suddenly as she remembered Trent had the hand-held excavator in his pack. She wasn't sure how long it'd take him to dig through the rubble, but it *could* be done. All she'd need to do in that case was wait until he dug his way through to her.

And, sure enough, after a moment, she heard a sound – a steady, buzzing drone, definitely mechanical. As she watched, a few small pebbles vibrated out of place in the wall of rocks and rubble, and she knew Trent had started up the excavator and was making his way to her.

“It'll be okay,” she said, now that she could talk again, looking down at where Goldie and Dusty were nestled in her shirt. “We'll be out of here in no time.”

“Ah. Well. That's where you're wrong, Ms. Alden.”

Zina froze, a cold shiver running down her spine.

*That voice...*

As she turned slowly, she *knew* she'd heard that voice before – it was distorted by the echo of the mine, but still, she knew it.

“Dr. Sumner?”

The laugh from somewhere within the tunnel made her blood run cold. It was cold and cruel – just as Zina knew Doctor James Sumner was.

And she knew exactly why he was here.

*I stole his fingerprints to get into the lab where they were keeping the eggs. He was my supervisor when I did a rotation through their security systems department – everything I knew about their lab systems, I learned from him. He was in charge of it. He was in charge of keeping the eggs safe.*

And she'd stolen the eggs right out from beneath his nose, using his own fingerprints and the systems he'd designed against him.

No wonder he was here, and no wonder he was *pissed*.

“That’s right, Ms. Alden. I’m glad to see you haven’t forgotten me, after all this time.”

Swallowing, Zina instinctively crossed her arms over her chest, where Dusty and Goldie were still huddled. She knew she couldn’t hope to conceal them for long, but she hoped she might at least be able to stop Sumner from seeing them until she could figure out what she was going to do next. There was only one way out of this cavern at the moment, and Sumner was standing in her way – though she couldn’t actually *see* him yet, even with the night vision goggles.

“Oh, don’t worry – I already know about the fact those eggs have finally hatched,” Sumner continued in his cold, smooth voice. “I’ll have to thank you for finally figuring that out – we hadn’t gotten anywhere with them for years. So if nothing else, I do owe you a favor for that. It’ll be yet another thing I can use to restore my reputation on my return.”

“Your reputation?” Zina asked – but she was mainly playing for time as she edged her way around the cavern. She needed to stall – Trent was trying to dig her out as they spoke. All she needed was to buy some time.

“Don’t be so naïve,” Sumner snarled. “You know how Hargreaves treats people they see as incompetent – it’s a jungle. Dog eat dog, survival of the fittest. And you, in one afternoon, managed to completely destroy a career I’d spent twenty years building.”



Zina could well believe that. She hadn't cared at the time – Sumner's professional reputation had been the *last* thing on her mind. He was the one who'd pushed Hargreaves into searching for the eggs in the first place, and then trying to hatch them and use the creatures' powers. That was all he cared about – his own career, his own power. He didn't see Goldie and Dusty as living beings – he only saw them as tools.

“So you decided to come out here to redeem yourself,” she muttered. “Get your reputation back.”

“You always were sharp, I'll give you that,” Sumner said. “Yes – it's my one chance. Hargreaves doesn't usually give people second chances, so in a way, I'm very lucky. I was given all the resources I needed, and all the discretion. As you know, many people in Hargreaves never believed in my ideas about the eggs – they didn't even think they'd hatch. But now, I can prove them wrong. Thanks to you.”

Involuntarily, Zina clutched at Goldie and Dusty even more closely. They weren't moving much – perhaps, instinctively, they realized there was danger. Either way, they were staying where they were, close to her chest.

*And please, just stay there a little bit longer.*

“I won't let you take them back to be used like that,” Zina spat. “I've outrun you so far – what makes you think I won't outrun you again now?”

Sumner's laugh echoed through the chamber. “You *outran* me? Is that what you think? Oh, Zina. I thought you were smarter than that. You didn't outrun me – I *lured* you here. I decided I wasn't going to take any more chances after that debacle at the river.”

Shock coursed through her, and Zina couldn't stop her mouth from dropping open. “Wh-what?!”

“You didn't think Hargreaves was *that* incompetent, did you?” Sumner continued, his amusement plain in his voice. “Finding this place – do you *really* think I would have allowed you to get into our systems so easily, once I knew what you were really capable of as a hacker? Zina, Zina... that was a

*decoy*. A plant. This place isn't Hargreaves's mining operation. This is just some old, abandoned mine. I led you here. You're here because it's *exactly* where I wanted you to be."

Zina stared into the darkness, her heartbeat thudding in her ears.

Instinctively, she knew it was all true. Hadn't she wondered why everything was so easy? Hadn't she been suspicious of how simple it had been to hack into Hargreaves's system and discover the location of – she'd thought – their claim?

She closed her eyes, swallowing.

*I should have listened to my instincts...*

But she'd been blinded by her sense of urgency.

*And now, Dusty and Goldie – and Quicksilver – are in danger.*

She had to believe Trent would dig his way through to her soon, though. So far, Sumner had seemed more than happy to talk at her – maybe she could keep him talking for just a little while longer...

"Oh, and if you're thinking about that lumbering oaf you call your mate, you can forget about help from *that* quarter. He will be dealt with shortly."

Zina sucked in a shocked gasp. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten about our friend so quickly. He gave you quite a scare back at that motel."

*The Bloodhound*, Zina realized, with a chill in her gut. Clearly, the plan had been to separate her and Trent, and then have Sumner deal with her, and the Bloodhound with Trent. *And I assume someone else is up there, dealing with Euan and Hector.*

She didn't have time to dwell on that now, however. Right now, she had to keep her wits about her, and just try to get herself out of this – or, failing that, get Goldie and Dusty to somewhere they'd be safe.

*That's not exactly going to be easy, however...*

She had to get past Sumner. Even if this mine wasn't Hargreaves's actual operation, she assumed he'd had time to familiarize himself with it, while she'd been running about blindly.

*Not to mention, I have two baby dragons I have to keep safe.*

But right now, she didn't see that she had much choice but to find a way.

For one thing, Sumner had finally emerged from the tunnel into a place where she could see him. He looked just as she remembered: a heavysset man with an appearance that belied the fact he was a scientist. He'd been a mercenary in his younger days, and taken up his interest in shifter genetics – and other, less savory things – later in life. So he wasn't someone she could take lightly, despite the fact she was a highly trained field agent. And besides that...

*Well, besides that, there's the fact he's pointing a gun at me,* she thought, looking at it grimly where he held it out in front of him, trained on her. *Would he really risk hitting the baby dragons, though?*

She knew she didn't exactly have the luxury of finding that out, however, as she dropped one of her arms from in front of her chest, pressing it against the wall behind her.

She also knew, as well, that she didn't have the luxury of stalling for time until Trent broke through the wall of rubble. She wasn't sure when it had happened, but now that Sumner had stopped talking, she realized she couldn't hear the sound of the hand-held excavator working away at the collapsed rubble anymore.

*Trent...*

She pulled in a deep breath, even as her antelope began fidgeting with anxiety.

*Our mate! If what this man says is true, then we need to find our mate! We have to go to him at once! We cannot let him be harmed!!*

*I'm working on it, okay?* Zina told it, as her fingers closed around a loose rock in the wall – something she could, with a bit of effort, prize free with her fingertips.

“So, what, you’re just going to shoot me and take the dragons?” Zina asked, shielding the movement of her hand with her body. “That’s it? You know it’ll take a lot more than that to keep me down.”

Sumner sniffed, a sneer crossing over his face. “If that’s what it takes, then that’s what I’ll do. But surely it’d be better to take you in alive – after all, who would help you? You have a burn notice out on you. Your agency has completely disavowed you. No one’s going to come to your rescue. And I have *so many* experiments I need to run – and so few test subjects. Well. Not ones that are still alive, anyway.”

Zina gritted her teeth. “Well, if those are my choices, I guess I’d rather get shot,” she said. She dug her fingertips into the wall of the mine, feeling something – blood or sweat – trickle over them. But she had *almost* worked it free.

*Come on, come on, just a little bit more...*

“Well, Ms. Alden, I’m not sure I’m going to give you the choice,” Sumner said, his smile growing cruel. “But I’d hate to hurt the little ones. And I know you’d hate that too. How about this – I’ll give you a painless death, if you hand them over now, no more fuss. I can’t offer you a better deal than that.”

Zina swallowed. The worst thing about it was, Sumner was probably telling the truth – a painless death really *was* the best deal she could probably hope for at this stage.

*But no way am I letting him leave here with Goldie and Dusty.*

Just as she thought it, she *finally* managed to work the rock free from the wall – it wasn’t big, just large enough to fit in her palm. But it’d do.

“Well, gee,” she said, in mock thoughtfulness. “Let me think about it.”

*I’ll only get one shot at this...*

Nonetheless, she knew she had to take it.

“Don’t think for too long,” Sumner said, his smile widening – just as Zina, calling upon every ounce of speed and strength she had from her antelope form, twisted back and then hurled the rock directly at Sumner’s face.

*Not fast enough*, she realized – even as she dashed across the cavern toward the tunnel Sumner had appeared from, she heard the gun firing, and then everything went black.

## CHAPTER 18

*Z*INA!! Zina, can you hear me? Somehow?? I'm coming!!

Trent held the excavator steady as he pressed its digging edge into the fallen rubble. He knew he should be wearing a face mask to protect himself from the dust it was kicking up, but right now, he couldn't think about anything except digging through to Zina, Dusty and Goldie as quickly as possible.

*I have to find them...*

He'd heard the *beeps* before the cave collapsed, and he knew this was no accident. This had been deliberate. It had been some kind of trap all along.

*And I walked right into it. I should have been more careful.*

His carelessness and urgency had put them all in danger. He could only hope Euan and Hector up above were okay – but he knew they could handle themselves.

*Well, Zina can handle herself too, but she's my mate. There's no way I can leave here without her.*

*You should let me kick this barrier away, his kangaroo piped up, swishing its tail in fury. I could remove it in no time at all. I will destroy anything or anyone that is keeping us from our mate!*

*I know, I know, Trent said, and the excavator bored deeper. But I'm not sure that's going to cut it right now. I have no idea how thick this rubble is...*

He'd just barely managed to throw himself clear of it when it had fallen in, sheltering Quicksilver beneath him. The little basilisk at least had seemed completely unharmed – it had simply blinked up at Trent with its large, dark eyes, made a soft *peeping* sound, and then clambered back into the backpack, where it apparently felt safe, just its head and two of its legs poking out the top, resting on his shoulder.

*Pity you're not a little bigger, Quicksilver, Trent thought, or I could get you to eat our way out of this.*

He felt Quicksilver's little needle claws on his shoulder through his shirt, and he took a moment to glance across at it, finding it licking its chops hungrily.

*I'd love to stop and let you have a little snack, but right now, things are just a bit urgent,* Trent thought, hoping somehow Quicksilver might understand what he was thinking. Right now, the Queen of Denmark could have been sitting on his shoulder, and Trent wouldn't have stopped the excavator to pay his proper respects.

