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ACCIDENTAL

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

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ACCIDENTAL MATE
A SMALL TOWN SHIFTER ROMANCE

OTTER COVE SHIFTERS



DELTA JAMES

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*This book, as are all the rest, is dedicated to
My Two Best Friends:*

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

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

Leave reality behind and

Welcome to My World!

*And to Ron and Richard—the husbands
of two of my faithful readers—*

Rhyannon and Suzy respectively.

Thank you for your help with the incident.

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CHAPTER 1



CARSON

*N*orthern Lights Genome Project *Reykjavik, Iceland*

Reykjavik was cold this time of year. Who was he kidding? Reykjavik was cold any time of the year. Even during the summer months, they were lucky if the temperature managed to climb above the mid-fifties. His twin brother Mason liked to point out that Alaska's temperatures were brutal in comparison. Carson Payne asked himself again why he'd decided to become a geneticist and accept a job as the lead for an up-and-coming company specializing in genome research.

The simple answer was they had offered him a boatload of money, a generous living stipend and to pay off his student loans. Given that he'd studied for both his undergraduate and doctoral degrees at Clemson University, the amount they'd paid off had been staggering. The more complex answer was that Northern Lights Genome Project, NLGP as it was more commonly known, was on the cutting edge of genetic research. Their corporate headquarters might be in Silicon Valley, but their vast research facility was outside Reykjavik, where it was believed if there was some kind of 'accident,' between the frigid temperatures and sparse population, any resulting damage could be maintained.

It was another bone-chilling day in Iceland and Carson was headed from his lab to the coffee room. Coffee was, in his opinion, the elixir of life. He was one of those people who

others learned not to speak to until he'd had his dark roast with just a splash of cream—none of that powdered or flavored stuff—real cream. He was just about to enter when he overheard a snippet of a conversation that would change the course of his life.

“I understand Seattle was a colossal failure,” said Tim Bartles, one of the scientists working on the EnGen project.

“That could well be the understatement of the year,” said Kam Perkins. “I heard Dr. Bullard flipped out. He thought they had a viable breeder, but he wouldn't cooperate, and they had trouble extracting what they needed from the samples they were able to get.”

“They should have had scientists or at least people with a medical or scientific background trying to get the samples. Trusting that kind of thing to goons is not the way to get the job done right.”

“Agreed. They kept spraying the thing with a saltwater solution to try and keep it under control, but it appears that doing so may have corrupted what they were able to harvest.”

“Too bad they didn't get a female. They could have put it down and harvested the eggs.”

“I think that may be what they try next. The problem is they're so rare, the males are over-the-top protective, and there are those that think trying to get one could provoke a war.”

“We have the approval of the Ruling Council, don't we?”

“We have the tacit approval of some of them. I've heard some of those at the top are worried we'll be disavowed if things go south. Besides, the Council has never had much sway over their clans, and no one wants to face off with the Phantom Fire.”

Phantom Fire? Wasn't that the mythological band of mercenaries made up of immortal dragons? His colleagues couldn't actually be talking about the existence of dragons, could they? Dragons didn't exist except in fairytales and legends. Many believed they'd existed thousands of years ago, but surely if they had, they had long ago gone extinct.

The two men seemed to be shuffling around, getting whatever they were getting in the break room. Carson didn't like at all what he'd overheard. He might have dismissed it as two scientists spinning wild theories, but neither Bartles nor Perkins was given to speculative research or gossip. Coupled with some other things that had been drifting around the office compound for the past few months, it was troubling.

Genetic research was important. There wasn't anyone at NLGP who didn't take it seriously. It didn't matter who you were or what you did; in the end, it all came back to genetics. But given that Carson was a snow leopard-shifter, he'd had a crucial need to understand genetics from an early age. He couldn't help but believe that if they could understand shifter DNA—specifically how two different species with two completely different DNA sequences could combine into a new one, they might be able to help humans understand that shifters weren't freaks. In point of fact, they were their first cousins—closer to humans, genetically speaking, than chimpanzees and bonobos.

Carson knew that genetic research generally bored the hell out of people. When at social gatherings he told people what he did for a living they either got a glazed-over look in their eyes or they made insipid jokes about *Jurassic Park* and/or Dolly, the first cloned sheep. They didn't understand that truly understanding and mapping DNA was the key to scientific discovery. If what Bartles and Perkins said could be taken at face value, something at NLGP had gone terribly wrong.

Some of those who saw the potential in genetic research, including his brother Mason, also saw the potential dangers. There was no denying it. Human nature being what it was, there was a very real chance that any advances in understanding DNA could be weaponized or used to perpetuate some of the horrors portrayed in *Jurassic Park* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Carson didn't deny it. He just believed that if the only people doing the research were doing so for personal or nefarious gains, it could lead to the end of life as anyone knew it. He believed with every fiber of his being that ethical scientists and geneticists needed to be leading the research into the answers only DNA could provide.

Mason called him ‘Forrest’ and chided him for what Mason believed to be his naïveté and deliberate blissful ignorance as far as NLGP was concerned. But naïve was the last thing Carson was. He was well aware of the pitfalls of genetic research. He believed the shifters needed to be involved in order to ensure their kind—all species—were protected and respected and not used for perverse or evil purposes.

Maybe Mason was right. Maybe he was naïve—there were just as many unethical shifters as there were humans—maybe more. After all, shifters knew shifters existed and understood the leg up they had on the evolutionary ladder and food chain from their wholly human counterparts. The ability to shift from man to beast had enabled some species long extinct in their purebred form, e.g., cave lions, dire wolves, saber-tooth cats and the like to continue and thrive. But dragons?

Carson worked the rest of the day, keeping mostly to himself and trying to look busy. Over and over, he replayed the conversation he’d overheard between Bartles and Perkins. He wanted to dismiss it, but given who they were, he couldn’t. Two months ago, if he hadn’t known who they were, he could have written it off as idle guesswork, but he’d been given a big promotion as lead on his team, and he knew Bartles and Perkins held similar positions. There was no way they were talking frivolously. In addition, he, too, had heard about the EnGen project going terribly wrong and the big bosses were looking at overhauling the entire program, including personnel.

“Hey, Carson,” said Joyce Nelson, one of the people he supervised, as she stuck her head in his lab, “a bunch of us are going to the Crystal Cube for burgers and brews. Want to come?” The Crystal Cube was one of the local taverns that had pretty good food and a wide variety of beer and ale on tap.

“No. I need to finish up here. Then I think I’ll head to the Glacier Café. It’s Meatloaf Monday.”

Joyce laughed. “You and your meatloaf.”

Carson grinned. “Hey, the Glacier’s meatloaf is really good, and it’s pretty much the only place they serve it, and they only serve it on Mondays.”

While that was true, it wasn’t the real reason he didn’t want to go out with his team. He was still having trouble processing what he’d overheard, and he was thinking of doing something incredibly stupid. By going to the Glacier Café, he wouldn’t be doing anything unusual, and if he decided to commit career suicide, it would be harder to track a phone call from one of the payphones inside the café.

After he was sure everyone was gone, Carson downloaded his most recent and updated research onto a backup storage device that looked like a cell phone battery. He’d taken to having three cell phone batteries—one which he normally kept in his cell phone, one in the glove compartment of his Dacia Duster, and one in a small hidden compartment of his luggage.

It wasn’t that Carson was paranoid, but his brother Mason could be a bit eccentric. Mason had served in the US Military and had a tendency to be something of a conspiracy nut. When Carson had announced he was going to work for NLGP in Iceland, Mason had insisted he take a gun, have an unregistered cell phone no one knew anything about, and have his secret storage devices. Mason believed that NLGP wasn’t all that it said that it was and that they had their own secret, hidden agenda.

He and Mason had been born twelve minutes apart, with Mason being older. They were, unless you knew them incredibly well and had seen them naked, identical twins. They were both heavily muscled and well endowed, but Mason had several scars his younger brother didn’t. Mason had moved to Alaska, up above Otter Cove on the peninsula. There wasn’t a snow leopard-shifter clan there, but the small town was comprised only of shifters. Mason lived outside the city limits in a remote part of the Aleutian Range.

Mostly, Mason supposedly lived on his pension and worked as a lumberjack. But Carson wondered if that was the whole truth. Given Mason’s background, as well as his heightened level of suspicion of the world around him, it made

more sense that his brother also worked as a cyber security expert, hiring out to black ops and intelligence agencies as a private contractor. Despite their myriad differences, the brothers were close—as only twins could be. They tried to get together at least twice a year—the winter and summer solstices.

Tucking the data storage device into his cell phone, Carson headed out, waving at the security desk as he did so. They were supposed to have an over-the-top security system, but most everybody, including the security staff, ignored the protocols. One of the perks of his recent promotion was that Carson had a reserved parking space close to the building. He started his engine and drove back into Reykjavik, finding a spot right out front of the Glacier Café.

“Hey, Carson. We’ve been expecting you. Sit anywhere you like. I’m assuming you want the meatloaf?” called one of the waitresses.

“That would be great,” he said, heading for his favorite small booth in the back.

It offered him the best view of the café, was right by the restrooms and an emergency exit, as well as the bank of ancient payphones. No one ever used them anymore with the advent of cellular phones, but they were some of the few in the world that were actually still operable.

Once his meatloaf with garlic smashed potatoes, roasted baby carrots, and coffee was served, he began to look at his company-issued cell phone. For one thing, Carson wanted someone to be able to track that he’d been at the diner.

Halfway through his meal, he got up, paid his check and then walked to the back where the payphones were all in a line. Carson fed the vintage payphone with a number of coins. Dialing his brother’s number, he waited for Mason to answer. Carson had managed to sneak into some files he shouldn’t have had access to and copy the information he found there. The EnGen Project had been of special interest to him, and some of the information he’d been able to scan left him feeling more unsettled than ever.

Finally, Mason's phone picked up. "You know who you dialed. You know what to do." BEEP.

"Mason, it's Carson. Look, I'm not going to be able to get together for our birthday. Give me a call so we can arrange something else."

The message was innocuous and certainly wouldn't translate to anyone who wasn't him or Mason that Carson had found something unsettling and needed to talk to him and was going to be enroute to Mason's cabin. Slipping out the back door, Carson walked briskly to the bus station, taking the first bus out to the airport.

He got off the bus and waited for it to pull away before going into the terminal and catching a flight out of Reykjavik to Montreal, Quebec, where he opened the locker he and his brother kept there with a stash of cash and fake passports. He then rented another small locker and stashed his company and registered personal cell phones within before making the connecting flight that would ultimately land him in Kodiak, Alaska, where he hired a bush pilot to take him to a landing strip as close to Mason's home as he could get. From there he'd take one of the two snowmobiles his brother left in the private, heated shelter the remaining distance to Mason's. The shelter also contained everything one needed to travel in the arctic climate including a polar survival suit, helmet, and goggles.

Getting out of the small bush plane, Carson had to agree—compared to the Aleutian Peninsula, Reykjavik was downright balmy. Carson keyed in the code that allowed him to access the shelter. He pulled on the polar suit and goggles, opting for his ski hat instead of the helmet. Once clothed to withstand the environment, he got on the snowmobile and took a tour around the landing strip. For one thing he wanted to get the feel of the vehicle and ensure it was working properly. For another, he wanted to see if anyone had followed him.

I'm starting to get as paranoid as Mason. Gunning the engine, he began the long, cold journey to see his brother.

CHAPTER 2



AMELIA

*B*ellingham, Washington

Amelia Lockhart sat behind the controls of her single-engine prop plane, a de Havilland Beaver, enjoying the smooth way the plane handled. It was a favorite among bush pilots, and it was worth every dime she'd scrimped and saved to buy it. Amelia had grown up in America's bread basket and was flying crop dusters before she could legally drive. After a stint flying cargo planes and rescue choppers for the US Military, she'd mustered out in Washington State's Fort Lewis, fallen in love with the Pacific Northwest, and stayed.

Her two passengers on this trip were regulars. Hal and Don both worked in the high-tech field, and Amelia flew them to their favorite fishing hole on the Alaska Peninsula at least twice per year. They were relaxed, gregarious, and great tippers.

Having arranged for a car and driver to pick them up, Amelia scanned the commercial dock area to see if she could spot Jack. He was waiting for them. She flew past, wagged her wings at him, and radioed the marina and closest tower to inform them of her approach and impending landing. The latter wasn't absolutely necessary, but Amelia thought it was good form. She banked the airplane back toward the marina and executed a flawless landing. Jack grabbed the line to tie off the plane as she killed the engine and let the plane sidle up to the dock, got out and opened the passenger door, folding down the stairwell.

“Gentlemen, we have arrived, and your chariot awaits,” she said with a flourish.

“Thanks, Amelia. As always, a great trip,” said Hal.

Don nodded. “Yep; even when the fishing is lousy, the trip up and back is always a treat. You sure we can’t convince you to come to work for the company as our corporate pilot?”

Amelia laughed. “And miss going up to Alaska on a regular basis? No way.”

“Just thought I’d try,” said Don, slipping her an enormous tip.

“Gentlemen?” said Jack, “as the lady said, I’ve got the SUV waiting and a couple of homemade brews in the back.”

Jack knew how to take care of his customers, as well. He loaded their gear on his foldable trolley and the three men walked down the dock to Jack’s SUV.

Once the plane was secured, Amelia jogged down the dock to the small office area she had at the marina. It wasn’t much, but it gave her a physical address to meet passengers, receive mail, and check in with Phoebe, her receptionist.

“Hey, Boss,” Phoebe said by way of greeting. “How’d it go?”

“Gorgeous clear blue, smooth skies and Don and Hal are always great.” She handed Phoebe the wad of cash from Hal.

“Whoa! You do know that’s just a tip. In fact, it’s a tip on top of the twenty percent tip they added to their invoice.”

Amelia shook her head. “Like I said, they’re great. Why don’t you take a couple of hundred of that and treat yourself to a spa day. Put the rest in the safe and we’ll deposit it tomorrow. Anything I should know about?”

“Yeah. There’s a guy—very sketchy on the details—who has an incredibly lucrative job. He’ll deliver the package for you to fly north. All you have to do is deliver it to a set of coordinates outside the town of Otter Cove on the Alaska Peninsula. Someone will be there to pick it up and then you fly back.” She arched an eyebrow. “Honestly, I think ‘sketchy’ is

a nice way to put it. He swears it isn't drugs or anything associated with them. The name of the company is the Phoenix Corp, like in that television show, *MacGyver*. I checked them out, they're legit and have offices in Wyoming, Colorado, and up in Alaska."

"Stolen?"

"He didn't say either way, but I don't think so. There was something kind of straight arrow and almost noble about him. I just got the idea that it was something top secret—not necessarily government, but something they don't want to call attention to."

"I don't know, Phoebe."

"Amelia, he offered three times your normal rate for an up and back. Just you and the package. I didn't like the idea of you meeting someone we don't know in an unpopulated area. He's agreed to provide a parachute to attach to the package. You circle the drop zone, toss the package out the door, the parachute activates automatically, and it floats to the ground. I got him to agree to five times the normal rate. He'll wire half before they get here as a non-refundable deposit and the balance as soon as you tell him you're circling the drop zone."

Amelia grinned at Phoebe. There was a reason she paid Phoebe what she did. The woman literally ran the business side of Midnight Sun Flight Service. Amelia had picked the name as she'd always been fascinated with all things Alaska, and she piloted both passengers and cargo to the area on a regular basis. She had an outstanding reputation for being able to get into and out of isolated locations. She had several standing contracts picking up and delivering cargo to some of the more remote spots all up and down the Pacific Coast from Northern California to Alaska and northernmost Canada—specifically the Northwest and Yukon Territories.