It wasn't until his kangaroo suddenly whipped its head around, ears trained, whiskers twitching, that Trent *did* actually stop the excavator, as a cold shiver ran suddenly down the full length of his spine.

*Someone's behind me.*

He knew it with complete certainty: while he'd been distracted trying to break through the rubble to get to Zina, someone had moved up behind him, probably coming from the forking passage he and Zina had seen earlier. They'd clearly been lying in wait for him and Zina to be separated, and now they'd made their move.

Putting the excavator down on the ground gently – he'd need it, after all, once he'd dealt with whoever was trying to keep him from his mate – Trent turned, and found himself looking at a dark, hulking silhouette, just barely visible in the darkness.

*The Bloodhound.*

Trent had only seen him the once, and that had been at a distance, as the man had stuck his head out of the motel window when he'd last hunted them down. The shape of him was unmistakable, though: tall, broad, bull-necked, pure muscle.

He'd be hard to beat as a human, and perhaps even more so in his shifted form, whatever it turned out to be.

*Not to mention, shifting probably isn't a great idea for me right now...*

He was already eight feet tall as a giant kangaroo. If he tried to bounce, he'd smack his head on the ceiling and knock himself out.

*So whatever I do, I better do it quickly.*

The Bloodhound didn't say anything – he clearly wasn't the kind of villain who was given to long speeches explaining themselves and what they were doing, Trent thought. The man in front of him simply cracked his neck, the movement long and slow, before his hands clenched into fists by his side.

“Hand over the creature.”

His voice was as rough as sandpaper, deep and threatening. He clearly wasn't here to fuck around, thought Trent.

“Hm. No, I don't think I will,” Trent said, moving into a fighting stance himself. He felt Quicksilver's tiny claws prickling against his skin once more as the little basilisk scampered down from his shoulder, climbing back into his backpack.

*Probably the safest place for you right now, little fella,* Trent thought as he raised his fists.

“I can do this the hard way, or the easy way,” the Bloodhound said, voice still gravelly, and Trent just *had* to roll his eyes.

“Oh, please,” he said. “If you're going to talk, can you at least come up with an original line? It's always *the hard way or the easy way*. Did you guys all read the same training manual or something?”



The Bloodhound said nothing, though Trent *swore* he saw his fists clench a little tighter.

“Hand it over,” he repeated. “I won’t ask again. I’ve got your scent now – there’s nowhere you can run. I can track you anywhere.”

*He might have strength... and depending on what he turns into he might be able to use his shifter form... and he’s blocking the exit right now... but I have speed, and I have the fact I need to protect my mate right now,* Trent thought, eyes darting to the tunnel to the left of the Bloodhound. Was it possible all these tunnels might join up somewhere? Would he be able to find his way back to Zina that way?

*The mated bond can guide us,* the kangaroo said, tense and on edge. *We can find her. We simply have to follow our senses.*

*Good advice,* Trent thought. He hoped it was true, and not just something his kangaroo had made up because it’d gotten over-confident about its own abilities – that happened sometimes.

Trent glanced up. The ceilings in here were pretty high, or higher than they had been at the start of the tunnel. Measuring it by sight, Trent *guessed* he might be able to shift in here, provided he didn’t try to jump. Quietly and quickly, he slipped off his backpack, setting it gently down to the stone floor of the shaft. He knew Quicksilver was inside, but if he messed this up, he suspected he wouldn’t get a second chance anyway.

*I might be able to get a shot at him...*

“Well, that’s good to know,” he said, trying to goad the Bloodhound. If he could get him mad enough, maybe he’d charge him in a rage, which would give Trent the opening he was hoping for. “Shouldn’t Hargreaves keep its dogs on a leash, though? I can’t tell you how many council guidelines you’re breaking right now. It’s no dogs off leash here. Have a little respect.”

The Bloodhound grunted, his massive shoulders bunching.

“It’s a delicate ecosystem out there,” Trent continued. “Do you even have a permit for... well, yourself, I guess?”

The Bloodhound lowered his head, like a bull about to charge.

“Or is there some kind of exemption for –”

Evidently bored with their conversation, the Bloodhound charged.

*All right, here we go!*

Quick as a flash, Trent called his kangaroo forward. It was with him in a trice, all its senses straining, all its power his to command. It surged forward, its rage at being kept from its mate blinding in its strength.

*We will destroy anyone who tries to stop us from finding her and protecting her!*

Thankfully, Trent didn't have to take any time to wrestle the kangaroo's rage under his control – he knew he could simply trust its instincts to do what had to be done.

The Bloodhound might have been made of muscle, tall, heavysset, and operating with superhuman strength – but even *he* couldn't stand against the powerful kick of an eight-foot-tall prehistoric kangaroo's massive hind legs. Rearing back onto his tail, Trent sent the most savage kick he had it in his power to give straight into the Bloodhound's chest as he charged forward, the long, curved claws at the tips of his feet digging into his flesh and shredding it.

The kick sent the Bloodhound, huge as he was, flying back into the darkness at the other end of the shaft, out of Trent's sight; all he could make out was the *thud* as he landed on the stone floor, followed by a groan of pain.

*He might be down, but I doubt he's out,* Trent thought, reining in his kangaroo's instinct to go stomp on him until he really was finished. *I need to get Quicksilver out of here – and I need to find Zina.*

Looking around, making use of the kangaroo's senses and nocturnal eyesight while he still could, Trent saw the entrance to the forking tunnel off to his left. He couldn't sense any movement from the Bloodhound, and he wondered if he dared to risk staying in kangaroo form for now – he wouldn't be able

to move very fast, just lope along on his toes and forepaws, rather than his speeding bounce. But if the Bloodhound took his time recovering, he might be able to put some distance between them *and* use the kangaroo's senses to find his way to Zina.

*It is this way,* his kangaroo insisted, tugging at his mind and forcing his body to movement. *We must hurry!*

*Just a second – we can't forget Quicksilver.*

The kangaroo had to admit that was true, and it stopped trying to take over his mind to send them tearing through the tunnels searching for their mate. Trent couldn't clip the backpack onto his back again with his kangaroo's paws, so instead he simply reached inside, hoping Quicksilver would still know him, even in his shifted form.

*Come on, fella,* he thought, as Quicksilver poked its head out of the bag's opening, blinking at him. *You know me. You're safe with me.*

Evidently, Quicksilver *did* know him, because it swarmed up Trent's foreleg and up onto his shoulder, its tiny clawed feet clinging to Trent's fur. As it settled there, it let out a small *prrup prrup* sound, that Trent *hoped* meant it was ready to go.

*All right then, little fella,* Trent said, *let's get going.*

He set off at as quick of a lope as he could manage, keeping his head down. The kangaroo's senses guided him – it could feel air currents, pick up scents and sounds that Trent would have had no chance of detecting in his human form. And most of all, it could sense the bond between him and Zina, burning brightly in his chest, telling her that she was all right, and guiding him to her.

*Just hold out a little longer, Zina, wherever you are. I'm coming for you. I promise.*

He hoped the mineshafts all met up with each other at some point – but he had to assume that if the only way to Zina was through the collapsed rubble, his kangaroo would have sensed it and told him to stay put, rather than leading him down a dead end.

As he loped along, however, the kangaroo suddenly felt a thrill of pure *terror* run down its spine at a noise from behind it.

*What – what was that?!*

There weren't many things that could faze the kangaroo – it was huge, after all, muscular, and it wasn't afraid of a fight with anyone or anything. It could disembowel with a kick, not that Trent usually let it do anything like that, no matter how much someone may have deserved it. So the idea of the kangaroo being *that* terrified of whatever was... *slithering*... down the mineshaft behind it did not make Trent feel very good about anything at all.

*What is it?* he asked again, once the kangaroo's mind had cleared from the bolt of terror that had arced through it.

*I do not know*, the kangaroo said. *But I do not like it.*

Trent risked stopping, glancing back over his shoulder – and then felt his blood run cold.

There, following him, was the largest crocodile he had *ever* seen, moving at a pace that Trent would *not* have thought such a beast could move at. It was so bulky that its armored flanks scraped against the sides of the tunnel as it moved, its beady eyes trained on Trent.

*Oh, what the hell?!* he thought, as his kangaroo's instincts went suddenly into overdrive. *That isn't a bloodhound, or any kind of hound!*

Trent couldn't exactly say what he thought he'd been expecting from the Bloodhound, but he'd assumed that he'd at least be some kind of dog – not what looked to be the direct ancestor of all of his absolute worst nightmares combined. Kangaroos did *not* like crocodiles! They just didn't get along!

The kangaroo was struggling against him, wanting to take off at a racing bound – but there was just no room for it here in the tunnel. But if he kept going at this loping pace, the crocodile would catch up to him, and there was literally nowhere for him to go. The tunnel was straight, with no forks

that he could see yet. There'd be one sooner or later – but right now, the only place he had to go was forward.

And right now, he could move a lot faster in human form, too.

*We have to shift*, Trent said, as the kangaroo continued to struggle against him, wanting to take complete control of both his body and his mind, and probably bash their brains out on the roof of the tunnel in the process. *Don't fight me – work with me!*

But panic had a tight grip on the kangaroo's mind, and the crocodile was almost on them, its jaws opening to snap shut on his tail or his leg before the kangaroo finally relinquished control, and let Trent change back into his human form.

*Hold on, Quicksilver*, Trent thought, cupping a hand around the little creature as soon as he *had* a hand to hold it again. It managed to keep its grip on Trent's shoulder as he took off at a run, hearing the crocodile's jaws snap shut around the thin air where, less than a moment ago, his tail had been.

Trent's senses were more dulled now, but at least he could move at a run – he dashed down the tunnel, hearing the deep, terrifying growl of the crocodile behind him, the *thud* of its massive feet on the stone floor, and the scrape of its sides against the walls.

*How can it even be that big?!*

He knew even as he asked the question that it was stupid, however – giant prehistoric crocodiles were a thing, after all, and he himself was a prehistorical mammal, who had two griffins, a marsupial lion and a diprotodon on his team. He wasn't exactly in any position to be saying a giant crocodile was a thing that should not be.

*Even though it isn't!*

*“Pirrup? Pirrup?”*

Quicksilver sounded just as uneasy with the situation as Trent felt.

*How can I fight that thing, though?!*

He knew even as he thought it that he couldn't. His only option was to evade it. He had to find his way to Zina through the labyrinth of this mine – which seemed never-ending – and get them both to safety.

*I need to focus on the mated bond. It'll show me the way.*

Finally, the tunnel he was running down opened up into two, forking off from each other. Trent hesitated only a moment before choosing the left-hand path – something in his heart told him it was the right choice, and right now, Trent didn't have time to stand around debating his instincts.

*Let's hope that thing has bad eyesight,* he thought, though he knew with a sinking feeling that if the Bloodhound – no, *Bloodcrocodile* – had retained his tracking ability in his shifted form – and Trent couldn't see why he wouldn't – then it wouldn't matter if he was as blind as a bat. He'd still be able to find him, no matter where he went.

*Well, I don't have to evade him forever,* Trent thought, as he heard the crocodile begin tracking him down the path he'd taken. *Just for the next little while. Just long enough to get out of here.*

But the deeper he went into the mine, the more Trent grew worried that his instincts might have led him astray. The farther he went, the darker it got, and the fouler the air became. It was stale and musty, filled with dust, and Trent had to hold his arm up over his nose and mouth to breathe properly. And at every pace, he could hear a huge, relentless, bloodthirsty predator behind him – one that couldn't be reasoned with, couldn't be fought, couldn't be evaded.

“How are you doing, Quicksilver?” Trent asked, his voice muffled by his arm, but Quicksilver seemed to be doing just fine. In fact, it was darting its tongue out, then happily making smacking sounds with its lips – with a small jolt, Trent realized it was eating the tiny particles of rock out of the air like a frog catching insects. “Well, I'm glad you're relaxed enough to have a little snack!”

“*Pirrp?*” Quicksilver said, looking at him inquisitively, and Trent shook his head.

“No, I’m not angry or anything – we’re just in a tight spot right now.”

Just as he spoke, Trent found himself suddenly standing at the mouth of a large cavern – much larger than the one Zina and he had found when they’d first been exploring. It didn’t look like it had been excavated – large columns of rock stood from floor to ceiling in what looked like natural formations, and the ceiling was uneven and jagged. It had probably been a natural cave that the miners had stumbled upon during their digging, Trent thought, as he stepped out into it – but more to the point, he thought, as he moved between the giant stone columns, where the hell was the exit?!

He couldn’t go back the way he’d come – there was a giant prehistoric crocodile down there, which Trent could hear coming closer and closer by the second. But this room was a confusing maze in itself, impossible to walk in a straight line through, and disturbingly easy to lose his way in.

*And there doesn’t seem to be another way out...*

Trent called his kangaroo forward as far as he dared, feeling its panic pressing up against his mind, but needing its heightened senses to feel if there were any slight gusts of wind coming from any other direction.

But there was nothing. The only way out was the way he’d come in, and right now, that simply wasn’t an option. Not least because the crocodile had finally caught up with him, and its massive snout – filled with massive teeth – was emerging from the darkness of the tunnel, its beady eyes swinging this way and that before they locked onto Trent.

*Shit.*

He moved back behind a thick pillar of rock, but he knew the thing had seen him. He’d just have to play an extended game of keep away – with himself as the thing he had to keep away – until he could work his way around the room and back out into the tunnels. And then, he guessed, he’d have to start all over again in his search for Zina.

*All right. Seems simple enough.*

In fact it didn't, but Trent didn't see the point in defeatist talk right now.

He could hear the low growl the Bloodcrocodile made echoing off the walls of the cave, making it seem as if the beast was everywhere all at once. Trent edged his way around the column, ducking his head out to scan his immediate vicinity before breaking cover and moving around the perimeter of the cave, trying to keep at least a few stone columns between him and the Bloodcrocodile at all times.

The Bloodcrocodile, however, seemed to be at the limits of its patience, and it definitely had other ideas. Its massive head swung toward Trent, and then it *charged*, heedless of whatever was in its way. One of the smaller, narrower columns of rock that stood between them was smashed apart by the force of the crocodile's bulk as it charged across the room.

“Shit!”

Trent knew there was nothing else he could do in this situation but *run*.

He threw himself forward, eyes trained on the dark shape of the tunnel's entrance. But clearly, the Bloodcrocodile had anticipated him, and it changed course slightly, putting itself between Trent and the exit, and letting out another long, low growl as it stalked slowly forward.

Trent backed away, swallowing. The Bloodcrocodile opened its mouth, showing each and every one of its pointed teeth – but Trent knew that if it got him, it wouldn't be the wounds caused by the teeth that would kill him – it'd be the crushing power of the monster's jaws that would squash the life out of him.

*And it'd only take him snaring my foot or tripping me with his tail for him to get me.*

Trent's eyes darted around as he looked for a way around the Bloodcrocodile. But the beast, for all its size, was shockingly nimble, and every time he made a dash for it, he found the crocodile was there, bursting out from behind a thick



wall of stone, or simply smashing right through it if it was small enough.

*“Pirrup! Prrup. Pirrrupp!”*

Quicksilver was making small, urgent noises as it danced around on Trent’s shoulders, scampering back and forth from right to left.

Trent hoped the poor little thing wasn’t too scared – he hoped it just thought this was some kind of elaborate game of peek-a-boo with the world’s grumpiest reptile.

*But I have to get out of here, and soon,* Trent thought, glancing around. He could hear the thud of the Bloodcrocodile’s tread, even if he couldn’t *see* it for the moment – wherever it was, it was close, and getting closer.

*This isn’t working. I need to think.*

Trent knew that he’d managed to goad the Bloodcrocodile into charging him in a rage once before – he’d been in human form then, but by the looks of things, his temperament didn’t really change once he was a huge crocodile. If anything, it seemed to have gotten *worse*.

*I need to find some way of trapping it,* Trent thought, glancing around. *I can’t fight it myself. But if I can incapacitate it...*

As he looked around, he spied two thick columns of rock, with only a narrow gap between them. He knew that the columns hadn’t really proved much of an obstacle to the Bloodcrocodile in the past – but that had been only the small, fragile columns, right?! These ones were thick and sturdy, and didn’t seem like they’d break even under the strength of such a heavy, powerful beast.

*Whatever the case, I can’t waste any more time on it,* Trent thought, as, hoping the Bloodcrocodile wouldn’t pop its head out at him anywhere between him and the columns, he took off at a run, skidding to a halt right in front of them. He couldn’t see the Bloodcrocodile yet, either – but when he called out “Hey! *Hey!* I’m over here, idiot!” the beast appeared from where it had been lurking, eyes beady, teeth glinting.

Trent swallowed. *Well, here goes.*

Reaching down, he picked up a few rocks and stones from the floor.

“Here you go,” he murmured to Quicksilver, passing one up to it to chew on. “Have a little snack.”

His eyes never left the Bloodcrocodile, but he could hear Quicksilver chomping away happily on the rock. Maybe it’d be enough to distract it if this went badly.

“Hey!” Trent called again, lifting his arm and then hurling one of the rocks he held right at the Bloodcrocodile’s face. It hit him square between the eyes, but Trent had no illusions he had even *felt* it. He wasn’t aiming to hurt the creature, though – just enrage it. He hurled another rock, and this time actually managed to hit the Bloodcrocodile right in the eye. It shook its massive head and glowered at him, and then, very clearly, lined itself up for a charge.

*Okay. Well, if this doesn’t work it’s lights out, I guess,* Trent thought – and then, the crocodile charged.

Trent knew he had to time this just right – one second too early and the Bloodcrocodile would pull up in its charge, and one second too late and he’d be mincemeat. At least he knew Quicksilver would be okay – it was too valuable to Hargreaves for the Bloodcrocodile to do anything to harm it. The whole *point* of this was taking the baby creatures back safely to the Hargreaves labs.

The Bloodcrocodile came on, eyes seeming to glow with rage as it pounded its way across the chamber, the sound of its feet filling the air.

Trent sucked in a breath as it grew closer, and then closer still, its jaws opening, its warm, fetid breath blasting against his face –

*Now!*

At the last possible second, Trent leapt back, throwing himself between the two sturdy columns he’d been standing in front of. The Bloodcrocodile didn’t pull back – it kept coming, hurling itself into the narrow gap, its jaws and head passing

between them easily, still flying at Trent where he stood with his back pressed against the wall – and then it stopped.

Trent stared at it as it snapped its jaws in a fit of pure fury, inches from his face, globs of saliva spattering against his chest and neck. Up close, its teeth looked even *bigger* somehow – but they weren't getting any closer. The Bloodcrocodile was trapped, wedged between the two massive columns of rock, its shoulders and front legs too wide to pass through the gap. But nor could it back out, since its charge had carried it with such force into the stone columns that it was now trapped between them, and it was left thrashing and roaring in an impotent fury.

*But not for much longer,* Trent realized, with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. As the Bloodcrocodile thrashed in rage, its tail waving furiously and smashing apart everything it touched, Trent could see a small but distinct crack beginning to form at the base of one of the columns – it was going to break any second now.

*I have to get out of here while it's still trapped!*

As he tried to edge away, however, the Bloodcrocodile snapped its massive jaws at him, still clearly trying to get at him the moment he moved – it might have been trapped, but it was still as deadly as ever.

*And that pillar won't hold out for much longer...*

*"Prrrup! Piirrrrup!!"*

Quicksilver, perched on his shoulder, seemed supremely unconcerned by the whole situation. Trent turned his head toward it, before reaching up to try to grab at it, but Quicksilver evaded his grasp.

"Quicksilver, now's not the time – I have to get you out of here before that pillar collapses!"

This time, at least, he managed to grab hold of the tiny basilisk, holding it firmly in his hands as he started to edge away.

*The Bloodcrocodile will be on the loose again any moment now, and I have to get out of here...*

*“Pirrup?”*

Quicksilver seemed to be asking him a question – and then Trent felt the tiny claws on all six of its legs prickling against the skin of his palms. When he looked down, he saw that Quicksilver had turned, and was facing away from him, staring at the Bloodcrocodile –

– And suddenly, there was silence.

Trent blinked.

The Bloodcrocodile was still there, still wedged between the slowly cracking columns. But it wasn't moving anymore, its jaws frozen half-open, its tail hovering mid-thrash. Its eyes still stared madly into his face, but there was something different about them...

*No. There's something different about all of it,* Trent realized, as he stared at the giant reptile, which had been writhing madly, but was now as still as – as –

*As still as a statue,* Trent realized with a jolt. *A statue carved out of stone...*

Trent stared down at Quicksilver, still sitting calmly in his palm.

*Quicksilver is a basilisk. A creature that can turn anything to stone with just a glance,* he thought, his heart thudding in his chest. Quicksilver looked up at him, blinking its huge, silvery eyes.

*“Pirrup? Pirrp prup?”*

It seemed to be looking for confirmation that it had done the right thing, and Trent couldn't help but reach out, rubbing Quicksilver under the chin, eliciting a purring sound from the little basilisk.

“You really saved my arse that time,” he said, as relief flooded through him. “But... be careful with that power of yours, okay? It's only to be used in real emergencies, and against Bloodcrocodiles who can't mind their manners, all right?”

*“Prrp. Pirrup pirrup!”*

Trent *hoped* that meant Quicksilver understood what he'd said, as he began edging away from the Bloodcrocodile's frozen jaws.

*That really was a close one...*

Looking around, Trent began to head toward the tunnel he'd come in by to start over again with his search for Zina. Evidently, his instincts had somehow gotten muddled, and had led him down the wrong path. But just as he began making his way over to it, he stopped as he realized he could feel a strong, fresh – well, comparatively fresh – breeze blowing on his face.

*Huh?*

Turning, he was surprised to see a large hole in the wall, behind the now-stone Bloodcrocodile.