"I changed my mind. Take \$300; go somewhere really nice and tip big."

As usual, Phoebe had negotiated a much better deal than Amelia would have and had set it up so that the risk to her and the plane was minimal.

Phoebe laughed. “For that kind of money, I’ll skip the spa, head to the Steak House at the Silver Reef Casino, have an amazing meal and gamble the night away. The crab they serve is so good and it’s worth it just for the ‘palate cleansers’ between each course.”

She was right. The Silver Reef’s Steak House was an exceptional restaurant and rivaled some of the best in Seattle. “Have fun.” Amelia made a mental note to have a bottle of wine delivered to the table at her expense. “When do I go?”

“That’s the bad part, and part of how I got them to agree to the jacked-up price. They want it delivered tomorrow. They’ll be here at nine to load the package. I said if it looked hinky to you in any way, the deal was off, and they’d forfeit the fifty percent deposit.”

“Damn, girl. You play hardball.”

Phoebe grinned. “That’s what you pay me for.”

It was and they both knew it.

“I think I’ll pick up a black & bleu burger and onion rings at the Horseshoe Café and head home.”

“Yum. If I didn’t have dinner waiting in the crockpot, I’d probably do the same.”

“Do I need to call anyone at the Phoenix Corp to tell them we’re taking the job?”

“Nope. I told them if we weren’t I’d call them this evening. I was pretty sure you’d want the job.”

“Because you know what a money-grubbing bitch I am.”

“No,” Phoebe laughed, “because I figured it was minimum risk with maximum reward and you taught me those were the best jobs. The only thing I worried about was heading up north the day after you got home.”

“Nothing to it,” said Amelia. “One of the reasons I wanted the Beaver was because it’s easy on a pilot to fly. I’ll be fine.”

“Ok. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Phoebe peeled off three one-hundred-dollar bills from the wad Hal had handed Amelia, locked the rest in the safe and headed out to her vintage Volkswagen bug. Amelia called the café, ordered dinner, glanced at her email and then locked up. She stopped to pick up her food before heading to her waterfront condo that had been converted from one of the older mansions that overlooked Bellingham Bay. There were times she daydreamed about buying one of the townhouses or even a single-family home, but with her business, it was far more practical to have a spacious condo where all the maintenance was taken care of.

Amelia picked up her burger and rings, laughing when the hostess handed her two bags.

“The bigger bag has your burger and onion rings. The smaller bag has some onion rings to munch on the way home.”

“God, you guys know me too well.”

The hostess shrugged. “You’re a good customer, Amelia, and you work hard. You know we do deliver, right?”

“It’s bad enough that I don’t cook very often, the least I can do is pick up my own food.”

Amelia headed out to her Jeep, hopped in and headed home. She parked in her reserved spot and took the elevator to her ‘penthouse’ condo. She laughed every time someone called it that. Her condo occupied the very top floor of the old mansion—but there were only two other floors below her. Somehow, ‘penthouse’ seemed rather grandiose.

The elevator opened onto the small landing outside the entry door to her condo, and Amelia keyed in her access code. One of the things she’d liked about the condo was that it had an excellent security system, open floor plan, and a lot of ‘smart’ features. It was one bedroom with an attached bath and a powder room off the main living area. The entire back wall for both the living area and the bedroom was windows with a gorgeous view of Bellingham Bay. There was a balcony that stretched the entire length with plenty of room for seating and a built-in outdoor kitchen, which Amelia had yet to use. What

she did use was the small seating area with the fire pit off her bedroom.

But tonight, she was more tired than she'd thought she'd be. Coming into her main space, she set down her food on the kitchen counter with its built-in eating area and headed into her bedroom to strip out of her clothes and pull on a pair of pajama pants and tank top—not glamorous but functional. She had designed the built-in eating area, which had a banquette along the kitchen island, a table, and two more low profile chairs. It sat four comfortably and could be expanded to seat eight.

Amelia detoured through the kitchen, grabbing her food and an excellent, local IPA before sliding into the well-cushioned banquette and sat down to enjoy her food and watch the sunset. She picked up her tablet and pulled up information regarding the Phoenix Corp. Everything appeared to be on the up and up. Finishing her meal, she cleaned up and headed out to the deck, igniting the firepit and sipping her IPA.

It might not be exciting, but her life was good and she enjoyed it. She meant to take a long, hard look at the Phoenix Corp's package, and it might not go amiss to call up to the Otter Cove Sheriff's Department to see if they knew anything about them and what they might be having dropped off outside of town. Maybe the sheriff wasn't the way to go. After all, anyone going to these lengths to have something dropped off clandestinely might not want the local law enforcement knowing about it.

Over the years, she'd worked with a man known as The Finder. It was said there wasn't anything Deke couldn't find out if the need was great enough and you were willing to pay. It might not be the worst thing to ask him if he thought it was worth her paying him to do a little investigating. If nothing else, it might not hurt to have him standing by as some kind of backup.

CHAPTER 3



CARSON

Normally, riding a snowmobile was something Carson enjoyed. These were not normal times. More than once before he got on the bush plane, he'd thought someone might have been following him, but then had dismissed the idea. As he'd never seen the same person twice, he convinced himself that his paranoia was running rampant. Still, not seeing anything, or anyone for that matter, at the remote landing strip had gone a long way to settling his nerves.

As he made his way up into the Aleutian Range, he thought about what his bolting from Reykjavik might have cost him. Surely by now NLGP knew he had gone missing. Given the growing paranoia within the ranks, they most likely would assume the worst. In his haste to get away, he'd done nothing to lay the groundwork for why he might have to be gone. He could have invented a family emergency or even called in sick and maybe not have raised their suspicions.

Had he raised their suspicions? That was a stupid question. He'd disappeared. His phone was in Canada and hadn't moved. They had to know something was up, didn't they? Of course, they did. They had to. He'd left Reykjavik without a word to anyone and virtually disappeared in Quebec. He wasn't so arrogant as to believe that he had covered his tracks so completely that no one would be able to trace him. He did think it would take some effort on someone's part to figure out he'd come to Alaska as he'd been sparse with the details about his brother.

NLGP, if not actively looking for him in a physical sense, had to be making calls and working digitally in an effort to find him. Even though Carson hadn't told anyone what he'd heard, those working on the EnGen project tended to be incredibly secretive, territorial, and suspicious about anyone outside the project knowing anything about the project. Perhaps Bartles and Perkins had somehow known he'd overheard them. But what had he overheard that could have worried them? The fact that Bullard had thought they had a 'viable breeder'? Breeder of what? What was EnGen up to?

If, however, the rumors about EnGen being some kind of human cloning or breeding project were true, there was plenty for them to be worried about. That kind of thing was not only frowned on by the world's scientific community, but in some places it was outlawed. It was the kind of rumor that if it found its way to the public at large, could completely destroy a company.

If NLGP had put two and two together and were concerned that Carson knew something he shouldn't, would they use whatever means were necessary to silence him? Had he somehow given NLGP a clue as to what he'd heard? Had that been what had caused them concern? The conversation he had overheard had told him in no uncertain terms that Mason had been right in warning him away from NLGP. Carson was now a liability, if not a threat, to the company. Given the millions of dollars at stake, was it that far of a stretch to think his life was in jeopardy?

And it wasn't only that conversation he'd heard between Bartles and Perkins. Other things were happening, as well. The company had wanted everyone to sign new, more stringent confidentiality and non-compete agreements; security personnel had begun to stroll the halls—breaking up conversations in the staff lounge and by the watercoolers. Tracking apps had been downloaded onto company cells, and NLGP had offered to chip employees with tracking devices for their safety. At the moment, that last part was still voluntary, but rumor was rampant that in the not too distant future it would become mandatory.

Looking back, Carson didn't wonder why he'd become uneasy and suspicious, he only wondered what had taken him so long. Upon reflection, bolting didn't seem to be an overreaction to anything, but rather a measured response to an increasingly threatening and restrictive corporate culture. He wasn't ready to try and reach out to anyone regarding his concerns, mainly because those concerns weren't well formed. That had been the reason to head to his twin. Between the two of them there had never been anything they couldn't figure out or handle.

But where was Mason? True, he'd only called him the one time and the message he left would have seemed inconsequential to anyone else. The thing Carson found most concerning was that Mason had not been waiting at the landing strip, nor had there been a message for him. The only thing he had thought to do was get on the snowmobile and head for Mason's cabin in the mountains. The cabin would be difficult if not impossible for anyone to find, and if they did, Carson could impersonate his twin brother. It made the perfect hiding spot until he could figure out the next thing to do.

Carson pushed the snowmobile for more speed. He had still not reached the thick tree coverage so felt exposed. He kept himself balanced in the center of the seat, shifting his weight from one side to another to maintain the vehicle's optimum balance. The snowmobile had the capacity for great speed, but with this much snow, it was difficult to tell what lay beneath. Carson opted for a balance of speed and safety. He allowed himself to ride through the bumps and stayed on course. He needed to be at Mason's before full dark. Being a snow leopard-shifter meant that even in his human form he had better night vision than most humans, but he would prefer to be inside shelter before night fell.

He was forced to slow his progress as the forest became denser. Carson wove through the trees, avoiding deadfall when he could. It had been a long day, and his shoulders were beginning to ache. Normally, he'd take a shower, have some dinner and then shift and go for a run. In Reykjavik that meant getting in his SUV and heading out of town to find some empty farmland or stretch of beach to shift and run. But here

in the Aleutian Range, he could shift in the comfort of his brother's cabin and head out into the wilderness that surrounded him with little worry about being spotted.

To say Mason's cabin was isolated was a gross understatement. The only thing for miles and miles around Mason's cabin were more miles and miles. The closest town was Otter Cove, and it was fairly small. It was a pretty little village made up entirely of shifters—all kinds of shifters living in relative peace mainly because the town's sheriff, Zak Grayson, was a polar bear-shifter and former SEAL. In other words, not someone most people wanted to take on.

As he crested the hill that led down to his brother's cabin that sat beside the creek that burbled year-round, Carson stopped and turned off the motor. Granted, if anyone was lying in wait they would have heard him, but he wanted to listen to the sounds of the gathering dusk to see if he could discern anything amiss.

The call of a great horned owl sounded. The deep tenor of the soft hoot with a stuttering rhythm was soothing as it did not sound like the owl was warning others of predators in its territory—*hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo*. He could hear the flap of the giant wingspan of the owl as it flew through the trees.

Somewhere to the left, a rabbit hurried across the snow in search of a warm place to hide.

And the creek behind the cabin gurgled along its path, winding down the side of the mountain.

There was no sound of a human presence. Carson had hoped against hope that he would hear the crackling of a fire or the smell of smoke—although both would have been difficult from this distance—and no lights shone on the front porch or from inside the cabin indicating Mason was there. But still, choosing caution over comfort, Carson pushed the snowmobile to a safe spot and covered it with branches and snow. He meant to enter the cabin unobserved. If it proved to be safe, he'd come back for the vehicle in the morning and store it in the small shed Mason had built for it.

Carson moved along the ridgeline, keeping out of sight and making his way to the hidden entrance to an escape tunnel Mason had constructed at the same time he built the cabin. It was accessed through a trap door in the kitchen pantry, which led to what looked like an adjunct cellar where Mason kept root vegetables, wine, beer, cheese and other things that favored colder temperatures.

Lifting the cover with as little disturbance to the vegetation and snow as he could, Carson climbed onto the ladder that led to the tunnel. He secured the cover and climbed down. He didn't much care for ladders and always felt better when his feet were once again on *terra firma*. Foregoing a torch, Carson moved his way through the tunnel using his hand along the wall to find his way. Once he came to the dead end, he activated the lever that moved one of the storage shelves so he could step inside the actual cellar.

He shook his head. He was probably being far more cautious—if not downright paranoid—than he needed to be. But still, better safe than sorry. He stood beside the door, pressing his ear against it to see if there was something he could hear. Nothing. Nothing was a good thing. He cracked the door open and sniffed the air from inside. Again, nothing. Silently, he opened the door and slipped into the kitchen area. One good thing about the way Mason had built his home was that there were few places to hide—namely the pantry and the bath. He moved along the walls of the cabin until he reached the bath. Stepping inside, he was rewarded with the gift of emptiness. There was a door next to the shower that Carson didn't remember. It was locked with an external keyed lock, which meant no one could be hiding there, and he could respect Mason's privacy.

Convinced that he was alone, he ensured the cabin was secure and then built a small fire in the fireplace. Carson was cold to the bone, even though Mason's generator powered his kitchen appliances and kept the interior of the house above freezing. He divested himself of the polar survival suit and stood in front of the fire until he felt feeling return to his entire body. Once he was warm, he thought about going for a run,

but decided a hot shower and a good night's sleep might be more restorative.

Stepping into the bathroom, he turned on the water to let it heat. As he removed his clothes, he stared at the locked door. It was sturdy and had two locks—a keyed deadbolt and a keyed padlock. Whatever Mason had in there, he had no intention of anyone seeing it without his permission. Stepping into the shower, Carson closed the heavy glass door and sighed. While the rest of the bath was in keeping with the rustic feel of the cabin, the shower was over-the-top in comfort and features—tiled, multiple shower heads, body sprays and plenty of room. It was one of the few things Carson envied his twin brother.

After a thoroughly enjoyable shower, Carson pulled on a pair of his brother's sweatpants and a sweater. Tucking his feet into a pair of fur-lined slippers, he padded into the kitchen to see what he could scrounge. There wasn't much in the fridge that could or had gone bad, and so Carson had no clue as to where his brother might be or how long he'd been gone. Grabbing a jar of spaghetti sauce and some frozen ravioli, he made a quick meal before checking the cabin again and then heading over to the big bed. Normally when he was here, Carson slept on the comfy leather couch but with Mason gone, the king-size bed was his to enjoy.

Pulling off his clothes and slippers, he crawled under the cover and was asleep before his head hit the pillow. In his mind's eye, Carson smiled. He'd wondered if he'd see her tonight. She didn't disappoint him. From the end of a long dock, the woman smiled, waved, and blew him a kiss. She was not necessarily the kind of a woman men dreamed of—she was curvy, had medium length chestnut-colored, curly hair and the most engaging smile he'd ever seen. He had no doubt she was most likely his fated mate, but she seemed to be more tease than anything else. She was always laughing, always elusive and just out of reach.

He and Mason had told each other they didn't believe in fated mates, but Carson had been lying. For almost a decade he had seen her in his dreams, aging as he aged—at first only a

couple of times a year, but more and more frequently until of late she had become an almost nightly visitor. Her appearance ensured a good night's sleep and a massive hard-on come morning. There would come a day when she would take care of the latter for him.

For the next few days, after moving the snowmobile down to the small shed, Carson spent his time doing random chores and minor repairs around the house. In a wilderness cabin, there was always something to be done. He had to admit, however, that if the cut firewood—both green and dried—was any indication, his brother had been busy. It seemed to Carson that there was enough wood to last for years. He also began to hunt and fish, using Mason's smokehouse to cure the meats as well as wrapping and freezing some of it. Once he had the larder full, Carson began to get bored.

By the third day, boredom was being replaced by concern. He'd had no word, nor had he found anything from Mason indicating where he'd gone or when he might be back. Otter Cove was a long day's journey from the cabin, but there were provisions and things Carson would like to stock up on. He made plans, and on the morning of the fourth day, he headed out on the snowmobile down toward the eastern shore of the Alaska Peninsula and to Otter Cove. Perhaps someone there would have news of Mason and the world at large.