*Well, that definitely wasn't there before...*

The Bloodcrocodile must have broken down the wall with the wild thrashing of its tail, Trent realized. The miners had clearly dug a tunnel that passed by this cavern without having actually linked them up, but the wall between them had been thin enough to have been smashed open by the Bloodcrocodile violently thrashing around as it had tried to free itself.

Walking over to the new opening, Trent stuck his head through the hole – and was immediately overpowered by the feeling of his mate, somewhere nearby.

*She is here*, his kangaroo insisted, suddenly back, and all a-twitter at the thought of Zina being nearby. *We have found her! We just have to follow our senses!*

Stepping through the hole, Trent found himself looking down at a small set of tracks, set into the floor – like a very small railway track.

“Oh, for mining carts, I guess, to transport excavated rock out of the shaft,” he explained to Quicksilver, who cocked its head.

*“Prrup?”*

“Yeah, something like that,” Trent replied, nodding, even though he had no actual idea what Quicksilver might be trying

to convey. “For the moment, let’s follow these tracks. Perhaps they’ll lead us to Zina.”

*“Pirrp! Piruup prip!”*

Nodding, Trent put Quicksilver back on his shoulder, where it immediately perched happily.

*Hold on Zina, just a little bit longer. I promise, I’m coming for you,* Trent thought, as he set off at a jog down the mine.

## CHAPTER 19

“Come on now, Zina. This is silly. You’re just prolonging the inevitable, you know.”

Crouching, Zina made her way along the wall of the mine, the darkness around her completely enveloping.

*Thankfully the night vision goggles were enough to deflect the bullet he fired at me, but I sure could use them right around now...*

Zina knew she’d been lucky – *beyond* lucky. If she hadn’t been wearing the heavy goggles, Sumner would have fired two perfect shots right into her head. But as it was, one had been diverted into the wall, and the other had buried itself in the heavy mechanism and thick padding of the goggles, stopping it before it buried itself in her brain.

She’d taken the goggles off and tossed them aside as soon as she’d figured out what had happened – but now, she was stumbling around in the darkness, Goldie and Dusty still tucked into the front of her shirt, trying to keep at least a few steps ahead of Sumner.

*I don’t even know what he shifts into, she thought, as she felt her way along the wall. If it’s something that can see in the dark that’s probably not great. But on the other hand, if he shifts, at least he won’t be able to fire the gun...*

Zina honestly wasn’t sure what was the better option. Right now, she just had to keep going, and hope that whatever tunnel she was heading down would take her somewhere

useful. Or at the very least, not right down into the dead-end of the mine shaft.

“Zina! Zina, use your brain. Do you really think you can win?”

Regardless of all that, she could hear the frustration that was edging into Sumner’s voice. For the moment at least it seemed he was either unwilling – or unable, for some reason – to shift.

*Maybe it’s because he can’t taunt me if he’s in his shifted form?*

The thought was silly, but Zina wondered if it might be the truth. James Sumner always *had* loved the sound of his own voice.

She couldn’t ignore the fact that the air was growing staler the farther she walked, however, which seemed to indicate she wasn’t heading toward an exit – she was going down deeper into the mine, and farther away from any kind of escape.

*And Trent...*

Where had he gone? Was he grappling with the Bloodhound right now? She knew he could take care of himself and that, just like her, he was a highly trained field agent. And she’d seen him prove himself time and time again while they’d been on the run together – he’d always been able to get them both out of the sticky situations they’d found themselves in.

*But still, I have to find him. He might need me.*

Not to mention, she *had* to get Dusty and Goldie to safety. Letting them fall back into Sumner’s hands simply wasn’t an option.

*But if I want to get out of here, I’ll have to get past him first, Zina thought, glancing over her shoulder. Right now, I don’t think I’m going the right way.*

Within her, her antelope’s ears twitched, and it shook its head. It seemed cowed, depressed – it did *not* like being underground one little bit.



*There's nothing ahead of us but more rock, it told her mournfully. No fresh air, no open space. We must turn around.*

Grimly, Zina knew she had no choice. If it had been just her, she simply would have made a charge at Sumner – throw everything into a last-ditch effort, and trust to her instincts. But with Dusty and Goldie to protect, she didn't dare take the risk.

*But I have to get past him somehow. I have no other choice.*

There had to be a way. Zina simply refused to believe she wouldn't be able to find a way out of this. She hadn't come this far, only to let Dusty and Goldie fall back into Hargreaves's hands now.

Crouching down, Zina called her antelope as far forward into her senses as she dared. It was still twitchy and panicky, and she knew if she let it take her over, the chances were it would simply tear off on its own, searching for the surface, doing whatever it could in its panicked state to get back to wide open spaces and fresh air. But she also needed its sensitive nose and heightened instincts, its swift reaction times and ability to move faster than the wind.

*I'll get Dusty and Goldie out of here, and then I'll find Trent and Quicksilver. And together, we are all getting out of here.*

All she had to do was find a fork in the tunnel; all she had to do was follow her senses.

“Honestly, Zina, I'm starting to get a little bit frustrated here,” Sumner said, as Zina crept forward. His voice echoed eerily around the mine, sounding both very close and very far away at once. “Do you *really* think you can make it out of here? Of course, I *originally* planned to just blow up the exits with you down here, until my colleague the Bloodhound told me you'd brought those creatures *with* you, so I had to come down here myself to get them. Which isn't something I appreciate, you know. But I think it'll be worth it. For me, anyway.”

Gritting her teeth, Zina ignored him. She groped along the wall, letting her antelope's sensitive nose tell her which way to go. She had one source of comfort, and that was that if Sumner *knew* where she was, he'd simply come to her and put a bullet in her brain. He must have lost her while he'd been pursuing her through the maze of tunnels that made up this mine.

*So hopefully, I can sneak out past him again, and retrace my steps... or find another way out...*

“In any case, do you really think I came here unprepared?” Sumner asked, his voice ringing. “Of course I didn't – I've rigged up explosives all over these tunnels, and I'm the only one who knows where they are. I could set them off at any time. I could cut off your escape route at a moment's notice – just like... *that*.”

Zina gasped as she heard the same *beep beep beep* that had sounded in the moments before the ceiling had caved in, when she and Trent had gotten separated.

*It's coming from behind us!* her antelope just had time to cry out, and Zina threw herself forward as the charges went off, rolling herself in a ball around Dusty and Goldie, as small rocks and stones pelted off her back.

*Thank goodness I'd just left that area,* Zina thought, as she uncurled slightly, glancing back over her shoulder. She couldn't see anything at all, of course, but she could sense the churning air and smell the dust and rock that had been stirred up as a section of the ceiling had caved in. *What the hell?!*

Maybe Sumner was getting frustrated – it didn't make sense otherwise for him to be randomly blowing stuff up.

She'd always known he had an explosive temper, however – no pun intended.

Lifting her hand, she checked on Dusty and Goldie, nestled in her shirt. They *piruped* and *cheeped* softly as she patted her hand over them comfortingly.

*I'm sorry, guys – just a little while longer. You can hold out while I get us out of here, right?*

At least it seemed like Sumner's explosive charges were small ones – they weren't intended to cause a huge explosion or bring the whole mine down on her head. They were just meant to box her in, give her fewer places to go.

He wanted to corner her – not kill her. Not yet, at any rate.

*I just have to keep one step ahead of him... wherever he is.*

Creeping along the tunnel, Zina paused as her hand brushed over something smooth and cold in the middle of the floor – something hard and metallic, and completely immovable. A moment later and she realized it was a track, set into the stone.

*A small track for mining carts*, she thought, as she moved her fingers up and down, feeling how it extended beyond where she could reach. She'd been sticking closely to the walls before now, so she hadn't noticed the track down the center of the shaft.

*I wonder if it still works, and where the carts are*, she thought as she continued to feel her way along it, moving while still folded into a crouch. She didn't have to wonder for long, though – in the next moment, her head had bonked against something hard and boxy, sitting on the tracks.

*Ah – well, this feels kind of cart-like*, she thought, as she moved her hands over it. It was rough-hewn, made from wood, and clearly old. But it moved when she pushed it, though the wheels squeaked horrendously. Zina held her breath, waiting, wondering if Sumner had heard the squealing sound and if he could use it to find her.

But there was no sound, no evidence he was coming after her.

“Okay, little guys, I have an idea,” Zina breathed, as, slowly, she stood up. Dusty and Goldie shifted a little inside her shirt as she reached inside it. “You guys are going to have to get out of there for a little bit.”

Neither of the baby dragons protested as she lifted them gently out of her shirt, reaching down carefully to place them at the bottom of the mining cart. The sides were pretty high –

Zina had to bend almost all the way over to put Dusty and Goldie on the floor – and she figured the wooden sides were thick enough to protect them from any bullets Sumner might have left in his gun.

“Just stay there,” she whispered to them, hoping they understood. In the darkness, she could see their big yellow eyes gazing up at her, blinking as she lifted her finger to her lips. “And stay *quiet*.”

Standing up straight again, Zina began to *push*.

After some initial squeaky resistance, the cart came to life surprisingly swiftly, moving on its four wheels over the track. Zina sped up, pushing it faster, making sure to hold on tight to the lip of the cart – the last thing she needed was it speeding off without her, taking Dusty and Goldie with it.

*I need your speed and strength*, she said to her antelope as she began to speed up – and immediately, she felt the antelope’s power surge through her, propelling the cart down the track.

*Okay... now!*

As soon as she’d built up a good head of steam, Zina leapt into the cart, springing up easily over its side, the way a normal human never could have managed. But her antelope was with her, lending her its strength, and she made the leap easily.

As the cart sped down the track, she saw a dark, shadowy figure appear from one of the forking tunnels, clearly drawn by the sound of the cart’s wheels.

*Sumner*, Zina thought – she ducked down as they passed him, but she still managed to catch sight of his enraged face as they whizzed by, before he raised the gun again.

Zina covered Dusty and Goldie with her body as she heard the gun firing, but the bullets had no hope of penetrating the thick, sturdy wood of the cart.

*If I can get enough distance between us, then I can start looking for a way out*, Zina thought. She thought the air might

be getting fresher already – a sure sign that there had to be an exit around here.

It was likely that Sumner had brought some more goons with him as well – there'd been quite a few of them back in Adelaide, after all, and with the Bloodhound when they'd tracked them to the motel. But Zina decided she'd just have to deal with that when it happened.

*One problem at a time! Right now, I'm in a mining cart, and I have to get two baby dragons to safety, and find Trent and Quicksilver and get them out of here, too. I think that's enough on my plate for the moment! At least I'm getting a bit of distance from Sumner...*

Or so she *thought*, until another gunshot rang out, and she heard the bullet *ping!* off the side of the cart.

*How is he still in range?!* Zina thought, risking a quick peep over the lip of the cart.

*Oh, shit... he found a cart too?!*

It seemed to be true – because there was Sumner, riding in his own mining cart, speeding down the tracks toward her.

It must have been down the forked path he'd been going down, Zina thought as she crouched low in her own cart, still making sure to protect Goldie and Dusty with her body – not that the dragons seemed at all aware of their predicament. They chattered at her, *chirruping* and *cheeping* as if they were on a fairground ride, which, in their minds, they probably were.

Zina, however, was all too aware of their problems.

Sumner was gaining on them – her cart was already beginning to run out of momentum, whereas his was still going strong. *And* he had a gun, and he clearly wasn't afraid to use it. Another couple of shots rang out, and Zina curled herself even lower into the cart.

“Zina! Stop being so ridiculous! I've already won!”

*Not yet you haven't*, Zina thought grimly, as, reaching down into the corner of her cart, she picked up a couple of

good-sized rocks that had collected there. Turning and putting her head up over the side of the cart as much as she dared, she hurled them with all her strength at Sumner's head, where it was just barely visible in the darkness of the mine.

*“Argh!”*

She must have hit him, if his outraged shout was anything to go by, but not hard enough to do much damage, since he fired the gun again in what was clearly a petulant rage a moment later.

No matter what, however, Zina knew she couldn't defeat the laws of physics, and her cart was beginning to slow. She turned her head, looking around wildly – but the only thing she could see in her future was more bad news, in the form of some collapsed rubble that was covering half the track.

In just a few moments, her cart would hit it, and come unstuck from the track – or at the very least, she wouldn't be able to go any farther.

*The only thing I can do is brace myself –*

There was a bone-crunching jolt as the cart, still going at a good speed despite having slowed down somewhat, crashed into the pile of rocks and rubble that blocked its path. Zina heard the agonized screech of metal as one of its fitted wheels tore loose from the tracks, and then the whole cart overturned, falling onto its side on the floor. Zina wrapped herself around Dusty and Goldie, clutching them close to her chest as she crawled out of the cart, choking, hacking and sputtering on the dust that had been thrown up by the collision.

*I have to run. I have to get up and run –*

*“Zina!”*

She looked up, still disoriented, wondering if she might have hit her head and started hallucinating.

*That sounded just like Trent – but... I guess it's just my wishful thinking –*

*“Zina, quickly, get up!”*

If it was a hallucination, it was a really *good* one, because now Zina could feel large, warm hands pulling her to her feet – hands she knew well, hands that left a tingling sensation on her skin everywhere they touched her...

“Trent?!”

Finally, her mind snapped back to reality. She stared, not sure she should trust her own eyes – but it really *was* Trent, standing before her, his hands on her shoulders, supporting her against him.

“How – how did you find me?” she asked, as Trent began pulling at her, urging her to movement.

“I just followed my nose – by which I mean my instincts,” Trent said, his face uncharacteristically grim. “But come on – I’ll explain later. For now, let’s get out of here –”

“Not so fast, either of you!”

Zina froze as Sumner’s voice rang out, echoing through the close space of the tunnel. *His* cart, unlike Zina’s, was coasting to a relatively sedate stop – though it only took Zina a moment to figure out why: his hand was resting on the lever of a brake built onto the side of his cart, a feature that hers hadn’t had.

*Just my luck*, she thought, inwardly groaning. Not that it would have made much difference in the end.

Zina sensed Trent stiffening by her side – and then, a moment later, he had passed Quicksilver into her arms, and put himself between her and the gun Sumner was once again raising.

“I won’t let you harm a hair on their heads,” Trent growled, and Zina’s heart thudded in her chest. She couldn’t see Sumner from around Trent’s tall, broad body, but she definitely heard him laugh.

“Oh *please*. Spare me the heroics. Do you really think you’re getting out of here? *Either* of you? Please. I could bury you both in rocks right now if I wanted to. But I’m trying to be nice – hand over the creatures, and I’ll make this quick.”

“Never,” Zina said, stepping out from behind Trent. “You’re not taking them anywhere, Sumner.”

Trent immediately tried to step in front of her again, but not before Zina caught a glimpse of Sumner’s face, his manic smile, his gleaming eyes.

*He clearly thinks he’s won, Zina thought – but then, a moment later, and maybe he has a point.*

Still, she couldn’t *quite* bring herself to believe things were finished just yet.

“Don’t you believe me or something?” Sumner asked, a chuckle still in his voice. “You think I won’t drag you back to Hargreaves to use as test subjects? Well... to be honest, that *does* sound like a lot of work. Maybe I’ll just seal off all the exits and leave you down here in this mine to rot, however long that might take.”

He laughed, and Zina, glancing around Trent’s shoulder, saw him take out a small black box from his pocket.

With a flourish, he held it up, pressing a button on its surface. Zina gasped, ducking her head as she heard the same *beep beep beep* as the explosives Sumner had rigged the mine with primed, and then the small charge exploded, bringing down part of the ceiling and sending dust clouds flying up.

*Can this guy just stop with that?!*

When the dust had settled, though, and she looked behind her, she saw that the exit she had been heading toward in her cart had now been completely sealed off – there was nothing there but a pile of rubble.

“I’m telling you now – don’t make me drag you back to Hargreaves,” Sumner said. “Just hand over the creatures, and then we can –”

Whatever Sumner said next, however, Zina didn’t hear it. Her nose was suddenly assaulted with a strange smell – a smell that made her antelope startle back in alarm, its nose twitching violently.

*It smells like... burnt metal?*



Glancing up at Trent, she realized that he too had scented it – and that, whatever it was, it definitely wasn't good.

“Gas,” Trent said, a look of realization spreading across his face. “That last explosion must've hit a pocket of gas down here –”

Zina's eyes went wide with horror. She didn't have to be a mining expert to know that this wasn't good – that *gas* tended to mean *explosions*, and not the small, controlled detonations that Sumner had been setting off.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “We have to get out of here.”

“Are you two even listening to me?” barked Sumner suddenly, rage clear in his voice. “I'm telling you now – this is your last chance!” He threw his hands up, clearly at the end of his patience. “Why am I even bothering? I'll just shoot you both now and take the animals back myself –”

“Wait!” Trent shouted, raising his hands. “Don't shoot – you'll set off the –”

But it was too late.

Sumner fired the gun – and in the next moment, Zina's ears felt like they were exploding as all the gas filling the tunnel ignited.

She curled herself protectively over Dusty, Goldie and Quicksilver, but she felt Trent's hand on her arm, tugging her along, pulling her somewhere, and then she found herself in an enclosed space, the pounding of rocks and rubble ringing overhead, but somehow, not raining down upon them.

Daring to lift her head, Zina realized that they were inside the overturned mining cart – Trent had yanked her to safety before pulling it down over all of their heads, keeping them safely inside as the tunnel above them turned into chaos.

“Zina, are you all right?” Trent asked, his voice loud in the small, pitch-black space of the cart's interior.

“Y-Yes,” she managed to stutter out, nodding, though she knew Trent couldn't see it.

“And – the kids?”

“*Cheep! Cheep cheep!*”

“*Prrup!*”

“*Biiirup!*”

“I think that’s them sounding off,” Zina said shakily, as the pounding of rocks and rubble above slowed to a trickle, before finally dying off altogether. She waited with bated breath for the thundering of the tunnel collapsing completely to start up, but after a few moments, nothing happened, and she ran her tongue over her lips, daring to hope it might be over.

“I guess I should see if I can get us out of here now,” Trent said, his voice uncharacteristically tense. “Hopefully we haven’t been buried too much...”

He had a point, Zina had to admit. Just because they were uninjured, protected by the sturdy cart, it didn’t mean they were out of danger.

*And what if Sumner is still up there? What if he didn’t die in the explosion?*

Zina grimaced.

*One problem at a time, remember?!*

She heard Trent grunting as, she assumed, he tried to lift the cart from over them, straining against the heaviness of the cart itself, and however much rubble it was buried beneath.

At first, it didn’t move at all – but then, as Trent heaved and strained, she felt it start to shift.

“Let me help,” she said, pressing her shoulders up against the floor of the upside-down cart, pushing up with all her strength. And again, she felt the cart move. Just the tiniest bit – but it *did* move.

*Just a bit more... come on!*

Sweat rolled down her forehead as together, they strained to lift the cart – and then, finally, all at once, it lifted, and Zina heard large rocks and rubble falling away, letting them free.

They stood gasping in the dusty air of the tunnel, looking around them. There was no sign of Sumner – where he'd been standing there was nothing but a towering pile of rubble. Zina shuddered – though she couldn't exactly say she was *sorry* that a man like Sumner was no longer of this earth.

“Well... I guess that kind of solves one problem for us, while creating quite a few others,” Trent said, looking around. “Like how exactly we get out of here.”

“Couldn't have put it better myself,” Zina muttered, shaking her head. “I guess... I guess the only thing we can really do is dig our way out. Or try to. Or hope that Quicksilver here puts on a growth spurt and eats our way out.”

Trent let out a low laugh. “I was thinking that before myself. Oh, look – it's started already, though.”

Despite the direness of their predicament, Zina couldn't help but smile when she looked down and saw Quicksilver munching happily away on some of the rocks that had collapsed from the ceiling.

“Maybe they're ultra-rare, gourmet rocks,” she said, unable to hold back a small laugh. “I guess it's not often you get to chow down on rocks from the bottom of a desert mine shaft.”

“You can say that again,” Trent said, laughing along with her. Then he looked around, head whipping from side to side. “Uh, where've Dusty and Goldie gone?”

Zina, eyes wide, suddenly realized the baby dragons weren't sitting at her feet anymore. She turned her head from right to left frantically, searching for them. *Where could they have gone? They can't possibly have run off – not now – not when we're so close –*

“*Cheep! Cheep cheep!*”

Relief surged through Zina as she heard Dusty and Goldie from not far off. She followed the sounds of their cheeping and chirping to where she finally found them, vague silhouettes in the darkness, seeming *very* excited about something.

“What’s up, guys?” she asked, crouching down and squinting – at least until Trent appeared by her side, a pencil flashlight in his hands, shining its thin light at where Dusty and Goldie were clearly *incredibly* interested in –

“Whoa,” Trent muttered, as the beam from his flashlight caught something shiny in the ruined wall of the tunnel. “Is that...?”

“I think so,” breathed Zina.

And it was – there was nothing else on earth that looked like that.

It was a *massive* seam of opal – pale and fiery, and twinkling fiercely in the light.

“*Cheep! Brrrrp! Brrup!*”

“Well, stone the crows,” Trent murmured. “No wonder Dusty and Goldie are so excited.”

“Best addition to their hoard ever,” Zina had to agree.

“Does this mean I can have my two-dollar coins back?” Trent asked, as Dusty and Goldie scrabbled at the opal, snapping gently at each other as they clearly squabbled over who had the better claim to the beautiful prize.

“I guess you’ll have to ask them,” Zina said, laughing a little. “But right now... well, how do you suppose we can get out of here?”

“Hmm,” said Trent, looking around. “I suppose we could always –”

He didn’t get the chance to explain what his plan might be. Zina held up a hand, cocking her head to listen, and he fell silent.

“Do you hear that?” Zina asked in a whisper, not sure if she should dare to hope she was right. She could only just hear it herself: the soft, but *just* perceptible buzzing sound of a hand-held mechanical excavator, like the one Trent had brought down into the mine with them.

After a moment, Trent nodded. “I do.”

“Do you think it’s Euan and Hector, or some of Sumner’s goons?” Zina asked, hearing the tension in her own voice.