CHAPTER 4



AMELIA

The following dawn broke bright and clear. Amelia logged immediately onto the weather service's website to see what the weather might look like for her lucrative trip to Alaska. The Doppler radar looked a little dicey, but not chancy enough to miss out on a payday that was big enough to pay off her plane and ease the pressure for the rest of the year. Paying off the plane early meant reducing the stress of keeping things going even in the lean months of the year. Besides, the Beaver was a solid plane and in peak condition and it beat the hell out of flying combat missions.

She'd spent part of the evening doing enough research on Phoenix Corp that she was convinced there was little chance there was anything nefarious in the pouch she was flying up. And with the size and assets of the company, if she did a good job on this initial run, she might well secure future lucrative contracts for her charter service.

Amelia got dressed in comfortable but professional clothes for her flight. She wanted to present a good impression to Phoenix Corp's representative but still be comfortable for the actual flight. She called in her order for a breakfast burrito and swung through the drive thru. Munching her breakfast, she arrived at the marina and made her way down to the plane.

Opening the door to her plane, she grabbed her preflight checklist and began to go through it, checking off items as she went: weather status, general status of aircraft, wheels, doors, wings, propellers, documentation, licenses and certificates, fire extinguishers, life jackets, and emergency systems.

“Ms. Lockhart? Or should I call you Captain?” asked a tall, good-looking man who looked as though he’d stepped off the cover of a men’s fashion magazine. He was gorgeous.

“Actually, most people just call me Amelia. Can I help you?”

“Yes. I’m Tevryn. Your associate, Ms. Pierce, said you would be able to deliver our package.”

“The one with the secret contents?” Amelia teased.

The smile that lifted the corners of his mouth did not quite reach his eyes. “I wouldn’t call them secret. More confidential. Documents pertaining to proprietary business of the Phoenix Corp.”

“You do realize you named your company after one in a popular television series, right?”

“In point of fact, they named their fictional company after our very real one.”

Amelia could see humor wasn’t big on Tevryn’s agenda.

“That’s true. Your company has been around for more than a century...”

“Several centuries to be precise.”

“Right,” said Amelia, slowly beginning to wonder if perhaps there wasn’t something more at stake than Tevryn and his people were saying. “If I find out now or sometime later that you have involved me in something illegal, I will not withhold any knowledge I have from the authorities.”

This time the smile showed true amusement. “Yes. Ms. Lawrence was quite clear on where you stood regarding stolen or otherwise contraband information. I give you my word, there is nothing in this pouch that in any way could be used against you and yours.”

“Okay. Just so we’re both clear. I believe you were to have wired the fifty percent non-refundable deposit to our bank. I’ll take the pouch and confirm with Phoebe we’ve been paid. You were also supposed to supply me with some kind of parachute for the thing.”

Tevryn nodded. “Yes. The pouch is to be placed in this small box. The GPS coordinates have been programmed in and all you need is to turn it on and drop it from the plane. The parachute will open automatically and the navigational unit will see it to its drop zone. As soon as you radio us that you are approaching the area, we will wire the rest of the agreed-upon fee before you dispatch our parcel.”

Amelia leaned inside the plane and grabbed the palm microphone. “Phoebe?”

“Yeah, boss?”

“I’m standing on the dock with Tevryn. He says they wired us their deposit, and he has the parcel.”

“Checking... Yep. We have it. I saw the weather was a little dodgy.”

“Not bad, even if I fly straight up the coast, but if I go a little inland or a little out to sea, it should be smooth sailing. I’ll radio you when I’m in position. You let Tevryn and his people know, and once you confirm receipt of the balance, I’ll drop the package and head for home.” She looked at Tevryn. “Sound good?”

“It sounds like a cautious and well-conceived plan.” He handed her the parcel, which was leather and had a large wax seal on it. Tevryn then placed it in a watertight container. “Suffice it to say we will not be pleased if that seal is broken.”

Amelia looked down. “I’ll take a picture of the intact seal as it leaves the plane. I have no interest in your business.” She extended the package back to Tevryn. “But if you’d rather give your business to someone else, I’ll even return your deposit.”

Tevryn smiled. “My apologies, Amelia. Not only would I prefer you take the package, Phoenix Corp is hopeful that this is the start of a long and profitable relationship for both of us.”

“That would be nice,” said Amelia, returning his smile.

Tevryn stepped back. “I would normally say ‘fair winds and following seas,’ but somehow that doesn’t seem quite right. How about, safe journey.”

“That’ll do. Thank you for your business, Tevryn.”

Amelia untied the plane, pushing off from the dock as she climbed into the cockpit, slid the package in the pocket behind her seat, secured the drop box on the floor behind it, and did a quick doublecheck of her instruments. The last item was probably superfluous as she’d been standing next to the plane the entire time, but nevertheless, it was habit.

Putting on her headset she said, “I’m away from the dock and starting the engine. Radio our flight plan and I’ll let you know when I’m circling the drop point.”

“Gotcha. Have a safe flight. See you when you get back. Midnight Sun Flight Base out.”

Amelia grinned. Phoebe always sounded so professional. It just cracked Amelia up. Not that Phoebe didn’t always put her best foot forward, but she’d seen her be considerably less straightlaced. Hiring Phoebe had been one of the best decisions she’d ever made with regard to her company. When she was far enough away from the dock, she engaged the plane’s engine and taxied out into the bay, pushing the throttle forward so the plane lifted off in a smooth, straight line. Once she was aloft, Amelia banked north toward Alaska and continued to climb until she reached her cruising altitude.

She continued to monitor the weather and when it began to turn, she changed her flight plan, heading west earlier than she had planned so she could approach the drop point from the south as opposed to the north. The air was a little bumpy but not something she or the plane couldn’t handle.

Other than a little rough air, the flight was going according to plan, and there had been no problems. She thought about heading east after the drop and landing in Kodiak for the night. As the weather began to turn nastier than she had anticipated, she radioed Phoebe to let her know her location and to amend the flight plan to have her landing in Kodiak and then heading home tomorrow.

“Are you okay?” asked Phoebe.

“I’m fine. It’s just a little turbulence, nothing I can’t handle, but it’s taking more out of me than I thought, so for safety’s sake, I’m going to overnight in Kodiak. They have that great diner. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, boss. But you be safe.”

“Always.”



COLBY

“You’re sure the pilot is still planning the drop for today?” Colby asked Tevryn over the phone.

“I did ask about the rough weather, and her assistant assured me that the pilot is very experienced and flies in the rough Alaska weather all the time. You know, dragons can fly, I could have brought it to you.”

“Yes. I am well aware, but the last thing we need is anyone—be they shifter or human—spotting a dragon. The sight of dragons would put everyone on high alert. I’m not sure your isolationist ways have served you well. And I sure as hell don’t need one landing at Windsong. No. This will work. I have people at Otter Cove who can pick the thing up and bring it to me. It’ll just add to my mystique as the local smuggler.”

“You and your games,” said Tevryn. “Do you think your people can break the code?”

“I’m pretty sure, especially given that we know that the papers detail what they were trying to do in Seattle. I’ve brought in a shifter known to my former second. She says he’s good with code—both deciphering as well as writing. And his brother is a geneticist and can be trusted. We’ll let you know as soon as we find anything. I take it the Phantom Fire is throwing in with us against the Shadow League?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I would say we won’t oppose you and there are those that believe this is a fight we should take on. In any event, I think the information will benefit us all.”



AMELIA

The plane was getting more difficult to handle. The rough air was fighting her; Amelia was beginning to think about turning back, and then remembering what her instructor told her and countless others ‘there are old pilots and bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots.’ She felt a lurch—something akin to the initial drop an elevator makes when it starts its descent in a high-rise building. The plane tried to nose down, and she could see the dials beginning to spin as the engine coughed, stalled, coughed, and caught.

Shit! She began to reiterate the well-known pilot mantra: Aviate, Navigate, and Communicate, to be done in that order. More than one tragedy could have been averted if instead of focusing on trying to fix the problem the pilot had focused on flying the plane and using ‘checklists’ committed to memory. Especially with a small, private plane, looking for a place to land and then radioing for help. One of the things she liked about her plane was that it had amphibious floats meaning she could land on the ground or water.

Using all her strength, she tried to bring the plane’s yoke back in an attempt to raise the nose. As she did so, not only could she hear that the engine was failing, her vision was being obscured by the oil smearing across the windscreen as well as the smoke trailing from the engine. She berated herself for not having her headset plugged in, but there was nothing to be done for it.

At this point, she needed one hand on the yoke and the other on the throttle control in an effort to maximize the thrust before the engine seized and the plane fell from the sky. She glanced at her electronic navigation which showed a sizeable body of water not too far ahead. She could probably keep the plane in the sky long enough to reach it. Whether or not she’d have enough glide power and momentum to land properly was another matter altogether.

The Beaver was an incredibly reliable aircraft with many redundant systems built into its design. It seemed incongruous to her that her plane was in trouble and that her systems were failing. She prayed she could just keep the Beaver in flight long enough and without losing too much altitude. She reminded herself ‘pitch up for best glide speed.’ Her best and safest spot to land was the lake; landing anywhere else didn’t look promising, and she doubted she’d walk away. Even the water landing wasn’t guaranteed, but it was better than rock, trees and hard, frozen ground.

Okay, Amelia. You can do this. Thoughts battered her brain like heartbeats.

Stabilize the plane

Keep flying, pitch for glide

Focus on your landing zone

Analyze the situation

Look for anything in the water that will foul the floats

React appropriately

Smoke and oil continued to trail out of the engine, making it harder to see, forcing her to use the side windows to see. That was worrisome and not just from an if the engine seizes and the plane ceases to perform kind of way. The image of a saying on the brick in her former flight instructor’s office came to mind: ‘throw me and you’ll know where to land,’ which wasn’t at all that helpful. Because she’d just had the plane inspected and serviced, she was pissed.

The coughing and spitting from the engine was getting worse. She glanced down to see if there was any other viable landing spot. Even if she reached the lake, her glide path would be too steep and she didn’t know if she’d be able to keep the plane from flipping, cartwheeling or ending upside down in the icy water.

The map on the navigation unit was accurate. Her only chance at survival, and that was slim to none, was to make the lake and pray she could get to the floating sled and get away from the plane before it sank. If the floats broke or the plane

became inverted, she had to stay out of the water. Failing to do so would cause her to die of hypothermia.

The black water was approaching fast—too fast and at too steep an angle. She braced for impact as she glanced out the side window and saw it—every pilot’s worst nightmare when landing on water. A partially submerged log. She jerked the yoke to the right, making one of the floats hit the water and careening it around. Amelia managed to avoid crashing into the log, but it caught the back part of the other float, causing the plane to upend and driving the nose and the propeller under the water.

Even though she was belted in tightly, her body slammed forward into the yoke as the plane shuddered to a stop and she seemed to dangle above the freezing water that was slowly seeping in. Hope that she might survive flickered until she realized she was belted in and losing consciousness. As darkness descended, Amelia’s last thought was that she wouldn’t be aware of the end of her own existence.

CHAPTER 5



CARSON

Making his way to Otter Cove gave Carson some time to think. At one point he'd believed he might pass himself off as Mason. There were two problems with that: the first was shifters tended to be more perceptive than humans, and Carson wasn't sure he could fool them; second, Mason might well be in Otter Cove or someone there might know where he was. All in all, it seemed safer just to go as Mason's brother, tell them he'd had a chance to make a surprise visit, and see what he could learn.

Carson had worked with Deke Campbell before, helping him find a missing girl. Unfortunately, she had been found dead. Carson hadn't asked Deke if the two men who'd been responsible had managed to survive their escape attempt. The local police had said they vanished into the Icelandic wilderness. He didn't believe that. Carson's guess was that at some point their bodies would be found buried deep in the frozen land or chained to some kind of weight in the icy waters that surrounded the country. Shifters didn't tend to trust human justice where the murder of one of their own was concerned.

Stopping just outside Otter Cove, Carson stopped and dialed The Finder's personal cell. Carson had no idea whether Deke would pick up or not, as this was not the mobile number Carson had used before.

"You have reached The Finder's phone. He's busy right now finding various ways to drive me crazy and make me..."

What sounded like a growl before the smack of a female ass by a male hand came across the phone. Carson grinned. He'd heard a rumor that the surly cave lion had taken a mate.

"Damn it, Annie. Campbell. Who the hell is this, and it better be important," growled Deke.

"Deke, it's Carson Payne. We met a couple of years ago in Reykjavik..."

"I remember. What do you need?"

"It's important, but I hate to interrupt..."

"It'll do my mate some good to cool her jets while you and I chat. How can I help, Carson?"

"My brother..."

"Mason? Lives up in the mountains? May be the only guy I know more hermit-like than I was before I took a mate?"

Carson grinned. He liked Deke. The guy was spooky and intimidating as hell, but there was a nobility and honor to him that appealed. "Yeah. I wanted to surprise him, but he wasn't there. Hasn't been there for at least three days."

"Was he really surprised?" Carson could hear Deke's mate moaning in the background.

There weren't many people Carson thought he could trust, but Deke was one of them. "I'm in trouble. I left him a cryptic message that he would understand. His not being at his cabin is unsettling."

"How much trouble?"

"I don't know, and I could be wrong. I overheard something at work..."

"That genetics place, right?"

"Yeah. Northern Lights Genome Project. Something about one of their projects going wrong in Seattle."

"Seattle?" asked Deke, the tone of his voice shifting subtly. "That's not good. Look, it's late. Let me set up a meeting with

the sheriff, Zach. We can meet out at his lighthouse compound.”

“Can I trust him?”

“Absolutely,” said Deke. “He’s my Annie’s older brother. I’ll set up the meeting for, say, seven? We may as well meet out there. I’ll give his second, Wyatt, a call. They’ll be expecting you. Do you need a place to stay?”

“I’m sure I can find something.”

“No need. They have room. That way we’ll limit anyone who might see you.”

Once Deke had given him the coordinates, he had no trouble finding the polar bear compound at the lighthouse. He was warmly greeted by Wyatt, who was beta to the clan. It seemed to Carson that Wyatt knew more than he was willing to confide, which made sense as Carson was doing the same.

The following morning, he came out into the dining area of the lighthouse cottage to find Deke and another man who Carson assumed to be the sheriff.

“Carson,” said Deke, extending his hand. “Good to see you. This is Zach Grayson.”

“Sheriff,” said Carson, shaking Deke’s hand and then extending it to Grayson.

Grayson grasped it, shook it firmly and nodded. “Let’s get comfortable.” He directed them to three leather wingback chairs in front of a large fireplace. “I understand you work for the Shadow League.”

Carson was taken aback. “I don’t know where you got that idea. I work for the Northern Lights Genome Project in Reykjavik.”

Zach shrugged. “Same difference. NLGP, as far as we can tell, is a shell corporation for the Shadow League. They’re running all kinds of shady shit out of Iceland.”

Carson felt as if he’d been punched in the gut.

“Shit, Zach, and Annie tells me I have all the subtlety of a hand grenade.”

“Well, she isn’t wrong,” chuckled Zach. “Deke also says you can be trusted. That’s high praise coming from my sister’s mate. I take it from your reaction that you had no idea.”

“Not just that, but I’ve been trying to convince myself and Mason that the Shadow League doesn’t actually exist.”

“Oh, they exist all right,” said Deke, “and we think NLGP is into whatever they’re doing up to their eyeballs.”

“And Mason?”

Deke and Zach exchanged glances. “I deserve to know. He’s my brother.”

“We’re not sure where he is. Deke was heading out this morning to look for him,” said Zach.

“And why would Deke be doing that?” asked Carson, afraid he knew the answer.

“He’s been working undercover as an operative of the League. In actuality, he’s been working with those of us who are working against them. He was supposed to check in yesterday and didn’t.”