“I guess we can only wait and see,” Trent said grimly.

In the end, they didn’t have to wait long – after just a few minutes, rocks and small stones began to fall away from the wall of rubble that cut them off from the rest of the mine shaft, until the few falling rocks became a small landslide. Zina picked up Dusty and Goldie – ignoring their outraged protests at being moved away from the opal they’d found – and moved away to a safe distance, just as Trent did the same with Quicksilver. Zina stared at the newly created hole in the rubble, watching as it got bigger and bigger, waiting to see who’d emerge from the other side...

“You two in there? Hello?”

Zina let out a long, slow breath, relief flooding through her.

*Hector:*

“Yeah – we’re in here, Hec,” Trent called back, and Zina could hear how relieved he too was in his voice. “And it’s not just the two of us. We had some stowaways, as it turns out.”

“Huh?” Hector sounded confused, but then his head and shoulders appeared through the hole he’d dug, his eyes sweeping over them before landing on Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver. “Oh – shit!”

“It probably turned out for the best, to be honest,” Trent laughed, as he rubbed Quicksilver under its chin, eliciting a loud purr. “This little one might have saved my bacon. Well, and left a geological mystery behind for some future archaeologist to discover.”

Zina turned to him, raising an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Well... let’s just say it learned how to use its basilisk powers at the best possible moment it could,” Trent said with a smile, as Quicksilver rolled over to get its belly rubbed, its six tiny legs all wiggling in joy as Trent complied.

Zina stared at him a moment, her mind whizzing. Then, she realized what he meant. “The Bloodhound?”

“Yeah – though he turned out to be more of a Bloodcrocodile. Anyway, whatever the case, he’s very much a statue of a Bloodcrocodile now, thanks to Quicksilver.”

“O-Oh,” Zina murmured. She gazed down at where Quicksilver was wriggling and purring as Trent scratched its belly – it seemed impossible that such an adorable little creature could have such a terrifying power.

*I guess we’ll just have to raise it to make sure it understands just how powerful it is!*

“Huh, lucky for you guys we got here when we did,” Hector said, interrupting her thoughts as he climbed through the hole he’d made, now big enough for him to clamber through, and followed a moment later by Euan. “What was your plan for getting out of here, just out of interest’s sake?”

“We didn’t have one,” Trent said evenly. “Things kind of... well, they got complicated. You can read the report – right now, I think we just need to get out of here. And have a shower. I have shards of rock in my underpants, pretty sure.”

“Okay, well, thanks for informing us of that, mate,” Hector muttered.

“How did you know where to find us?” Zina asked, and Hector grimaced.

“I spotted some goons – who I assumed were Hargreaves’s goons – coming out of a hidden exit *way* over on the other side of the mine,” he said. “That was when I realized this place covered a much bigger area than any of us realized – *and* that you guys might be in need of some help. So I flew down and gave them a bit of biff, just to attract enough attention to draw their friends out. It was a bit like shooting fish in a barrel after that – I almost felt bad about it.”

“You did not,” Euan retorted. “You were having a great time, swooping down on them from above and scaring the living daylights out of them before knocking them unconscious.”

“All right, yeah, that *was* fun,” Hector said with a grin. “After that, it was a case of ‘follow the sound of the explosions.’ That usually leads us to where Trent is.”

“Well, I suppose I shouldn’t argue with that, in case I seem ungrateful for the rescue,” Trent shot back. Pausing, he glanced over his shoulder – and after a moment, Zina realized he was looking at the opal seam Dusty and Goldie had found. “Just before we do actually get out of here, can I ask you to use the excavator to do me a favor? Or rather, do Dusty and Goldie a favor?”

“Uh, sure,” Hector said. “But what –” He fell silent, his eyes growing wide as he followed Trent’s gaze to the glittering opal. “Holy shit. That’s enough opal to set you up for life, Trent.”

“Maybe so, but it belongs to Dusty and Goldie,” Trent said firmly. “They found it, and they’re dragons. They need their hoard.”

“True enough,” Hector agreed, as he headed back to the hole to get the excavator. “We’ll have it out in a jiffy. No worries.”

As Hector returned with the excavator and he and Euan started debating the best angle to start digging out the seam of opal, Zina felt herself beginning to relax for the first time in a long, *long* time. She wasn’t sure whether everything was going to be okay – they still had *a lot* to deal with, and things were far from over yet.

But somehow, as she looked down at Dusty and Goldie in her arms, and then at Quicksilver in Trent’s, she felt a thawing in her chest – as if the cold tension that had gripped it was at last beginning to melt away.

Not least, she supposed, because she could feel the aura of Trent’s body heat by her side, and she had to stop herself from snuggling into it.

*There’ll be plenty of time for that later, when we’re not at the bottom of a mine shaft,* Zina told herself as she looked up

at Trent's face, her heart speeding up in her chest as she took in his concerned, loving expression.

"You okay?" he asked softly, as Hector started up the excavator.

Zina wasn't sure she could get out the words – all she wanted to do right now was go to sleep for about a thousand years. But it was okay – she knew Trent would understand the look in her eyes.

*I'm fine*, she told him silently, as he gazed down at her, his hand coming to rest on her side. *With you here, everything's going to be completely fine.*

"Oh – hey!"

Zina was jerked out of her near-reverie, staring into Trent's eyes, by the sound of Hector's voice from behind them.

Turning, she saw that he and Euan had shut off the excavator, and were staring at the wall of the cave with great intensity.

*Is it the opal?* she wondered, as she and Trent came over to join them where they stood. *Is it bigger – or smaller – than they thought?*

But as she leaned down, squinting in the low light of the flashlights, Zina realized Hector hadn't been shouting about the opal at all.

They'd managed to dig the seam free, as far as she could tell – at least, a hunk of rock with a glittering, pearlescent line of opal running through it was lying on the ground at their feet, with Goldie and Dusty joyously scampering about over it, snapping at each other a little in what Zina *hoped* was a good-natured way.

But the opal clearly wasn't the only thing that they'd discovered.

"What's that?" Zina asked, crouching down, as Trent directed the beam of the flashlight into the small cave that had been revealed when Hector and Euan had dug out the opal.



“I’m not sure,” Euan said slowly, leaning down and frowning. “Maybe just a little pocket of nothing in the rock. When the opal seam fell away, it opened up suddenly.”

*There’s something inside,* Zina thought, catching her breath. And there was – something shiny and oval-shaped, glittering in the light –

“It’s an egg!” The words were out of Zina’s mouth before her brain had caught up with her eyes.

Beside her, Trent, Euan and Hector all crouched down further in unison, all peering closely into the small hollow.

“Strewth, so it is,” Hector murmured after a moment.

“Do you think – do you think it’s the egg Hargreaves were after?” Zina asked, as she gingerly reached out to touch it. They’d been searching for it for such a long time, and then it had been here all along. Buried in this abandoned mine.

“Maybe,” Trent said. “It’d be a bit of a coincidence if not – well, a bit *more* of a coincidence.”

Zina nodded wordlessly, running her fingers over the smooth surface of the egg. She was a little apprehensive about the possibility of breaking it – but then, she thought, if it was all that delicate, it probably wouldn’t have survived all this time here.

*Still, better to be safe than sorry,* she thought, as, carefully, she lifted it up from the small shelf of rock it sat on, cradling it gently in her hands.

“You take care of that egg, and I’ll handle Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver,” Trent told her, scooping up the two baby dragons in one enormous hand – though they immediately started crying at being taken away from the newest addition to their hoard. “All right, all right,” Trent jokingly grumbled, as, putting Quicksilver up on one broad shoulder, he picked up the hunk of opal in his now free hand.

Zina stared down at the egg, resting in her palms, still feeling a little dazed. *We found it. It’ll be safe now – Hargreaves won’t get their hands on it after all.*

“We ready to go then?” Hector asked, as he slung the excavator over his shoulder. “We should get out of here while the going’s good.”

And Zina found she couldn’t agree more.

## EPILOGUE

Trent stood to attention in front of Robb's desk, Zina at his side.

He could sense the tension radiating off her as Robb, his head bent and not looking at either of them, read over the official report they had submitted about everything that had happened over the past couple of weeks: Zina's decision to steal the eggs and escape from Hargreaves, her decision to contact Trent, why Trent had chosen to go on the run with her... and then everything that had happened afterwards, from the pursuit across the desert to the fight in the abandoned mineshaft, to the discovery of the egg that Hargreaves had spent so much money and time trying to find.

Trent strained his eyes in their sockets, trying to get a glimpse of Zina's expression and maybe give her a quick wink to reassure her that everything was going to be okay... but for one thing, Zina was a consummate professional and she didn't so much as glance his way, and for another, Trent wasn't completely sure that everything *was* going to be okay.

Robb had stuck his neck out *a lot* for them already – sending Hector, Rhys and Euan to track them down instead of just reporting Trent missing right away, and then allowing Trent and Zina the opportunity of giving their side of the story to him in writing, rather than just throwing them into a disciplinary hearing... or worse.

Trent knew Robb's word held a lot of sway, but he wasn't omnipotent. And he'd have to be convinced it was worth his while to defend them.

*And unfortunately, I don't really know what exactly goes on in the mind of Robb...*

Finally, after what seemed like a deeply uncomfortable eternity, Robb raised his head from the final page of Trent and Zina's report, sighing and sitting back in his chair. He looked away, out at the sunlight glittering over the harbor.

"And you swear every word of this report is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" he asked eventually, not turning to look at them.

"Yes, sir," Trent said instantly. "That's all of it – I promise. Everything just as it happened."

Robb nodded, before finally turning to look at them. "Well, your separately written reports *do* tally – but it has to be said that you certainly had enough time to come up with a good story to tell and make sure you had all the details straight. Isn't that right?"

"That's true sir, but it's not what happened," Zina said firmly. "I swear on my life everything in that report is the complete truth. You have to admit if I wanted to spin you a story that'd get me out of trouble, that report isn't exactly what I'd write."

"True," Robb admitted, and Trent knew Zina had a point. Whatever the reason, she'd still gone against her own agency's clear instructions when she'd stolen the eggs and made a break for it. It had been a decision made for moral reasons – but in their line of work, they were often expected to do as they were told, no matter how much they personally might have disagreed with it.

"And regardless of what you might have done, the end result was good," Robb went on, tapping his fingers against the report. "The egg was recovered. Several dangerous Hargreaves operatives were taken out of commission. And you brought back the eggs you took unharmed... well, in a manner of speaking, I suppose."

Trent nodded. "You can't get two baby dragons and a baby basilisk without breaking a few eggs."

Robb gave him a withering look, and Trent decided it'd probably be for the best if he kept his mouth shut for now.

"But the last egg – the one you found in the mine – still hasn't hatched?" Robb asked.

"No, sir." Zina shook her head. "The others didn't hatch all at once, and Hargreaves had them for a while. Not to mention how long they must have sat around, seemingly dormant, before that. I guess they only hatch when they feel ready – I don't think there's much we can do to speed it up."

"No, it seems not," Robb agreed. "But that's not important, I suppose. The important thing is they're no longer in Hargreaves's hands. And for that, both of you are to be commended."

Trent blinked, sucking in a quick breath and hoping he was understanding Robb correctly. "Commended, sir?"

"Don't get any ideas," Robb said sternly. "You're not about to get a medal for anything you did – it'd be for the best if this stayed as low-key as possible. I'll still have to explain you running off on your own and try to put a positive spin on it. But if I can get my bosses to focus on the ends, rather than the means, I think I can keep you out of any *major* trouble. But you're walking a pretty fine line, both of you."

"Yes, sir," both Trent and Zina said at the same time.

Robb grimaced, shaking his head. "And next time, Trent – try *telling* me things. I gave you every chance. Do you really think I'm such an ogre?"

"Not an *ogre*, sir," Trent said, shaking his head. "More like..."

But try as he might, he couldn't really come up with some kind of fantasy creature that Robb might find it flattering to be compared to. Thankfully, Robb didn't actually seem to care about whatever he might've been about to say. He turned his eyes to Zina.

"Now, Ms. Alden. It seems you're an accomplished hacker, with extensive experience in digital espionage, and you spent several months working undercover at Hargreaves

without being detected – your cover was only blown because you chose to blow it yourself.”

Zina nodded. “That’s right.”

“Hm. It’s a pity your agency seems to have washed its hands of you – whatever your skills might be and whatever reasons you had, I’m not sure they’re going to offer you your job back at this stage.”

Beside him, Zina shook her head. “I doubt it.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Robb’s mouth. “Well. That’s too bad for them, I suppose. A hacker of your abilities and experience – and with insider knowledge of Hargreaves – doesn’t exactly come along every day. So I’m sure you can understand why our agency might be keen to snap you up.”

Surprise rippled through Trent, and he glanced at Zina to see her looking just as astonished as he felt, if not even more so. She blinked, her eyes wide, her mouth popping open slightly.

“S-Sir?”

“I think it’s a good solution,” Robb said firmly. “You can work for us, as a show of good faith. If I can tell my bosses that you’re willing to come over to our side, it’ll make the process of smoothing this whole thing over a lot easier, I can tell you that. Not that I’m trying to make that sound like a threat – just laying all my cards out on the table. And to be honest, I *would* like someone with your expertise around here. I’ve read over the results you can get even in difficult circumstances.” He tapped his finger on the reports they’d given him. “Even if I can’t say I’m *happy* about how this whole thing went down, I *am* pleased with the outcome. So what do you say, Ms. Alden? Or do you need some time to think it over?”

Zina blinked a few more times, before shaking her head. “No, I don’t – I can tell you now that I accept. Hacking is what I’m good at – it’s what I *enjoy*. If I could put my skills to use against Hargreaves, then I’m happy to do it.”

“Excellent.” Robb nodded his head, seeming satisfied. “Well, if you two don’t mind, I have a few probably unpleasant phone calls to make. But you have my word I’m behind you – I’ve got your backs. I won’t say everything’ll go completely smoothly – you might still have a few questions to answer – but you’re going to be okay. If that’s all, then you can both go.”

“Thank you, sir,” Trent and Zina both said in chorus, before they both turned to go.

Trent let his shoulders sag the moment Robb’s office door was closed behind him. He hadn’t realized just how tense he’d been until now, when he could finally relax a little. The cold feeling in his stomach that he’d been carrying around for the last few days as he’d been writing his report and then sweating over the interview with Robb had finally begun to dissipate.

“Well,” he said, looking at Zina. “I think that went about as well as could be expected.”

“Better,” Zina said, nodding. “I can’t tell you *what* exactly I was thinking would happen, but it wasn’t that I’d be walking out with my head not bitten completely off *and* a job offer.”

“Yeah – you’re right about that,” Trent admitted. “Robb’s a good guy – but like he said, I guess we still might have a bit of a rocky road ahead. This is more than I would have dared to hope for, though.”

There was a warm surge in his heart as Zina flashed him a smile. “You can say that again. Believe me, I was *not* looking forward to having to go on the lam again if they’d decided they were going to send me back home, or lock me up here. I don’t know if I can stomach any more pie floaters.”

“Hey, I share my country’s culture with you, and what do I get in return?” Trent said, throwing his hands up as together they began walking through the rows of desks. “Nothing but lip! Ingratitude! Slander of one of the greatest foods ever known to humanity! Do you know how rare it is to find a meal that encompasses *every* food group in one?”

“Yeah, as long as the food groups are mystery meat, grease, and squashed peas,” Zina shot back, grinning at him.

“You forgot pie crust,” Trent informed her loftily. “How can you criticize if you’re going to forget one of the most important parts?”

“Oh sure, my bad,” Zina said, laughing and holding up her hands in mock surrender. “How could I have forgotten that?”

Trent laughed as they came into the meeting room, where Hector, Rhys, Euan and Callan were waiting for them. Their heads turned, expressions apprehensive as Trent and Zina came into the room, but they relaxed as soon as they saw their faces – clearly, the smiles weren’t the expressions of people who’d just been told they’d crashed and burned their entire careers, if not lives.

“So, I take it that went okay?” Hector asked after a minute. “Or are you smiling because you’re trying to break it to us gently that we’re gonna have to smuggle you out of the country or something?”

“No, no, everything went fine,” Trent said, shaking his head. “Robb’s a good one – but you knew that. He’s going to help us out – and he offered Zina a job.”

“Can’t say fairer than that,” Rhys said, nodding. “That worked out well. Maybe I should consider running off without a phone call. Maybe I’d get a promotion out of it.”

“Don’t count on it,” Hector told him. “Not sure I’d bother dragging *your* sorry arse back here, either.”

“Now, now, don’t fight,” Callan said mildly – he’d known both brothers since they were young, and he’d always been the peacemaker of the group anyway, Trent thought with a smile. “And especially not in front of the kids. Brooke will be bringing Dusty, Goldie and Quicksilver back from their checkup any moment now, along with the unhatched egg.”

“Yes, I certainly will be,” Brooke said from behind them, as she appeared in the doorway. Goldie and Dusty were draped over her shoulders, while Quicksilver had wrapped itself around one of her forearms. In her hands, she held the



remaining egg. “I have good news. They all seem in perfect health, from what I can tell,” she said, as she crossed to the meeting room table, placing the egg down and letting Goldie and Dusty scurry down from her shoulders. They immediately started scampering around the table’s surface, sniffing curiously.

*Probably looking for something to add to their hoards,* Trent thought, swallowing a smile. He wondered if they might be impressed with whiteboard markers – which were definitely the most coveted items in the room, judging by the rate at which they went missing.

“I checked them over as much as I could,” Brooke said, sitting down. “Obviously we still have a lot to learn about them, but they seem energetic, their reactions were quick, and all their vitals seem totally fine... well, I *think* they are, anyway. Hard to tell, on a dragon and a basilisk. But given everything else, I’m happy to give them a clean bill of health.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Zina murmured, as Dusty and Goldie swarmed over the table to her, *cheep!*ing and *brrp!*ing ecstatically.

“They certainly do seem happy to see you,” Brooke said with amusement in her voice, as finally Quicksilver detached itself from her arms and scurried on its tiny legs across the table to Trent. “About as happy as that little one is to see you, too!”

Trent felt a surge of affection filling him as Quicksilver, blinking its enormous, silvery eyes, looked up at him.

*“Birrup? Biirp?”*

“You said it, Quicksilver,” Trent said, laughing, as the baby basilisk scurried up his arm to sit on his shoulder, rubbing against the side of his face like an especially affectionate cat, and purring just like one too. “Did you miss me?”

“I think the answer to that is obvious,” Brooke laughed. “You were the ones who they felt safe enough to hatch around, after all. It makes sense they’d see you as their parents.”

Trent looked up, eyes wide. “Their *parents*?”

“Makes sense, Trent,” Hector observed evenly. “After all, Ruby is my daughter – doesn’t matter what she hatched out of. She’s mine and Myrtle’s – and we love her just as much as we would any other children we might have. She chose us – just like these little guys have chosen you.”

Trent blinked. *But... but...*

*But isn’t that exactly what you were thinking anyway?*

It was true – he and Zina had risked everything for these eggs – and the creatures who were inside them. Even before they’d hatched, he’d known he’d do anything for them, no matter what. And Zina had felt the same way. Looking over at her now, he could see the same thoughts running across her face: there was a hint of fear, sure. But mostly, there was love.

“I don’t know if I’m cut out for raising two baby dragons and a basilisk,” she murmured, as Dusty and Goldie chirruped and fluttered and play fought with each other. “But I guess... well, I guess no one’s ever *really* prepared for raising children...”

“And don’t forget, you’ll have all of us here to help you as well,” Callan pointed out. “Ruby spends a ton of time over at our place when Hector and Myrtle need a bit of a break. And Rhys is always around there, playing the doting uncle. I think he kind of enjoys it, not that he’d admit to it.”

“Hey, *obviously* I’d admit to it,” Rhys shot back hotly. “I love that little girl – she’s my niece! I’d do anything for her.”

“Do you think the other egg might hatch eventually?” Zina asked after a moment or two, during which she presumably soaked in the wonder of being a new parent – and to triplets, at that, Trent thought. It was strange how quickly he’d come to consider Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver as siblings, especially since Quicksilver wasn’t even the same species as the dragons, but, somehow, it just seemed to fit.

“I don’t know,” Brooke said. “I examined it pretty closely, but I couldn’t see any signs of it being about to hatch, and it’s impossible to tell what might come out of it when it does. I

guess we can just keep an eye on it, take as much care as we can of it here, and hope that one day it might feel ready.”

Trent nodded. “I guess so. I’m not sure why exactly Dusty hatched when he did, but afterwards, Goldie clearly felt safe enough to come out as well. And Quicksilver after that. But I guess this one just needs a little more time.”

*“Meeeh!”*

Trent’s head shot up as he heard the tell-tale call of an alicorn from out in the hall – and, sure enough, a moment later, Hector’s daughter Ruby came fluttering around the corner in a flurry of silvery wings and golden tail and mane, her tiny alicorn horn flashing.

A moment after that and Hector’s mate Myrtle came dashing around the corner, clearly struggling to keep up.

“Ruby!” Myrtle gasped as she came into the room. “Sorry – she got away from me! When Brooke called me and told me the news about Ruby possibly having some new little playmates, I came straight here. But when we got out of the lift Ruby jumped right out of my arms and flew straight off – I couldn’t stop her!”

“Don’t worry, Myrtle,” Hector laughed. “She’s getting pretty big now, and she always knows what she wants. And doesn’t have any trouble making it clear.”

Hector was right – as Trent watched, Ruby landed on the table, even though she was getting a little big for that kind of thing now, and marched straight over to where Dusty and Goldie were playing.

*“Meeeh? Meeehhh?”*

The three of them regarded each other for a long moment, necks outstretched, nostrils twitching as they tried to make out what they thought of each other – but evidently, whatever they thought, they approved.

*“Cheep! Piirrrrup!”*

Dusty was the first one to break, scampering up to Ruby and fluttering his wings as if to show them off and compare

them to Ruby's feathery ones. Goldie seemed just as keen to play too, scampering about to get a better look at Ruby's shining tail, as Ruby swished it in her face, making Goldie sneeze.