Carson sat back, shaking his head. “Shit. I knew he was hiding something from me. I knew he knew more than he was saying about NLGP. Wait, he didn’t think I was involved, did he?”

“Nothing of the sort. He was trying to figure out how to get you out and safe. He made it plain from the get-go there was no way you were knowingly involved.”

“Damn it, Mason,” Carson muttered under his breath.

“Why don’t you stay down in Otter Cove until we know more about what’s going on,” offered Grayson.

“No. I think I’m better off up at his cabin. If he’s on the run, he won’t bring trouble to this town. He’ll want to go to ground, and if he’s picked up my message, he’ll be expecting

me there. I came down to find out about Mason and get provisions.”

“We can get you set up. We’ll send extra rifles and ammo as well,” said Deke.

Carson was too distraught to eat, so he and Deke went into town to the general store where Deke’s mate loaded him up with way too much food, and Deke went equally overboard with guns, ammo and explosive devices. They loaded it onto a sled that the snowmobile could tow.

After changing back into the polar expedition suit, Carson swung his leg over the snowmobile. Deke handed him a backpack, helping him into it.

“There’s something in there to keep things warm. Annie packed you some strong black coffee as well as something to eat and a bottle of good whiskey for when you get home. Let us know you got up there safe and sound. There should be a shortwave radio hidden somewhere in the cabin. I’ll head out and try to find Mason, and I’ll keep in touch. Mason’s one of the best survivalists out there. Don’t count him out just yet.”

Carson nodded, not wanting to acknowledge his greatest fear. “Deke? If they’ve killed him, I want whoever is responsible to escape.”

He looked at Deke meaningfully. Deke gave a sharp nod. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Good enough.”

Carson started the snowmobile and began the long trek back.



Aleutian Range

Alaska Peninsula, Alaska

The snow had gotten deeper and icier. The sled with all the provisions had begun to act, if not like an anchor, then like a drag. Hiking through the Aleutian Range in Alaska in the

winter was not Carson Payne's idea of a good time, but halfway to the cabin, he realized he was going to have to ditch the snowmobile. The landing strip wasn't far, so at least he could leave the vehicle there.

The range, known for its many active volcanoes, extended from the southwest of Anchorage to the tip of the Alaska Peninsula. It was fucking cold. Even for a snow leopard, it was fucking cold. Why couldn't he have been born a cheetah or a jaguar? They lived in hot, sunny climates. But no, he had to be born a snow leopard—the white, icy shit was literally a part of his species' name. It didn't help that his twin brother, Mason, had loved all things snowy and cold.

Bitching about the cold wasn't going to help anything. He trudged back to Mason's cabin in the mountains, sticking as close to the tree line as he could in case he had to duck for cover. The sled wasn't making things easier. It was loaded down with enough supplies to get him, or them, if Mason ever showed up, through the winter. He'd need to hunt and fish for protein, but he had everything else he'd need. Almost, anyway; Carson regretted not getting the extra case of dark roast coffee.

The sound of the distinctive single engine prop of a de Havilland Beaver shattered the silence of the surrounding mountains. Only, there was something wrong with it—the engine was coughing and sputtering. Carson stopped and held his hand up to shield his eyes, searching the skies for it. As he located it high above him, dread furled low in his gut; smoke streamed behind the plane. The plane was falling steadily through the sky, which it would have if the engine had conked out.

He had no idea where the pilot was headed, but he knew he wasn't going to make it. Carson shrugged, trying to turn his back on the impending emergency. It wasn't any of his business; and after all, sticking his nose in where it didn't belong is what had gotten him into this mess. He took a few more steps, then stopped. Shit! He couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it.

Securing his supplies to the sled, he located a branch stout enough to hold the weight and threw his line up and over the branch. Why did they always make that look so easy in television and movies? It wasn't. The first two attempts missed, and the line fell back down, smacking him in the face. Sighing, he threw the line for the third time, thinking if it didn't work, he would take it as a sign from the universe that he should forget about the poor schmuck of a pilot, leave him to his fate, and continue on his way.

Unfortunately, the end of the line sailed over the branch and returned to him, hitting him in the face again anyway. Carson couldn't decide whether to swear or sigh, so did neither. Instead, he grasped the line and began hauling the sled up into the air. He was damned if some bear would come traipsing along and commandeer his food. Hand over hand, he hauled the heavy load so it was suspended out of reach from even a large bear standing on its hind legs or hanging off a branch or the tree itself trying to get it. Once he had the sled at the proper height, he wrapped the line around the tree several times and then secured it with a figure-eight knot.

Grabbing the small bag he'd taken off the sled, Carson removed his clothes and then shifted from man to snow leopard. He shook himself from nose to tail. Not only was he warmer in his altered form, but he could also cover the distance faster between his current position and where he calculated the plane had crashed. Even if no one survived, which was the most likely scenario, there might be things to salvage from the plane and anything it had been carrying.

Carson bounded off in the direction of the crash, carrying the bag with the clothing he would need to change into after he shifted back. It wasn't ideal, but it was also something he hadn't planned to do. The terrain was rough—a lot of rock and shale, and most of that covered in snow, ice or a combination thereof.

The smoke trail was fading, but he had a good fix on where it would lead. There were a number of rivers and lakes that formed a maze of water features. Some of them, a good bush pilot might be able to land on in an emergency. A cold-

water landing wasn't ideal, but it beat the hell out of slamming into the side of a volcano.

He crested the incline of a mountain and looked down to see the pilot had managed to make it to water but hadn't landed on the pontoons. The nose of the aircraft was submerged, the tail raised up and the pontoons pointing down. If the pilot had survived, he didn't have long. Carson charged down the slope of the mountain, letting its steep incline aid in his speed. At the edge of the lake, he dropped his bag and plunged into the icy water.

Even his thick, two-layered coat didn't provide enough insulation to keep the cold from him completely. He swam with as much speed as he could to get to the plane. There was a distinct buzzing in his head like a bunch of mosquitos had taken up residence there. The cold of the water must be affecting him more than he thought.

He crawled up from the icy water onto the highest end of the pontoon, wedging his paw into the crunched and wrinkled passenger door to gain access to the cabin of the plane. There were no passengers, and the pilot was pitched forward against the console. No way he had survived the crash. No way.

Carson was just turning around, trying not to jostle the unsteady plane, sending it to the bottom of the lake before he could get out, when the dead pilot moaned. *Shit! He couldn't have waited until I was halfway back to shore and couldn't hear him?*

He looked around and spotted a floating sled, which he knew many pilots kept on board to ferry supplies from a dock to their plane. Carson pulled it down and left it sitting on the pontoon at its highest point, balanced precariously. Carefully he made his way forward. With each step, the plane seemed to angle further into the water, groaning with the strain of staying afloat.

Deciding he was running out of time, Carson slashed through the pilot's safety belts with his lethal claws. He grabbed the back of the pilot's parka where the hood was attached to the main part of the coat. He jerked him up and

over, through the back of the seats, backing away as quickly as he could as the plane seemed to give up the ghost and began sliding down into the icy depths.

Slipping the rope handle around his body, he began to swim powerfully toward the shore. He was just able to get the pilot on the float and the float away from the plane before the vortex created by its sinking would have pulled them both under. He dragged himself and the pilot out onto the rocky shore, exhausted from the effort. The plane gave a final groan as it slipped beneath the surface of the water.

The mosquitos in his head had gone from just buzzing to stinging or biting or whatever it was those nasty little critters did. He shook his head and let out the loud yowl that passed for a roar in snow leopards. The pilot moaned again and managed to knock the hood of the parka away from his face. Only it wasn't a *him* at all. It was most definitely a *her*—a very beautiful her. A her he had seen in his dreams time and time again.

She opened her eyes and batted them, not coquettishly, but in an attempt to get them to focus. She took one look at Carson's snow leopard and promptly fainted, which was probably the best thing she could do in the situation. Using the rope as a makeshift harness, Carson began hauling her back to his sled of supplies. Between the two, he should be able to redistribute what he needed to get her and his most vital supplies up to the cabin and leave the rest hanging in the tree. He could come back for it later.

The unconscious woman didn't appear to be damp, but he needed to get her wrapped in some of the thermal blankets he carried with him. And he needed to get her up to the cabin and see how badly she was hurt. There was no easy way to get her down to a doctor, but luckily there was one available by shortwave radio.

What the proverbial fuck? What were the chances that a beautiful bush pilot would crash and require him to play hero?

Then the buzzing in his head suddenly made sense. He supposed those odds increased dramatically when she was

your fated mate.

CHAPTER 6



AMELIA

The fog; the darkness; the pain. You weren't supposed to be in pain when you were dead, were you? Wasn't that part of the reason death was supposed to be peaceful? And dry—she was dry. Shouldn't she be wet if she'd drowned or had otherwise died in a body of water?

Alaska. If she was in Alaska, shouldn't she be cold? Because she was warm—nice and toasty warm.

Amelia sniffed the air. She ventured to open one eye. Flanked on either side by windows, the massive fireplace boasted a roaring fire—complete with the scent of seasoned wood burning and the crackling of logs as the flames danced all around them. She could see snow falling, which made sense. She was in Alaska.

Ouch! Thinking hurt. That wasn't necessarily true. Everything hurt, as if she'd slammed into the side of a mountain, but she hadn't hit a mountain. She'd hit the lake with too much speed and at too steep an angle. Gingerly, she reached up to touch her head—there was a massive bump, and it was even more painful when she touched it. Her head felt thick and as though an enormous hive of bees had taken up residence—buzzing and boring holes into her brain. If this was death, it sucked.

She forced herself to open the other eye. That did nothing to alleviate any of her suffering. 'Suffering?' that was a bit melodramatic. Taking a deeper breath, her lungs felt as if someone had struck a match to them and they too burned with a painful intensity. Maybe 'suffering' wasn't over-the-top. She

felt weak, sore, and ill. Everything hurt or did not seem to work quite right.

She looked around the room—it seemed to be a large, open cabin consisting of this main room that had a kitchen, seating/living area as well as a sleeping one. There were three doors—two that seemed to lead outside and the third into what she assumed and hoped was a bathroom. She couldn't hear anyone milling around in there. She seemed to be completely alone, but how had she made it from the plane to this cabin? Who had been there to help her?

Slowly and carefully, she made it into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Dizziness and nausea made their presence known, and she closed her eyes to see if she could abate both. Not gone, but a little better. Opening her eyes, she used the headboard to steady her balance. Setting her feet on the floor, Amelia made herself rise up from the bed, not moving until she felt stable. Tentatively, she moved her feet and stumbled to the bathroom.

Where the hell was she? How the hell had she arrived here? Was she safe? Didn't matter. She'd figure all that out later. Right now she needed to get to the bathroom. Nothing made sense; the room was spinning, and everything felt like it was swathed in cotton batting.

Only it wasn't. Not even halfway to the door of the bathroom, her feet refused to work as her knees buckled and she fell to the floor. She felt a cold rush of arctic air as one of the doors opened and the light it let in was mostly canceled out by the dark shadow of a decidedly male form. Amelia heard him curse as he slammed the door and stomped toward her as she lay prone on the smooth, hardwood floor. She tried to speak to ask him if he could stomp any quieter, as the pounding on the floor was doing nothing to alleviate her headache. Didn't he know she was dying here—or was she dead already, and this was some kind of purgatory?

The pounding on the floor stopped and she managed to turn her head to see him divesting himself of his snow-crusted clothing and boots. She tried to lift up and couldn't so began to crawl. It didn't seem to be a good idea to just lie there and wait

for whoever this was to do whatever he planned to do, especially given she was too weak to do anything to stop him.

Two feet in heavy wool socks appeared in front of her eyes. She sniffed—not bad. Feet were usually stinky, but his weren't. In fact, his entire presence was soothing, which was odd given she hadn't a clue as to who he was. He leaned over and scooped her up off the floor, carrying her back to the bed in two strides. She protested and he detoured to the bathroom, giving her a bit of privacy. For all it had cost her, it should have taken him more than two steps to get her back under the covers. He left her after he'd made her as comfortable as possible. Amelia laid back and enjoyed snuggling under the covers. The soft bed was much better than the hard floor.

The large, male presence was back. She couldn't get her eyes to focus enough to really make out more than 'large, male presence.' He nudged her over and sat down, helping her to sit up and offering her pills, which she pushed away. He brought his hand to her lips, encouraging her to open her mouth. He was nuts if he thought she was taking anything from him.

“Okay, be stubborn. We'll do this the hard way,” he rumbled in a deep, melodic voice. He brought his hand up to pinch her nose closed and she reactively opened her mouth. Popping the pills inside, he offered her water with which to swallow them.

Amelia did so, taking another sip and spitting the water at him. “Bastard,” she said weakly.

Instead of getting angry or retaliating in any way, he merely chuckled, which made her feel worse as he obviously didn't perceive her as any kind of threat. Quietly, like an eel moving through water, recognition and remembrance began to return. The package. Where was the package? She was supposed to have dropped off a package—sent it out the side of her plane with its own little parachute. Had she done that? Where was the package?

She began to struggle in earnest.

“Take it easy. Can you tell me your name?”

“Get off me,” she said pushing at his massive form and having no success whatsoever. “Who are you?”

“I’m Carson, and you are?”

“None of your damn business. Where’s my plane?”

“I suspect by now it’s at the bottom of the lake.”

“No. No. No. It can’t be. The package? The one behind the seat. Where is it?”

“Probably at the bottom of the lake with the rest of your plane and whatever else you had in it.”

“No,” she wailed. “I need that package. If I can get it to the person who was supposed to pick it up, they’ll pay me the balance they owe me, and I can pay off my plane.” She knew she was rambling, but hoped she was at least rambling intelligibly.

“That would be the plane at the bottom of the lake? Probably better just to claim a total loss on your insurance.”

“You don’t understand. I need to get that package delivered. Tevryn said it was important. If nothing else, I have a reputation to maintain.”

“You crashed your airplane. You survived, but just barely. I’d think that would be the most important thing.”

“You’d think wrong. Now, get off me,” she said, pushing away from him to make a dramatic escape. Only when the world started spinning and she had to grasp the sides of the mattress and close her eyes to keep from puking or falling off the bed, it lessened the dramatic impact.

Heat flushed her skin and rushed through her system. Part of it was because the sexy man on the other side of the bed was having an effect on her. Was it possible to feel aroused and nauseous at the same time? Apparently so.

“Take it easy, Ms. None of Your Business.”

“Amelia,” she snuffled, not bothering to open her eyes. “It’s Amelia.”

“See? We’re making progress.” Two firm hands reached out to pull her back into the middle of the bed, pressing her back into the pillows as he swung her legs back up onto the mattress. “You need to rest, Amelia.”

“What happened? How did I get here?”

“I saw your plane was in trouble and so I went to see if I could help. By the time I got there, you’d ditched your plane in the water, which was probably the only reason you survived the impact. The nose was submerged. I swam out to check for survivors, which is when I found you...”

“And the package?”

“Forget the package. I barely managed to drag you out and onto the floating sled. I hauled you out of the lake and then up to the cabin. You’ve been out of it for the most part since then.”

Amelia shook her head and began to shiver violently. “I don’t feel good.”

“I know. It’ll be all right.”

“I’m sick, and I’m hurt.”

“I can’t see or feel any major injuries, but you’re pretty banged up.”

“The package.”

“Forget the package. Let’s get you healed up, and then we’ll worry about the package. I’m going to take care of you, Amelia. I need you to believe that.”

She nodded—not just to reassure him, but because she knew it was true. There was something about him that she trusted instinctively. It was as if she’d known him before, perhaps in some other life. But somehow something deep inside her recognized and trusted something deep within him. Two souls touching, reconnecting.

As he pulled her into his arms, she tried to resist, but it was so much better just to listen to the deep purring that emanated from his chest, to feel it wrapping around her in a safe cocoon. She felt a shiver but couldn’t identify if it was cold, desire, or

something else. It didn't matter. She was where she seemed to belong and for right now that would have to be enough.

He laid her down, wrapping his body around hers and Amelia gave over to the infinite comfort and caring he seemed to offer. She rubbed her cheek against his upper arm as he spooned against her, nuzzling him.

“Sleep,” he rumbled reassuringly.

“For now,” she answered, understanding there would come a time when sleep would not be the balm she needed for her ravaged body.

Her plane was gone; the package was gone. But she was alive, which meant there was nothing cast in stone as far as the future was concerned. She would show the Phoenix Corp that she was the pilot they wanted to hire. She'd be damned if a downed plane and injured body would keep her from reclaiming the rest of that money and missing out on other lucrative contracts.

But for now, she'd snuggle into Carson's body and let the noise that seemed to come from him weave its way into her being and offer her peace, security and something more. What that more might be was also in question, but answers could wait. Sleep and safety could not.

CHAPTER 7



CARSON

He held her close, purring to her soothingly and letting the sound and his presence reach out to her down a link she didn't even know existed. She didn't need to know. What she needed was sleep and an antibiotic. Her fever had started the second day and had been climbing. So far he'd been able if not to abate it, then at least to slow it down, but it was a fight he now feared he was losing.

Mason's medicine chest was impressive, but mostly herbal. There were no prescriptions. Only the herbal remedies and over-the-counter drugs. Easing out from beneath her, he settled her back beneath the covers and into the soft mattress before returning to the kitchen area. One of the nice things about the design of Mason's cabin was that he could see her from everywhere but the bath. He removed what appeared to be organic honey from the pantry and went into the root cellar for ginger.

He cut a ginger root into pieces and placed it in cold water on the wood stove. Mason had a dual hot plate if quicker heat was needed, but Carson wanted to use as little electricity from the generator as possible. Given the time of year, he was fairly sure his brother had enough fuel, but with finite resources it was always best to be conservative. Once the water began to boil, he let the ginger steep into a rich, golden tea before removing it from the heat and straining it into a glass jar. He poured some into a mug and allowed it to cool while he began chopping vegetables to be stewed with venison in a Dutch oven. Once they were cooked, he'd make rustic mashed

potatoes, to cover the venison and vegetables to make a forest version of shepherd's pie.

The ginger tea was cool enough to drink but still warming. Carson added honey to the mug and returned to Amelia. Lifting her so that she rested against him, he lifted the fragrant tea to her lips and encouraged her to sip. When that didn't work, he poured small amounts into her mouth and let instinct take over. She swallowed and he was able to get some of the fever reducing liquid down her throat.

She was burning up. The dip into the frigid lake and slow descent into hypothermia hadn't done her any favors, but he'd been able to remove her to dry land and get her out of her cold, wet clothing fairly quickly. With her wrapped in the warm, dry blankets, he'd been able to travois her up to the cabin. But the shivering and fever had quickly taken hold, and she didn't seem to be getting better.

What was more worrying was the rattle coming from her chest when she breathed. Her skin seemed too flushed. Pneumonia, more than likely, which meant he was going to need antibiotics. She had yet to start coughing heavily or having real trouble breathing, but Carson feared they were heading that way in the not-too-distant future.

He could use the shortwave radio and call for help once he located it. He could radio for a medical extraction from the landing strip. All he'd need to do was load her onto the sled and drag her back down to the landing strip. The problem that presented itself was the weather. The snow had set in and although the cabin was warm and secure, his concern was that his mate needed more care than he could provide to her.

Once she was resting easy again, he went into the bath to get a cold compress for her forehead. As he entered the bath, he stared at the locked door. What the hell did Mason have in there? Who exactly was it locked against? It wasn't like he needed to worry about drop-in visitors or even burglars. He and Amelia were completely alone. The idea that there might be antibiotics in there seemed ludicrous and Carson wasn't at all sure he wanted to know what secrets Mason was keeping.

Settling the cold compress on her fevered brow, Carson moved back to the kitchen to stir the simmering venison and vegetables. He added a dash of seasonings and tasted. Good. It would be nourishing and tasty when it was done.

He needed to find that radio. He moved around the cabin, bending over to test planks of flooring that didn't seem as secure as others. Finally, under the bed, he discovered several shorter, loose ones that easily slid back to reveal a hole. He couldn't see into the hole very well, but he could feel some kind of protective bag around something solid. Lying on his belly, he retrieved the bag, held his breath and removed the item from the bag.

It wasn't a radio. Instead, it was a locked metal box. What the hell was up with Mason and all his locks? Picking up the box and checking to see if Amelia was all right for the moment, he went into the kitchen, picked up the meat tenderizing tool, which was shaped like some kind of weird hammer, and brought it down on the lock. The little lock didn't stand a chance against the hammer and Carson's growing sense of frustration and concern.

The contents of the box weren't what he was expecting, either. He'd hoped for a small radio or some kind of communication device. Instead, he found several passports from different countries under different names, other identification documentation and cash—lots and lots of cash. Other than very expensive fuel with which to start a fire, none of it was helpful or even germane to the situation in which he found himself and his mate.

He gazed out the window above the kitchen sink, grasping the countertops and growling slowly in frustration and anger. The sky looked grim. The snow continued to fall, blanketing the already white landscape with even more white. They seemed to be shrouded in the stuff—blocking out the world so that it felt like they were all alone. He turned to look at Amelia. His mate. She coughed and the rattle from her chest was more pronounced. He was beginning to understand that just as her survival had depended on him pulling her from her

plane and certain death in the icy lake, so now did it depend on him to do whatever he needed to in order to ensure she lived.

Turn her. He shook his head to dispel the notion. The turning of a human was never done lightly and rarely done without her informed consent.

Turn her. Even if she was awake, there was no way she was well enough or that her fevered brain could process all the risks and consequences of abandoning her humanity to become a snow leopard-shifter. But what other alternative did he have?

Turn her.

One of the miraculous things about turning a human to a shifter of any kind was that the creature DNA—for it held true among all shifters—would cure whatever human ailment existed in the one being turned. *Turn her.* What if he did turn her without her consent? Would she accept the gift? Would she hate him for all eternity for robbing her of her humanity? Would she even survive the transition?

If he turned her, and if she survived, she would be furious and might never forgive him. Was he willing to force a pair bond on her—something which would plague both of them until their death? Was the only alternative to keep her as his captive mate until she accepted the inevitability of her fate? There was nothing to recommend any of these outcomes. However, it was beginning to become clear that it was either turn her or watch her succumb to the ravages of the pneumonia that was beginning to wrap the icy fingers of death around her.

Turn her.

Shaking his head to try and clear it of his morose and troubling thoughts, he went outside to bring in more wood so that if the snow got worse, they would have enough at the ready inside. But the cold, stark air did nothing to lift his thoughts or spirits. The weather outside was grim and showed no signs of letting up. He loaded wood onto the sled and ferried it back to the cabin, where he took it inside and stacked it in the cellar. It would be out of the way, but still easily accessible.

Once that was done, Carson checked on Amelia, who seemed no worse, but none the better either. He wanted to do a quick perimeter check and that was best done as a snow leopard. After all, it's what his shifted form was designed for. Removing his boots and clothes, Carson called forth his inner beast. The great cat leapt forward, as if to say, 'about time.' The roiling mist of color and lightning swirled around him. He craned his neck and shook all over before disappearing through the craftily engineered escape door incorporated into the kitchen cupboards. Unless you knew it was there, it was virtually impossible to detect.

Once outside, the air temperature and deep snow no longer bothered him. Breaking into a gallop, he bounded out and away from the cabin in ever expanding concentric circles, widening the distance between himself and the cabin. It occurred to him as he thought about the security of their position and protecting Amelia that having one of the sleds down in the cellar, loaded with supplies, a rifle and a spot he could make safe and warm for her might not be a bad idea. He decided he would bring one of the sleds inside on his return. He'd make sure it was one that could be easily attached to some kind of motorized vehicle—snowmobile or ATV—in case he was able to get to one. Once he had it inside the cellar where it could dry, he would take down the things he'd need. He'd put it all together if they had time, but at least he was better prepared than he had been.

As he charged through the virgin snow, he noted that there were no prints and no sign of anything anywhere near the cabin. They were as safe and as isolated as he had hoped they'd be. They were also completely snowed in.

Turn her. At least if he turned her now, she might have time to transition and they could leave the cabin as snow leopards, which would make traveling much easier and safer.

Once Carson was convinced their position was secure, he returned to the cabin, re-entering through what he thought of as the shifter door, and he shifted back into his human form. Once dressed, he walked to the bed and gazed down at his mate. She was beautiful and getting sicker by the minute. Her

sleep was fitful, and her fever appeared to be skyrocketing. He was coming to that fork in the road where he either chose to turn her without her consent or allowed her to die. *Turn her.*

He snapped his head around to look at the bathroom. The locked door. Maybe there was something in there he could use to help Amelia—medical supplies, some way to communicate with the outside world. Something. Fuck Mason and his secrets. Carson spun on his heel and stalked to the bath. He confronted the door. The padlock could be easily dealt with—not so much the deadbolt lock. Where might Mason keep the key?

Carson was fairly sure it would be handy and easily accessible if one knew where to look. He examined the shower and found nothing. He lifted the lid of the toilet tank and again there was nothing. He placed the lid back on the tank and turned toward the sink. He halted. Or was there? Had his eye caught something in the flushing mechanism that his brain was only now processing?

He returned to the toilet and removed the lid from the tank. There, attached to the chain of the flapper at the bottom of the tank was a clear line—what appeared to be a clear fishing line. Carefully, Carson lifted the flapper and began to draw the fishing line out, grinning as the steel head of a key revealed itself. Once he had it in hand, he put the toilet back together and returned to the door. As he'd hoped, the key fit the deadbolt lock and easily opened it. The same key opened the small padlock. *Clever, Mason.*

The room was nothing at all like what he'd imagined. An automatic motion-detected fixture flooded the room with light from overhead. There was a rack of guns and more ammo and explosive ordinance than he'd ever seen outside of a military armory. No medical supplies that he could see, but several polar expedition suits, snowshoes and a trap door, which Carson suspected led down to the tunnel. More than that, there was a long desk with several computer monitors, laptops, and desktop CPUs, as well as printers and some electronic gear Carson didn't even recognize. He toggled on what looked to

be the main switch and lights started blinking and the soft whirring of electronic gear coming to life could be heard.

He wanted to dive into it to see if there was some kind of communication device, but a rasping cough from the other room drew his attention and beckoned him back to her side. He stared down at her. He could tell her condition was worsening. Even if there was a mainline to a medical evac unit in there, Carson didn't believe they could arrive in time to save her. *Turn her.*

The time had come—he either turned her, regardless of the outcome, or he held her and tried to give her comfort while she died. Not much of a choice at all. Removing his clothes, he crawled naked into bed with her, spooning his front to her back and leaning her so that she was angled so he could access her neck. Pushing her hair out of the way, he trailed kisses along the nape of her neck and she moaned in response. Allowing his fangs to elongate, Carson lowered his mouth, took her neck in a claiming bite, and sank his teeth into her.

Turn her. At destiny's prodding, he did just that.

CHAPTER 8



AMELIA

She could feel her spirit drifting. No longer was she tied to earth or this plane of existence. She floated somewhere up above it all. She looked down and could see Carson's body wrapped around hers. He spooned against her and kissed the back of her neck and then there was pain—blinding, breathtaking, unbearable pain. The sonofabitch had bitten her. She could see two rivulets of blood trickling past his lips, could feel his *fangs* piercing her flesh and tearing at it before he lifted his head and delicately licked at the wounds he'd inflicted, trying to soothe her. It was a little late for that. The damage was done.

Why? Why had he done it? Was she going to die? Was he going to eat her? And not in a sensual, sexual way? She didn't feel like she was dying—just drifting. She chose not to cling to her corporeal form; instead she felt like a leaf driven on the wind to a future she had never imagined. The weather turned in her dreams and storms raged around her. In her mind, she heard the call of a great cat and when she looked ahead, she could see only darkness except for a small, shining light at the end of the tunnel. Surrounded by the light stood a great snow leopard and Carson. What was he doing here? For that matter, what was the snow leopard doing here? And where the hell was 'here?'

Carson stretched out his hand to her. "Come, mate," he beckoned softly. She didn't know if he was talking to her, but she hoped he was. She was glad he was here, with her, which seemed simultaneously strange and completely normal.

Placing her hand in his, he drew her close and they turned and walked toward what seemed to be a great Polaris. At either of their sides, a snow leopard walked.

The bright, white light that surrounded them seemed to have a magnetic pull. Walking with Carson and the two snow leopards was peaceful, and all her cares seemed to float away.

“It is not your time,” said Carson.

“No, you saved me.”

“I pulled you from the plane and initiated the gift, but it is she,” he said, pointing to the snow leopard that trilled at her side, “who saved you. We cannot tarry too long in the light. We must return to the earth filled with shadows, but ones that together with our comrades we will see parted.”

Amelia cocked her head to one side. “This has got to be a dream because you don’t talk that way in real life.”

He chuckled and the sound enveloped her as she and the snow leopard at her side were drawn back through some kind of vortex of thunder, lightning, and blazing shards of color.

“*Do not be afraid,*” said the snow leopard. “*We are one now.*”

A talking snow leopard? Carson speaking like an announcer for the BBC? Weird.

Her companion had abandoned her, and she now found herself floating in a kind of flowery essence with a light shining above. She kicked her legs and brought her arms up and then down, propelling her toward the light. As she emerged, she could feel Carson’s presence, but this time not in some esoteric way. He was real and was alive, and so was she. Since the first time she’d opened her eyes before the crash, she didn’t hurt. Her body felt renewed and restored. Not only that, but the only heat she felt was from the flush of arousal as it surged through her system.

It wasn’t that Amelia didn’t like sex—she did, very much. It was just that so often it felt more like a business transaction or was wholly disappointing, but then she’d never felt her system come alive the way it was now. Her skin tingled and

she could feel her blood racing through her veins, warming her. She recognized she had a fever, but it wasn't from an infection or a virus. It was from the man who stood towering above her, looking down at her with a decidedly feral and possessive stare.

Sex had always been pleasant, even fun sometimes, but although the fire racing through her blood felt good, pleasant wasn't the word for it. It was overwhelming... electric—as if she were a live wire, crackling, and sparking in the night. Amelia rose up from the bed, taking the step that stretched between them and winding her arms around his neck, pressing her naked body into his and feeling his hard length throbbing between them. His arms came around her; bands of steel that encased her in his strong embrace. She laid her head on his sculpted chest and felt the ridges of washboard abs as he breathed in and out.

Gently he turned her in his arms, wrapping one around her waist while he brought his other hand up to palm her breast and pluck at her stiffened nipple. Amelia leaned back against him and sighed contentedly. He turned his hand around and trailed the back of it down her torso, covering her mound briefly before swirling his finger around her engorged clit and allowing it to slide between the folds of her sex.

“You are mine,” Carson purred as he nibbled and then nipped at her neck.

“I wouldn't go that far,” Amelia murmured, trying to regain her equilibrium and failing as his fingers slipped lightly into her wet heat.

“I would, and where I lead, you will follow.”

“Is that a threat?” she asked, trying to find the will to resist his strong hands, the purring sound that seemed to surround her and make her more captive than even the cage of his embrace.