"You wanna go meet your new little friend?" Trent asked Quicksilver, who was watching it all with its enormous silvery eyes. It looked up at him.

"*Brrp? Brrrrrip?*"

"Of course it's okay," Trent said reassuringly. "I'm sure she'd love to meet you – how about you go introduce yourself and have a little play?"

Quicksilver blinked at him once or twice more, before cautiously slithering down from Trent's shoulder and making its way across the table to where Dusty, Goldie and Ruby were cavorting.

It approached cautiously at first, but once Ruby noticed it standing there, so clearly longing to overcome its shyness and play, she came trotting over, tossing her head so her mane shone, the tiny horn on her forehead twinkling.

That was apparently all the encouragement that Quicksilver needed, and soon it was slithering around with the other three, dancing about as much as its six tiny legs would allow.

"Well – seems like they all get along well," Myrtle said, laughing. "I'm so happy! Ruby has Delilah's niece Rosie as a friend, but... well, Rosie's not a shifter, and she has school. It'll be so nice for Ruby to have someone who's a bit more like her to play with, too."

"They *do* seem to get along well," Zina laughed, as Ruby fluttered her wings and rose up to the ceiling, showing off her ability to do loop-the-loops as Dusty, Goldie and Quicksilver watched in awe from below.

"And Rubes *loves* having people to show off to," Hector said with a smile. "The more people she has to admire her, the happier she is."

Trent grinned as he watched the four of them play. Soon, he imagined, Dusty and Goldie would be able to use their wings for longer than a few seconds too, and would be able to join Ruby in her air-bound play.

*God help us when that happens,* he thought, shaking his head. *They're enough of a handful now as it is.*

Ruby, apparently only the slightest bit dizzy after showing off her flying skills, landed back on the table, her hooves clicking on its surface as she trotted over to where Brooke had placed the unhatched egg.

“She seems very curious about it,” Brooke remarked, as Ruby sniffed it, her eyes bright with interest.

Ruby sniffed a little at the egg, seeming curious. She turned her head this way and that, nostrils working, as she inspected it all over, as if trying to figure out what it was, making her way around it, tapping at it lightly with one of her front hooves, clearly absolutely fascinated by it.

“What’s up, Rubes?” Hector asked, cocking his head.

*“Meeh! Meeeeh!”*

Ruby looked up at him in a way Trent would have called imploring, if Ruby had been capable of making human facial expressions. Either way, something had obviously caught her interest: she pranced a little on the table, circling the egg, sniffing at it again before looking up at her parents with huge eyes.

“You better be careful with that egg, Ruby,” Myrtle said gently, moving to pull the alicorn away from it a little. “It might be delicate. I wouldn’t want you to –”

*Crack!*

Just as Myrtle spoke, the tell-tale sound of an eggshell breaking open filled the room.

*“Meeh! Meeeeeh-eeeh!”*

Ruby bounded about excitedly, tossing her head and swishing her tail.

“Oh – I guess we found out how to make that egg hatch,” Zina murmured, moving closer to it.

“Put it close to an excited alicorn, apparently,” Myrtle laughed. “I wonder what’ll come out of this one?”

Trent was just beginning to lean over to try to get a closer look, when a thought occurred to him, and he glanced up at Hector.

“Hec, where did you say those bikies who were trying to sell Ruby’s egg found it in the first place?”

“In a cave system they were using to hide drug shipments in,” Hector said, looking at him curiously. “Why do you ask?”

“So... it was underground, then,” Trent said. “Just like where we found this egg – in an underground cave system.”

He’d said it only quietly, but immediately Trent could feel every eye in the room turn toward him.

“You mean, you think this might be another –” Myrtle began to say, until, at that very moment, the egg they’d been watching split apart – and there, on the table, was –

“A baby alicorn,” Callan said, sounding amazed.

And so it was – it was an even more miniature version of Ruby, sitting in the remains of its shattered eggshell, blinking up at them with the same luminous, silvery eyes that Ruby had.

There was, however, one important difference.

“She doesn’t have a horn, though,” Zina pointed out. “Is it really an alicorn, or is it a pegasus?”

“Ruby didn’t have her horn at first either,” Myrtle said, as, with all the gentleness in the world, she reached down to scoop up the new baby alicorn in her hands. “But she looked *just* like this. I’m sure this must be another alicorn – and it’d explain why Ruby was so excited, too! Perhaps she knew, somehow, that there was another alicorn just like her inside?”

“*Meeeh! Meeeh-ehhh!*”

Ruby certainly hadn't gotten any *less* excited by the hatching of the egg – she pranced and capered, as the baby sat cupped in Myrtle's careful hands, clearly not sure what to make of suddenly being out in the wide, bright world.

“Hello, little one,” Myrtle said softly, stroking a finger down its pure white flank. “I know this must be a bit of a surprise, but we're all very friendly, I promise!”

“*Meeh! Meeh!*” Ruby said, as if eager to agree, her hooves twinkling as she danced on the table.

Goldie, Dusty and Quicksilver seemed just as curious about the new arrival as Ruby was, but they kept a well-behaved distance, simply looking up at the tiny alicorn with wide, curious eyes.

“Well, at least we know this one'll eat mashed apples, just like Ruby did when she was a baby,” Hector laughed. “Amazing to think Ruby won't be alone anymore. It must be tough, growing up knowing you're the only alicorn in the world – well, in this realm, anyway.”

“*Mehhhh! Me-ehh!*”

Despite her insistent bleating, Ruby suddenly stopped prancing about on the tabletop, skidding to a halt and going very still as she stared up at the newly hatched alicorn. She turned her head first one way and then the other, blinking her eyes, before taking a few shuddering steps backward.

“Ruby?” Myrtle asked, concern in her voice. “What's wrong?”

“*Meeeh...*” Ruby's next little bleat sounded shaky and unsure, and immediately Hector was by her side, leaning down, his hand on her neck.

“Ruby? Is there something wrong?”

Ruby merely shook her head again, staggering back a little and almost falling off the table, though Hector was there to catch her before she could land on the floor.

“Ruby!”

Trent could hear the near-panic in Hector and Myrtle's voices as they called out to their daughter, and his own fear churned in his stomach as he dashed forward.

*What could have happened? What could have gone wrong?* he thought frantically. Ruby had always seemed so robust and healthy, and she'd been fine just moments ago – *How could something have –*

His thoughts were cut off as there was a sudden brilliant flash of white light from behind the table where Hector had lowered Ruby to the floor. He heard the others in the room gasp, and, in the moment before he covered his own eyes, saw them throwing up their arms to cover their faces.

*What the –*

As soon as the light subsided, Trent dashed around the corner of the table – only to find, sitting there on the floor, not the alicorn that Ruby had been just a moment ago, but a little girl with long blonde hair that fell past her shoulders and pale skin, blinking up at everyone with pale hazel eyes, wide with surprise.

Trent's mouth dropped open.

*She – she shifted!*

Trent had known that Ruby, as an ancient shifter, had been born in her animal form, and would, once she was old enough, have to learn how to shift into her human form, but no one had known how or when this would happen, or what age she might be when it did.

*But it happened,* Trent thought, for the moment too stunned to move or, really, even to think. *She shifted. She became her human form.*

“R-Ruby...?” Myrtle breathed, the newly hatched alicorn still cradled in her hands as she gazed down at her daughter. “Are you... did you...?”

“Mummy! Daddy!” Ruby called out to them, lifting her hands. “I shifted! I... became like you!”



Trent could feel a lump rising in his throat as he watched Hector and Myrtle drop to their knees by Ruby's side, Hector taking off the jacket he was wearing and draping it over her.

Ruby looked about the same age as she acted in alicorn form – only about five or so years old. But her voice sounded older, as if she'd been talking for years. Ruby had waited so long to shift and to say her first words in her human form – maybe she'd spent all that time listening and learning. *Or*, Trent thought, *maybe it's all just part of being an alicorn?* Ruby *was* very special, after all.

Tears were running freely down Myrtle's cheeks as, carefully tucking the newly hatched alicorn under her arm, she wrapped her daughter into a warm embrace, while Hector put his arms around them both, pulling them tightly against his chest. Trent knew that Hector considered himself a bloke's bloke – but he could see the tears that were glimmering in the corners of his eyes as he hugged his family, his pride and love for them all showing in every inch of his body.

“Ahh – Daddy, I'm getting squashed!”

Ruby's voice rang out as, clearly, Hector's hug grew just a little *too* fierce, and, reluctantly, he let them go a little, though his hands stayed on Myrtle and Ruby's shoulders.

“Oh, Ruby, how did you do it?” Myrtle asked, running her hand over Ruby's hair in wonder. “Did you do it on purpose? Did you know you were ready to shift?”

Ruby shook her head, her face solemn. Somehow, Trent could see all the mannerisms he knew so well from her alicorn form in her human form as well.

“No – I didn't know. But when I saw the baby, I just knew I wanted to – to do something. And then I felt a big burst of light in my heart, and I didn't know what was happening. But then...” Ruby trailed off, clearly not quite able to explain what she wanted to say in words. Instead, she made a bursting motion with her hands, and then frowned. “I wanted to get *bigger*, so I could hold all the light in.”

“Well, you certainly did that,” Hector said softly, looking down at her. “Was it maybe because you were so excited at the thought of... of there being another alicorn in the world?”

“Maybe,” Ruby said, after thinking it over for a moment. “Is the baby going to be my new sister?”

“Oh – I don’t know,” Myrtle said, her voice faltering slightly. She glanced up at Trent and Zina. Zina had come to stand by Trent’s side, and now, Trent felt the warmth of her palm as she looped her hands into his arm.

Trent glanced down to where she was looking up at him, but he could already sense that she was thinking the same thing as him as they looked at Hector and Myrtle standing there with Ruby, the tiny alicorn foal still snuggled against Myrtle’s side.

*They look like a family. They are a family.*

Trent felt a little too choked up to speak, so he simply nodded, and saw the relief and gratefulness wash over Myrtle and Hector’s faces.

“*Biirup?*”

Trent looked down to find Quicksilver had made its way across the table to them and was looking up at them expectantly. Goldie and Dusty were close behind it, looking up at them with their golden eyes.

“We’re a family too,” Trent said softly, reaching down to pick Quicksilver up, just as Zina did the same with Dusty and Goldie. The three of them snuggled contentedly in their arms, clearly safe and happy, and completely at home.

“We really are a family, aren’t we?” Zina said as she smiled softly down at the baby dragons, before turning to look up at Trent, her eyes filled with love, and hope for the future.

“We really are,” Trent told her – and he meant every word. With every fiber of his being, he knew this was perfect. This was where he felt everything had been leading, since the first time he’d met Zina three long years ago.

But it didn't matter how long they had had to wait for each other, Trent thought, as he pulled Zina close to his side, Dusty, Goldie and Quicksilver snuggling up in their hands.

*Because from now on, Trent thought, as he lowered his lips to Zina's, kissing her, we've got forever.*

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