“No, my mate, that is a promise. Come for me,” he rumbled, bringing the slick from her pussy up to her clit, where he rubbed it in, rotating around the little nub over and over.

She wasn't one to orgasm easily and surely it would take more than the evidence of his desire pulsing behind her and one hand fondling her nether regions while the other came up to roll, tug and pinch her nipples to make her do so now. It would take far more—or not. She felt the swell of pleasure rise and roll over her in a heated rush as she gasped and grabbed each of his arms in one of her hands. Arching her back, she called his name with a quiet desperation she had never known before. What had once been taut and strained from her powerful climax, now felt relaxed and without form. She felt like a wet noodle in his arms—a wonderfully satisfied wet noodle, but there were no hard edges to her body.

She didn't normally allow her body to just collapse into a man's arms, expecting him to keep her from hitting the ground, but she had no doubt Carson would keep her from falling. She felt him lean down, one arm coming behind her knees as he lifted her up and took them back to the bed. Carson laid her reverently on the bed, but not lengthwise as he had done before when he put her to bed, tucking her in and taking care of her.

He gently bent each leg at the knee and placed her feet on the edge of the mattress, pulling her forward so that he was standing between her legs—her thighs spread wantonly. There was something about the way he had taken charge, not asking her what she wanted, but giving it to her, nonetheless. He had her in the most vulnerable, intimate position she'd ever been in.

Amelia stared at his cock. It was a glorious thing, long and thick and hard as a rock, with the smallest drip of precum at its tip. She wanted to look at it, study it, touch it, suck it and then it was gone as he sank to his knees and leaned over, putting his mouth on her pussy. The vibration from his purring was almost her undoing. He ran his tongue around her labia, moaning in pure pleasure.

“I knew you would be delicious,” he rumbled.

“Carson, wait. We need to talk.”

“I don’t talk with my mouth full,” he said, lowering his head and beginning to feast on her sex as if she was the first meal offered to a starving man.

She wanted to argue but his lips and tongue felt so good. Her body, which only moments before had been completely spent and satiated was now on fire and wanting, no needing, more. Amelia wanted him to move up her body and penetrate her with that cock she so wanted to spend time with. But they needed to talk. Amelia wriggled, trying to dislodge his mouth.

He lifted his head. “Not yet,” he purred as one finger and then a second was pressed inside her, curling up so he could stroke the sweet spot deep inside.

Amelia lay back, her hands grasping the bedclothes as he slowly stroked her sheath, and his mouth sucked a nipple into its waiting warmth. He licked, sucked, and nipped her pebbled peak then he sucked it deeper and his fingers scissored inside her. Her back bowed and her head thrashed from side to side as she fisted the bedding and cried out his name.

Carson stood, lifting her up and repositioning her on the bed. His cock seemed to loom above her before he covered her body with his, settling between her legs, making a place for himself there. He pressed her into the mattress, and she wound her legs around him, bringing her arms up to encircle his neck. His cock was poised at her entrance, nestled there as if it had been like this with them a thousand times before. He looked down at her, lowering his head to capture her mouth as he thrust inside her, deep and hard and held himself still, allowing her to accommodate to his size and to being filled by him. She gasped and her eyes widened before narrowing to the hooded gaze of a woman enjoying what was being done with her body. His cock was perfect inside her, and she moved her hips in invitation.

Dragging his cock back until it was almost out, he surged back in with power and grace. She shifted her arms so they came up under his and she could grasp his shoulder blades and trail her nails down his back. He chuckled as over and over again, he stroked in and out.

“God yes,” she moaned.

That seemed to take the leash off him, and he began to pound inside her—fucking her hard, driving into her over and over again, holding her hips so that he could force himself deeper. She could feel nothing but pleasure and connection. The obvious one being his cock up inside her, but there was something more, something more binding and far more meaningful than just a hard cock inside her soft and yielding pussy.

She tightened around him with little to no warning, calling his name as he gave her a final, brutal thrust, burying himself up to his balls as he emptied himself into her, bathing her pussy with his warmth.

“Mine,” he purred as he rolled from her body, dragging her to his and drawing the covers up around them.

He was a possessive and dominating bastard—she had to give him that, but somehow, she didn't mind. She found her head fit perfectly in the crook of his shoulder with her hand splayed on his chest. She knew she should say something, but instead she burrowed closer against him, allowing the resonating purr that seemed to be a part of him to settle over them. She was drawn into the land of Morpheus, and reality and wakefulness slipped peacefully away.

CHAPTER 9



AMELIA

When she woke, the cabin was shrouded in darkness. The only light came from the fireplace as the logs crackled merrily, the flames feeding on each other and the wood. She lay listening to the strong, steady beat of Carson's heart. If they were in any place but here, she'd just slip out of the bed and be gone before the sun's first rays kissed the sky, but that wasn't a possibility. She was snowbound in a cabin with a man she knew little to nothing about.

There was something different about what had happened. Forget the fact that she barely knew him. Forget the fact that he hadn't been wearing a condom—she was on birth control, but still they should have at least talked about safe sex. Forget the fact that they were snowed in and were healthy adults with strong libidos. Forget the fact that the sex had been good; no, that wasn't true. The sex had been amazing. None of that mattered.

The difference wasn't in what had happened but in how she felt. Not the stupid, gooey feelings that wanted to bubble up within her. Amelia was entertaining none of that because of all of the 'forget' reasons she'd just listed. No, the difference in how she felt physically was the big difference. For one thing, earlier in the day she'd felt her life slipping away. She'd been aware that he was doing everything in his power to cure her. After all, he'd saved her from certain death when he'd pulled her from the sinking plane.

Not only did she no longer feel sick or weak, but she also felt as if something fundamental had shifted within her. Not

just her feelings or her fever breaking, but something deep and important. Something basic and profound. The image of the snow leopard prowled in her mind, and she remembered it saying, 'we are one.' What the hell did that mean? And why had Carson and a larger, presumably male snow leopard been in the same dream? It had been an odd, yet not confusing dream.

Why was that? Shouldn't a dream that made no sense be confusing? Instead, this one had been comforting and as she thought about it, it seemed to settle something within her. She focused inward, finding the snow leopard and looking at it. It quit prowling, laid down and cleaned its paws before regarding her with a like measure of curiosity.

Amelia didn't hold the snow leopard's gaze and shook her head to try and clear it. Before the image dissipated, she was fairly certain the thing was laughing at her. She reached beneath her hair and found what she really wanted to believe had just been part of a dream—two holes in the back of her neck about the width and size of a pair of fangs from a large cat. How the hell was that even possible?

She needed space—space to think and to check out how badly she'd been bitten—if she'd been bitten at all. As far as she knew, what felt like two puncture wounds could be something entirely different. Amelia wasn't sure, but she wasn't about to just jump to the conclusion that she had been bitten by an endangered species that had no business being in Alaska just because she'd seen it in a dream or a delusion or a hallucination of whatever the hell that was.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Carson had slipped her some hallucinogenic in what he'd been ladling down her throat, and she was on a bad trip from an illicit substance. She warmed to the idea that she'd been drugged and none of what she'd felt happened or how she was feeling was really pertinent to her reality—she was trapped in a cabin with some guy she didn't know. Maybe he'd given her ecstasy or Rohypnol, or one of the other so-called date-rape drugs were responsible for her uninhibited response. She didn't want to believe that of Carson. Maybe they'd both been drugged.

That had to be it. It accounted for the damn buzzing in her head that seemed to have left her. Maybe they'd been kidnapped by some sick cult and were being held here against their will and being force fed drugs that kept them from making rational, informed decisions. She nodded to herself. As farfetched as that sounded, it actually made the most sense.

She needed to talk to Carson. Perhaps he had a better grasp on the situation. Still, there was something to be said about not being in the same bed with him when she asked. If she could just manage to get off the bed, she could grab a sweater and curl up on the sofa by the fire. She had barely managed to roll away from him, when his hand smacked her bare ass before closing like a vice around her waist.

“Don't,” he growled.

Amelia reached down to try and pry his fingers loose. When that didn't work, she turned in his arms and took his bicep firmly in her teeth and bit down.

“Shit!” he snarled, spinning away from her and up off the bed.

Amelia rolled into a sitting position and stood up, turning to face him with the bed between them. “Hurts, doesn't it?”

“You bit me,” he accused.

“You bit me first,” she returned.

“That was different.”

“So, you don't deny it?”

“Well, it's not like you could bite the back of your neck yourself, and we're the only ones here.”

“You bit me.” The accusation was now on the other foot.

Carson brought his hand up and rubbed the back of his neck, picked up his jeans from the end of the bed and pulled them on.

“I can explain, but you must be hungry.”

“If anything, I'm hangry—you know that icky combination of hungry and angry?” When he looked at her

blankly, she stomped her foot, making her breasts bounce and catching his attention. She grabbed the heavy, V-neck sweater he'd had on earlier, pulling it over her head and allowing it to fall to mid-thigh. "Pay attention, you sonofabitch. You bit me."

"I know, but I can explain it, although in the mood you're in, I'm not sure you'll care."

"Probably not, but I am hungry. Do you cook?"

"Yes. There's not a lot to do in Reykjavik, so I took classes."

"Iceland? You live in Iceland? This weather must seem downright temperate to you."

"Not a chance. Iceland really isn't all that cold. I mean it gets colder in the winter than some places, but it's the tropics compared to Alaska. So why don't we head over to the kitchen? You can sit at the island, and I'll make you a cup of coffee or tea. How hungry are you? Like do you need a snack while I make something more substantive?"

"I'm ravenous, but I can wait."

"Nonsense. I picked up some cured meats, cheese and crackers in Otter Cove. I'll put something together you can nibble on. The venison and vegetables are pretty much done. I just need to cook and smash the potatoes..."

"Shepherd's pie? Made with venison? I hope you're a really good cook because that sounds amazing."

He grinned at her. She realized that when he smiled, it softened the sharp, angular features of his face, and there were crinkles around the corners of his ice-blue eyes, making them appear merry and bright.

"Next time, I'll put you to work helping me peel and chop the veggies."

"Uh, you might want to rethink that. If you give me a vegetable peeler, I can clean and peel vegetables. However, giving me a knife in a kitchen tends to produce rather unexpected and bloody results."

Carson laughed. “Good to know.” He came around the end of the bed and reached for her. Amelia pulled back. “Seriously? If I was going to hurt you, wouldn’t it have been easier to just let you go down with your plane or let the fever or pneumonia take you?”

He had a point. “Yes, but then you couldn’t have enjoyed sex with me.” She couldn’t believe she’d just said that and been joking.

“True enough,” he chuckled. “And there is little I wouldn’t endure to have experienced that.”

This time when he reached out to stroke his finger down her jawline, not only didn’t she flinch, but she leaned her cheek into his hand.

“It’ll be all right, Amelia. Let me get us fed, and we can talk about it over dinner. I want to show you something as soon as I get the potatoes cut up and in boiling water.”

“I can peel them for you.”

“What? And throw away all the nutritional value in the skins? No way.”

Carson made her a small plate of cured and smoked meats, cheeses, dried fruit and vegetables, crackers and complementary condiments – honey, jams, chutney, and a couple of mustards.

“Yum,” she said as he set it down. “You must have had a lot of time on your hands in Iceland.”

He shrugged. “There are only so many girls you can fuck that you don’t work with. After a while, meaningless relationships and recreational sex can get old.”

“So should I worry that we had unprotected sex?”

His knife stopped mid-chop. “No. I am absolutely clean, and I doubt you’d get pregnant so close to having been so sick, but if you do, the child will be ours. I won’t run out on you, Amelia. You are neither meaningless nor recreational to me. What happened over there,” he pointed to the bed with his

knife, “was important to me. I hope when you hear me out, it’ll be important to you, as well.”

Amelia was a little stunned by his declaration. He’d gone from Charming Guy to Serious Guy in the blink of an eye.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m clean, too, and I’m on birth control.”

He nodded and placed the cut-up potatoes into a pot of boiling water, wiped the knife blade down and put it in the sink. “Come on; I want to show you something.”

Amelia hopped off the counter stool and followed him to the pantry. “Okay, you have a pantry.”

“Technically, my brother Mason has a pantry. It’s his cabin, but it’s not the pantry, per se, that I wanted to show you.” He walked to the side pantry at the back and dislodged part of the cabinetry to form a lever, which he tripped and then pulled the shelf away from the wall to reveal a hole in the floor. “There’s a ladder which leads to a tunnel which takes you away from the cabin and lets you come up several miles away. If anything happens and I tell you to run, you get to this pantry, close the door behind you, go down the ladder, and when you get to the bottom, you pull the lever that moves it back into place.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll either be behind you or not. It doesn’t matter. There are a couple of backpacks loaded with survival gear. Can you handle a gun?”

“Yes, and I’m a pretty good shot with a rifle, a shotgun, or a handgun.”

“Good. Then you take what you need from the staging area at the bottom and get away. There’s survival gear at the end of the tunnel.”

“I’m not leaving without you.” She suddenly felt a strong pull to this man and that she owed him a loyalty she reserved for very few people, not to mention the debt she’d incurred when he’d saved her life.

“You’ll do what I tell you.”

“What’s going on?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “It’s a long story and I don’t know much of it.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Good. Being afraid keeps you on your toes. We’re safe right now. There are traps and alarms. I also go out and check the perimeter once a day.”

“Paranoid much?”

“It’s only paranoia if you don’t believe there aren’t people out to get you. I’m not sure that there are, but more importantly I’m not sure that there aren’t. Now that I know you aren’t going to die, we can start focusing on figuring out what the hell is going on. How good are you with computer equipment?”

“I can send emails and search the internet, but other than that. I’m not much good.”

“Would you recognize a communication system?”

“You mean like a shortwave radio?” He nodded. She grinned. “Finally, I’ve earned my geek stripes. I have an extensive system in my condo. And I can actually do some repair work if needed.”

“Good girl,” he purred, and she felt the praise wash over her in a way that made her believe things were going to be okay.

“Come on, let’s get the pantry put back together, and I’ll finish up dinner.”

“Better yet, you work on dinner. I’ll grab a bottle of wine and then start snacking on that tray you made.”

“Sounds good.”

He leaned over, brushing her lips with his and surprising them both. But not as much as when she grabbed both sides of his face and pulled him in for a proper kiss—one that held passion and promise. Carson said nothing but the grin that split

his face reminded her very much of the one in Lewis Carroll's books.

Spinning on his heel, he walked back out into the main room, whistling a jaunty tune. Oh god, what had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER 10



AMELIA

*A*melia wanted to slap her hand against her forehead. What the hell had she been thinking? There was the problem in a nutshell. She hadn't been thinking, only reacting. That brief brush of his lips against hers had felt wrong and incomplete. Some part of her had wanted to see if the bond she'd felt with him when they'd had sex was truly there. It was. Now what?

She was in uncharted waters—deep, dark, mysterious uncharted waters. She waited for panic to kick in or at least concern, but there was none. Instead, a warm feeling bubbling in her nether regions began to swell and invade every part of her body, leaving her with a feeling of well-being, which was completely out of place in her current situation. She should be upset and be looking for a way out, but she wasn't. She would be quite content to simply curl up by the fire with this man. A man whose last name was completely unknown to her.

Turning back to the wines, she selected a lovely pinot noir she thought would go with the venison shepherd's pie. She really hoped he was a good cook, because it sounded amazing. She re-entered the kitchen and stood watching him remove the potatoes from the heat and begin smashing them by hand, adding butter, cream, garlic, salt and pepper.

"I thought this looked good," she said, sitting down at the island and placing the bottle on the counter.

Carson turned around and smiled. "Good choice. It's one of Mason's and my favorites."

He picked up the bottle and removed the cork to let the wine breathe. Carson turned back to the Dutch oven and ladled the venison, vegetables and gravy into a casserole dish, covering the concoction with the smashed potatoes and setting it inside the oven to heat through.

“I added a nice Stilton cheddar to the potatoes,” he said.

“That sounds good. The fact is, it smells delicious.” She popped a dried apricot in her mouth.

Once the shepherd’s pie was finished cooking, she and Carson set the table, grabbed a couple of wine glasses and sat down. He poured her a glass of the pinot.

“You have questions. Do you want to ask them, or do you just want me to tell you what I know and then you can ask questions?”

“I have a couple of questions, then I’d like to know what you know.”

“Good enough. Fire away?”

“What the hell is your last name?”

“Payne. I’m Carson Payne and I have a twin brother named Mason. Our parents are dead and even though we live halfway across the world from each other, we get together at least twice a year and keep in contact the rest of the time.”

She nodded, listening closely as she took a bite of the shepherd’s pie. “Oh my god, this is delicious. If you aren’t a chef somewhere, you should be.”

“Thank you. I’m not a chef. I’m a geneticist and work for a company in Reykjavik called Northern Lights Genome Project. Mason at one time was an investigative and scientific journalist. I understand now from friends of his in Otter Cove that he has been investigating a group he probably shouldn’t have been.”

“I’ll get back to that. What’s a geneticist working in Iceland doing in his brother’s secluded cabin in Alaska?”

“I overheard a conversation I shouldn’t have, and I think my employers are either the same people Mason was

investigating or are controlled by them.”

“Do you know where your brother is?”

“Not specifically. When I saw your plane heading down, I was coming back from Otter Cove where I’d gone to see if anyone knew anything.”

“Did they?”

“Not sure. They don’t really know me. I think they know more than they let on, but I also know they were concerned for him.”

“So you came here looking for your brother and a safe place to stay. When he wasn’t here you went to Otter Cove, and on your way back saw my plane go down.” He nodded. “Are we close to the lake?”

“Not very. It was a clear day, and I could hear you were having engine trouble. When I saw the smoke coming out of your engine and the floats, I figured you had spotted the lake. I ran to help. When I saw the nose of your plane submerged, I swam out and pulled you out. I brought you back here and took care of you as best I could. You have to understand, it had started snowing. By the time I got you back to my gear, a blizzard was in full swing, and I didn’t think I could get you down to any kind of medical facility.”

“I kind of remember that. Mostly I remember being in pain and at some point thinking I was going to die. I remember floating above my body and watching with a kind of detached interest, which is when I saw you bite me.”

“Yes. I bit you. I had no other choice. I could feel your life slipping away. You weren’t coherent enough to make a choice, so I made it for you.”

“And the choice you made was to bite me?” she asked incredulously, but without any real rancor.

He chuckled. “Yes. You’re going to throw that in my face for the rest of our lives, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.” She realized what she’d said. He’d made it sound like they would be together for the rest of their lives,

and she'd kind of agreed with him.

Carson reached out, laying his hand gently on her arm. "It's all right, Amelia. I know it's confusing, but you need to trust in your feelings. I know it's a big thing to ask you to trust me, so instead I'll ask that you trust yourself."

"I'm so confused. One minute I get all the warm fuzzy feelings when I think about you, and the next you scare the hell out of me."

"For what it's worth, I'm in uncharted waters as well. I've never felt this way, but I have an understanding of what we're experiencing, which I doubt you do. For me it's a kind of recognition and a good feeling. For you, my guess is that there's some good, but it's offset by a whole lot of 'what the fuck.'"

She laughed, feeling herself relax somewhat. "You nailed it."

He smiled. "Just know that whatever this is—be it us or whatever is going on—we're in it together."

"Do you know what's going on?"

"Between us? Yes. In the bigger sense of things? Only partly."

"So, what's the 'choice' you had to make?"

"In the most basic terms—whether you lived or died. You need to understand that the floating feeling you had was your soul separating from your physical body. You were dying, Amelia. I'm not a doctor, and Mason had nothing up here in terms of antibiotics or whatever to help you. I couldn't stand by and just watch you slip away."

"Why not? You didn't know me."

"But I did. On a deep, primal level, I have always known you. My people call us fated mates. A belief that there is, for some, only one person that will complete their soul. One person with whom they shall be one."

She started to laugh, but the sound died in her throat as she realized he was completely serious and that what he was

saying resonated with something deep inside her. She looked into his clear, blue eyes and saw something reflected there as he nodded.

“Who are your people?” she asked.

“This is where it gets a bit dicey. My people are shifters—snow leopard-shifters to be precise.”

She shook her head. “Excuse me; what did you just say?”

“Nothing wrong with your hearing. My people are snow leopard-shifters. We can shift from our human form to our snow leopard form at will. When I go out to check the perimeter? I do so in my snow leopard form. I pulled you from the plane as a snow leopard. You opened your eyes at one point, saw me, and fainted, which at the time I thought was a good thing.”

He was nuts. He had to be. There was no such thing as some kind of being that was part beast and part man. Oh sure, she’d seen some of the romance novels that used that as a premise, but there were also romance novels that dealt with aliens, orcs, and vampires as heroes. It didn’t make them any more real than some kind of ‘shifter.’

“You don’t honestly expect me to believe that, do you?”

“No; at least not without a demonstration.”

“Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that I buy into this delusion.” She took a large sip of the pinot. “Is it rude to tell you you’re delusional?” Another gulp. “Doesn’t matter. As I said, let’s say I buy the whole ‘I can change into a snow leopard’ thing, what the hell does that have to do with my dying and you biting me?”

“Let me bring you back to the fact that you were on the verge of death. My choices were limited: let you die or bite you and initiate the change.”

She leaned forward. “What change?”

“Shifters can initiate a change that will turn a human to a shifter. Shifter DNA is inherently stronger and basically overwrites the human DNA.”

“Wh... What are you telling me?”

“That I am your fated mate and you were dying. In order to preserve your life, I chose to bite you and initiate the change. You’ve made it through the transition. At one point I feared I had waited too long.”

“Are you trying to make me believe I’m now a snow leopard-shifter?”

As crazy as that sounded, it did make some sense, given the snow leopard who prowled the recesses of her mind. She downed the last of her wine, reached across the table to grab the bottle, and poured another glass.

“Search your feelings, Amelia. You know it’s true.”

Another gulp. He wasn’t wrong. When she thought about it, if he wasn’t crazy, it was the thing that made the most sense. But he had to be crazy, right? There was no such thing as a snow leopard-shifter. She took another drink and started to laugh. Amelia tended to be a happy drunk and she was well on her way to that inebriated state. She took another bite of the shepherd’s pie.

“This really is good, and I’m snowbound with a crazy man.”

“I’m not crazy and neither are you. And this isn’t a dream or a delusion or a hallucination,” he said firmly.

How the hell did he know what she’d been thinking?

“The same way I know that you can hear and feel it when I purr to you,” he said softly.

Amelia had been looking at her plate, afraid to meet his eyes. She took another sip of wine and then raised her eyes to his. She closed her eyes and sighed as the purring sound increased, and she could feel it wrapping around her like the finest cashmere shawl.

She stood up, which required far more effort than it should have, but then the wine had gone straight to her head. Carson stood on the other side of the table from her and moved to the living room. He shucked off his jeans and locked eyes with

hers. Her eyes swept over his body and lingered on his fully engorged cock.

“I’m not looking to jump back in the sack with you.”

He chuckled as he made note of where her gaze had come to rest. “Liar.”

The words were no more out of his mouth than a vortex of thunder, lightning and shards of color all swirled around him. It was a centralized chaotic storm that engulfed him. She might have been more concerned if his face had shown any signs of distress, but it didn’t.

As quickly as the maelstrom had reached its crescendo, it fell away, revealing a gorgeous snow leopard that stared at her with Carson’s eyes.

CHAPTER 11



CARSON

There was no way to prove to her what he was saying without shifting. Amelia was taking this much better than he thought she might. He wasn't sure that she really understood he had taken her humanity without even asking. He imagined once she did, she would be none too happy with him. Or she might realize he'd really had no choice.

He removed himself from the table and from being in close proximity to her and removed his jeans. He had to admit it was a boon to his ego to see the look that came over her face when her eyes came to rest on his cock. It wasn't, so much, that he thought he had a gorgeous cock, but he knew he was endowed, and more than that, her look said she'd experienced great pleasure from it.

Deciding to let his ego and lust take a rest, he called forth his snow leopard and felt the familiar tingle of the shift as it began, and he was surrounded by the swirling mist. That never got old. There was something ancient and magical about being able to shift and experience the vortex of power that surrounded him as he felt his humanity slip away, and the feral beast with whom he shared a soul come forward.

Very deliberately, staring into his eyes, Amelia reached down, picked up the wine glass and drained what was left in it. Setting it down, she took a step back and lifted the chair, brandishing it at him.

"Stay away from me," she said in a firm voice. "Who the hell am I talking to?"

Carson chuffed at her softly before purring to her and trying to send reassuring thoughts down the link to her.

“Stop that. I know that’s you,” she said, threatening him with the chair.

Didn’t she realize that if he meant to harm her, he’d have already done it, and in any event the chair wasn’t much of a deterrent? He watched her shoot a somewhat panicked look towards the front door, then the kitchen door, then the pantry. Three viable means of escape, unless your pursuer was a snow leopard that could reach you before you could make it to any of them.

He increased the strength of the purr; Amelia shook her head as if banishing him from her thoughts. She pointed the legs of the chair at him again. “Nice kitty. Stay, kitty.”

‘Stay kitty?’ What the hell did she think he was? A well-trained Saint Bernard?

Amelia threw the chair at him with both deliberation and good aim. Carson had to leap to the side to avoid being hit. Without thinking and in response to the threat, he snarled, only to realize Amelia had the good sense not to wait to see if she’d managed to hit him. Instead, she had sprinted to the closest door and had run out into the snow. Where she thought she was going in this weather dressed only in one of his sweaters was beyond him. She’d freeze to death within the hour.

As he charged through the door, Carson realized the snow had finally stopped falling, but it was deep. He spied Amelia struggling to run, but sinking and falling into the drifts, flailing her arms as she did so. He couldn’t decide which feeling was more prevalent: fear for her, impatience, frustration, or anger. He thought about going back inside, shifting and dressing as a human for the weather so he could get her out of the cold.

There were two problems with that thought: the first was he could very well lose sight of her, and she could die. The second, and far more impactful problem was that he could see the snow rising up in a swirling cloud accompanied by thunder, lightning, and shards of icy colors. Her panic and fear

had caused her snow leopard to assert itself and come to the fore in order to protect her human host.

As the cloud fell away, Amelia's snow leopard emerged, bounding through the snow clumsily, but quickly finding her feet and her balance. The female snow leopard yowled her annoyance into the wilderness—galloping back and forth in a straight line in a show of defiance and anger. There was no more fear. The great beast had taken over and was in no mood to be told what to do.

The snow leopard might be in control, but she had failed to realize Amelia was now terrified. He could hear her thoughts galloping down the link, crashing into his own. Terror became confusion, then outrage and anger. But behind all of it came a kind of curiosity and wonder. Carson sat back. Amelia was in awe—of her snow leopard, of the possibilities, of him. Her thoughts came rolling down the link with no filter and not a clue that she could turn them, if not off, at least slow them down.

Amelia ceased her restless pacing, sitting down in a classic feline pose—on her haunches, her front legs extended in front of her like two Greek columns. Her tail was wrapped around her body, the end of it flicking. Her posture said she was comfortable, was not feeling threatened, but she was irritated. The level of vehemence with which she regarded him made it easy to tell with whom she was annoyed.

She glanced down as if only now realizing the differences in her human and snow leopard forms. She lifted a paw, regarded it, and then deliberately extended it, turning it this way and that so she could examine it. Amelia brought it up to her face so she could sniff it and then licked it—her entire body shivering as if it had tickled. She did the same thing with her tail—watched it flick for a minute or two while she changed speeds and how much of it flicked, then brought it up to her nose and again licked it. It seemed to be it only tickled when she examined her paw.

Curling her tail back around her, she began the rhythmic flicking and brought her eyes back up to him, growling softly and not in a friendly way. He approached her cautiously,

chuffing and purring to her to try to ease her fear and annoyance as she was experiencing both in spades. Coming alongside of her, he rubbed his cheek against hers and then wove his body around hers, coming back to rub her cheek again. That seemed to soothe some of her ire as her tail flicking slowed perceptively. Then she growled low, and the tip of her tail moved back to show her irritation.

Carson tried again, tamping down his own frustration and impatience. The human part of his brain knew she needed to accept her new circumstances and it also could well imagine how difficult that was. The beast, however, thought it better to simply dominate his mate, preferably sexually, but then his beast had been wanting to do that from the moment he'd pulled her ashore on the lake.

Coming around to her other side, he sat beside her, facing the house and doing nothing but purring and occasionally rubbing his head against hers. She had to fight to maintain her anger, as little by little it ebbed away and she leaned into him, looking for comfort and reassurance. He stood and nudged her, nodding toward the cabin. Once she was standing beside him, he started back to the cabin, moving hesitantly until he was sure she was following.

Once inside, he shifted quickly, grabbing the towel that was hanging on a peg just inside the door, drying his hair before pulling on his jeans. He closed the door behind her.

“I know you're a little freaked out, but you need to know you are in complete control. The only reason, and let me stress, the *only* reason your snow leopard came forward like that was because you were terrified, and she meant to protect you. It doesn't matter that I was never a threat. All she knew was that you felt I was. All you need to do is ask her to give you back control and she should. If she doesn't, command her to, but my guess is that if you're feeling a bit calmer, she'll be happy to relinquish primary control.” He stroked her head. “It'll be all right, Amelia. I told you, I'm not going anywhere.”

Gradually, he could feel her relax, and could feel her acceptance of his words and the solace he was offering. Carson could feel the moment her snow leopard relinquished

control and then stepped away so the mist-shifting storm could more easily work its magic and change her from snow leopard to human once again. He grabbed a soft blanket and as the cloud dissipated, he stepped forward and wrapped it around her.

Clasping the blanket around her, she turned and stepped away from him, ensuring she kept the blanket.

“What happened to my clothes?” she asked without turning to face him.

“They disappear during the shift. No one has ever really figured that out. They just don’t survive the shifting process. So whenever possible, you try to plan to have something to change into when you shift back.”

“Can you get me another sweater I can just pull on?” she requested in a voice devoid of any emotion. She also seemed to have figured out how to shut down her end of the link. His mate was a quick study.

“Sure,” he said reassuringly as he ran to grab one of Mason’s sweaters that he knew had a high silk content and should be extra soft. He returned with the sweater, handing it to her. She slipped it over her head, letting it fall to mid-thigh before she unwrapped the blanket and handed it back to him.

“You did this to me,” she said in that strangely detached voice.

“Yes.” No use equivocating about that, but she needed to understand why. “You were dying, Amelia. I could feel your life slowly slipping away. I wasn’t willing to allow that. We are fated mates.”

“So, basically, you saved me for yourself.”

He couldn’t tell if she was asking or deliberately misconstruing why he’d done what he’d done.

“No. I turned you because I didn’t want your light gone from this world. In the normal course of events, we could have come together, and I would have gained your informed consent.”

“Are you so sure of that?”

“I am. We are meant to be. I know you’re angry right now, and I don’t blame you. From your perspective, I stole your humanity. But I didn’t.”

“I don’t see anyone else.”

“True, I’m the one that initiated the Gift. That’s what we call it, because that’s what it is. You still retain all of your humanity, except the changes to your DNA...”

“Is that why you became a geneticist?”

“In part. DNA, because of my hybrid status, has always fascinated me. I suppose there was a part of me that worried that someday if humans found out about us, they might try to corrupt our abilities and use them to their own ends.”

“So, you thought you’d beat them to the punch.”

“No. I thought I could protect my kind from those within the human race who might try to pervert our differences. I was always playing defense. There is no need for shifters to try and obstruct human development and evolution, but it doesn’t mean that there aren’t shifters who don’t want to try. Shifters are no better or worse than humans in their covetous envy of what others have that they do not.”

“Other than being a beast, what possible advantages could there be in being part animal?”

“We tend to live longer, healthier lives.”

“You’re immortal?”

“Not in the least, we just age more slowly and our immune systems seem more robust. For instance, cancer is virtually unknown in shifters. And if a human who has cancer is turned, generally the transition eradicates the cancer genes.”

“Then why not offer some kind of gene therapy to humans?”

“Fear. If they know there’s something in our blood or about us that can cure cancer, they will kill us—either to get to the source or, in the case of pharmaceutical companies,

remove something that could cost them billions in lost profits. There are, however, shifters who are working to try and isolate the gene or whatever it is that causes cancer. There was a time, thousands of years ago, that shifters and humans lived alongside each other out in the open, but that time is past, and so we live, hidden in plain sight.”

Carson closed the distance between them, touching her shoulder. She pulled away, and then turned, throwing a right punch solidly into his face.

CHAPTER 12



AMELIA

*A*melia's fist connected solidly with his face. She'd learned to throw a punch and used the heavy bag at her gym in Bellingham on a regular basis, but that had always been with boxing gloves. She hadn't realized how much it would hurt her to punch him in the face with a bare fist. The only god-saving grace was that it seemed he felt it as well, as he stumbled back a few paces.

Her mind was a maelstrom of colliding emotions and fragmented thoughts—all crashing into each other, vying for supremacy and retreating to some dim, dark corner, only to rush forward again. She was beyond confused. She was a snow leopard? How the hell was that even possible? He was from some kind of ancient race that could shift between their human and snow leopard form? Were there others like him? Were there other kinds of beasts they could change into? Could one just choose the beast they wanted? And why the hell had he bitten her? He was a freaking scientist—a medical professional—couldn't he figure out some less violent way to save her life?

She paused for a moment, raised her face, and locked eyes with him. Had there really been no other way?

“Tell me something. You keep calling me your fated mate. Does that mean you think we're going to breed? Because having babies is not in my plan. If that's why you changed me, I'm afraid you are about to be sorely disappointed. I've been told by an expert that my chances of conceiving and carrying a pregnancy to term are pretty much slim to none.”

“We are fated mates because that is what destiny has decreed.” To his credit, her announcement that she might not carry a child didn’t seem to faze him. “The change to a snow leopard-shifter might have corrected whatever is wrong. But I turned you without your consent because I had no other choice. If fate has also decreed that we cannot have children together, then so be it. I have no driving need to be a father. There is no dynastic reason for me to sire offspring. We can let that be for the time being and discuss it if and when one of us would like to. Right now, I need you to believe three things: I had no choice if you were to live, you are a snow leopard, and we’ll figure out the rest, together.”

That sounded reasonable and plausible, and Amelia believed him.

She sank to the floor—drawing her knees close to her body and wrapping her arms around them as if she could hug them closer. When she had seen the snow leopard in her mind’s eye charging at her, it had scared the shit out of her. She didn’t know what to believe. Or rather, she knew she believed him, but she didn’t fully trust that belief.

He leaned down and scooped her up off the floor, carrying her to the leather wingback in front of the fire before sitting down and situating her on his lap. “Talk to me, Amelia. I can’t help if I don’t know what you’re thinking.”

Amelia chose, for the moment, to take the solace he offered. “I don’t know what I’m thinking, either. My thoughts are all jumbled in some kind of chaotic tempest that threatens to become a full-on, raging storm. I keep having flashes back to when the snow leopard came forward. She charged at me and then leaped. I honestly thought she was trying to kill me.”

“I’m sorry she frightened you. I suspect she is, too. Taking over like that is not something that happens unless your alter ego believes you are in mortal danger.”

“You weren’t trying to kill me.”

“You know that now, but that part of your brain that is still primitive saw an apex predator in the same room and hit the panic button. Your snow leopard responded to that.”

She nodded, laying her head on his chest. “That makes sense, I suppose. I have to admit that shift coming over me was the most frightening thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“Even more than knowing your plane was going to crash?”

“Very much so. I’ve been trained on how to handle a disabled plane or even a helicopter. Having a snow leopard charge me was not something I ever even considered as within the realm of possibilities.”

“Understandable. I was kind of surprised when you stopped so close to the cabin. And then the look you gave me —” He chuckled. “—had more malicious intent than just about anything I’ve ever experienced. I’ve stared down terrorists who looked at me with more compassion.”

“She was, and still is, pretty pissed at you. She’s buying the whole you-had-no-choice thing, but she feels like you could have handled it better. Is it weird I’m talking about her like she’s this real thing and kind of separate?”

“Not at all. She is real, and she is separate. She is also a part of you. The more you can integrate yourself with her, the better off you’ll be. That can be difficult for those who are turned...”

“Have you turned that many?”

“Not at all. You’re the first. It isn’t something honorable shifters do without cause...”

“And you’re an honorable shifter?” she teased.

“I am. Shifters also don’t normally turn someone without their consent. We take the thought of someone losing their humanity seriously. Even if death is the only other known alternative, it isn’t something we do lightly. For me, the thought of losing you was more than I could bear. I would rather you lived and hated me than let you die.”

The calm vehemence of his tone spoke volumes about the dilemma he had been faced with. He had violated a very basic tenant of who he was in order to save her life.

“I don’t hate you. It’s just a lot to take in. And the sex?”

He chuckled and gave her the most devilish grin. “You’re a beautiful woman, and you didn’t say no. I may be honorable, but I am no man’s fool. Besides, you are my fated mate.”

“That’s pretty self-serving, don’t you think?”

“Most definitely.”

She wasn’t sure why, but something about his self-effacing honesty struck her as admirable, humorous, and endearing.

“It was weird—not the sex, which was great by the way, but the shift.”

“I imagine it would be as you had no point of reference, and your snow leopard meant to protect you and believed you were in danger.”

“You really don’t want me to be angry with her, do you?”

He shook his head. “No. I promise you; she was only trying to protect you.”

“I think seeing you shift helped. I sort of knew what it was when I started. Can you shift on the run?”

“Yes, but it takes practice. It isn’t a bad skill to learn. The vortex created by the shift offers you some degree of protection, but only for that part of you that is obscured by the shift.”

“I was a little fearful when it started. I thought it might hurt, but it didn’t. I wouldn’t say it tickled but you could feel the power and a kind of electrical buzz, or no, more like champagne bubbles fizzing up and down my body.”

She paused for a moment and then continued. “I think the oddest thing was looking down through what I saw as my own eyes and seeing a spotted fur coat—and then realizing I had retractable claws and that I could flick my tail.”

He smiled at the memory. “You were quite regal, looking down on me.”

“I didn’t have much of an option. I felt clumsy trying to run and was pretty sure you could bring me down if you

wanted to. I do know when you approached me, her instinct was to lower to the ground...”

“To submit in the face of her mate’s annoyance. It’s why I purred to you and to her. I wanted you both to know I understood, and I wasn’t angry.”

“What is the feeling I get from you? Sometimes I can hear it, and sometimes I can’t, but I can feel it.”

“It’s the bonding link. Large cat-shifters use it to communicate with their mates. It works both ways. The link, like the change, is initiated by the claiming bite.”

“Claiming bite? That sounds a little bit possessive.”

Carson threw his head back and laughed. “Let me assure you, it is more than a ‘little bit possessive.’ Who made the decision to follow me back to the cabin?”

“It was kind of a joint thing, but you said I had control.”

“You will always have control. If, when she had charged, you had understood, you could have shut it down on your end. Your snow leopard will always yield to your will. But I find it’s best to try and link with them. There are things they see and perceive that we as humans miss. You will find you experience the world on a far more tactile level. Your eyesight will be keener, your senses of smell, taste, and touch heightened. But you will always have your human ability to listen, reason, and assess a situation and you decide whether to take human or snow leopard form.”

“Does shifting always make you hungry?” she said, trying to ignore the throbbing of his cock beneath her.

“Among other things. Come on,” he said, standing but not putting her down on her feet. Instead, he walked toward the dining area and sat her in the seat. “There’s more shepherd’s pie, there’s the meat and cheese tray, and I can make you anything else that sounds good.”

“Shepherd’s pie would be great.”

Carson gave her another serving as well as splitting the last of the pinot between them.

“Tell me again how we got here,” she said, taking a bite. “Not us as snow leopards but you and me.”

“Let me go back to a little before I saw you. I worked as a geneticist in Iceland. About a week ago, I overheard a conversation that I probably wasn’t supposed to. Two guys from a different department were talking about a project that had gone awry in Seattle. It made me begin to believe that Mason might be right about the people I worked for in that they weren’t good people and were up to no good. I decided I’d better get out while the getting was good.”

“Were you that concerned?”

He took a bite of the shepherd’s pie, thinking. “I was. Mason has been saying for years that he thought NLGP had nefarious goals for their genetic research. I guess his paranoia got to me. I literally bolted from Reykjavik—I didn’t tell anyone, left my car in front of my favorite diner and got on a plane to Quebec where Mason had stashed false identification, including credit cards to accounts no one could trace to us and a huge chunk of cash.”

“Didn’t that concern you?”

“I thought Mason was being overly dramatic, but I was grateful for that. I can’t be sure, but I think I was followed on the connecting flight between Reykjavik and Quebec. I lost the guy in Toronto where I changed info, but still. Before I saw your plane go down, I had gone to Otter Cove, which is the closest town...”

“It and Mystic River are odd little places. They kind of keep to themselves. I’ve always thought they could do a lot more business. Don’t get me wrong, when I’ve had to land close, people are friendly, just kind of distant.”

“That would be because both were founded by shifters and to this day only shifters live there. They keep to themselves, as having humans around hasn’t always been good for our kind.”

“Seriously? So are there different kinds of shifters?”

“Yes. Pretty much any living species except insects and arachnids. There are some shifter species whose pureblood or

animal species have gone extinct—dire wolves, cave lions, and cave bears all come to mind. Not any dinosaur shifters that I know of.”

“Do you know a guy named Deke Campbell? They call him the Finder.”

“I know Deke both by reputation and as a friend. He’s a cave lion-shifter.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. I met with him and Zach Grayson...”

“The sheriff of Otter Cove.”

“Yes. Before you ask, polar bear-shifter. Anyhow, they didn’t know where Mason was, either, and Deke was headed out to see what he could learn. Apparently, Mason was working covertly with them and against a group known as the Shadow League—a group of shifters not known for their good deeds. They would like nothing more than for the world order to be shifters on top with humans as their servants, slaves or breeders.”

Carson went back over how he’d seen her plane and come to her rescue. He played down his part, but Amelia was coming quickly to believe without his intervention, she would have died. The events she had experienced and he had described before now took on a whole new meaning given her understanding of what had happened.

Her skin prickled and goosebumps came up as she realized just how close to death she had come and that if it hadn’t been for Carson’s ability to shift and become a snow leopard, she would most likely be dead.

“I had a packet with me. It was behind my seat—a leather pouch with a red seal encased in a clear water-tight container. I was supposed to put a parachute on it and drop it at an abandoned airfield. It wasn’t too far from where I had to ditch. I realized I was in trouble and the lake was my best chance at survival.”

Carson pushed back from the table, going over to a desk and bringing back a map that he spread out. “Do you

remember where the drop zone was from the lake?”

She nodded and began to examine the map, tracing a line from the lake toward Mason’s cabin. “I think it was right around here.”

“My guess is it was meant for a shifter—either Mason or someone from Otter Cove—maybe Mystic River. What do you know about the person who paid you to deliver it?”

“A guy named Tevryn. Big guy. Works for a place called the Phoenix Corp.”

“Let’s go see if Mason has some kind of communication system.”

“I don’t see anything except your cell phone, and there’s no reception.”

Carson grinned. “That’s because you haven’t seen my brother’s little armory, which also has all kinds of computers. I’m hoping there’s either something on them, or a satellite phone, or maybe even a shortwave radio. We need to talk to Zach or Deke.”

“And I need to get word to the Phoenix Corp and my assistant Phoebe. Do you think we can get the package?”

“Deke has scuba gear. I should be able to get down to it once the weather clears off a bit, but let’s talk to Zach and Deke before we do anything.”

He led her into the bath, removed the key from the vanity drawer and unlocked the small room. The overhead light turned on as they walked in, and Carson flipped on the computer system.

“Holy shit,” she breathed.

“That was my response as well.”

Carefully they began to examine the contents of the room. At first, all they found were weapons, most of which Amelia thought were illegal in the United States, as well as files and a lot of maps and data. Carson recognized some of the data as having to do with genetic research, but he would need time to decipher it properly. He was trying to figure out how to get

them on the internet but was having trouble getting past Mason's security protocols.

"Eureka!" she cried as she pulled out an old wooden milk crate and discovered a shortwave radio. Amelia removed the various parts from the crate and arranged them on part of the counter, hooking things together and plugging it in. "That's odd."

He swiveled around in the chair. "What?"

"There's no place to tune to different frequencies. It seems to be set to one." Lifting the mic to her mouth, she pushed the button. "Hello. Hello. Is there anyone out there?"

The static and crackle of the radio frequency waves indicated that something was happening. "Mason?"

Carson grabbed the mic. "Yeah. Who's this?"

There was a deep, melodic chuckle. "No. Not Mason, but your voice is almost identical. I must be speaking to Carson. Shall I let Deke know you made it back to Mason's cabin?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

There was another round of static and the radio, at least on the other end, went dead.

CHAPTER 13



AMELIA

“*H*ello?” Carson said. “Hello?” Nothing. “Shit!” He slammed the mic down in frustration.

“It’s okay, Carson.”

“We don’t know that. For all we know that’s somebody on the other side that Mason’s been trying to infiltrate.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. He knew who you were; knew Mason had a twin brother, and knew you were supposed to check in with Deke. No. I think whoever that was, he’s the guy who’s pulling the strings on the side of the good guys.”

“It will take someone more than a few hours to hike or snowmobile up here...”

“Depends on where they’re coming from and how they get in. Some choppers can fly in pretty cold weather. They could bring them to the base of the mountain where the tree line starts...”

Carson nodded. “You’re right, but it would still take time. It’s not easy terrain and you’d have to know our exact location. Mason made sure he was off the beaten path. Do you think they’d bring a chopper up here in the dark?”

“Doubtful, but if whoever it is wants to get here, they could be on their way at dawn.”

“I don’t know that we’re secure. We need to get a good night’s sleep, see if we can retrieve that package, and then move out. We can work our way around the mountain and get

to Otter Cove or the abandoned landing strip where Mason has a couple of snowmobiles.”

She was standing behind him and could feel his concern and frustration. Carson stood and wrapped her in his embrace, lowering his head and trailing kisses along the curve of her neck. Amelia’s body went on high alert, but not in a bad way. Every erotic synapse began to spark as heat and arousal surged through her system.

Carson had the most profound effect on her body. All he had to do was get close and her libido went into overdrive. He was barely more than a stranger—okay a stranger who saved her life, but still. She realized the link not only worked two ways, but that she could sense things from his end, things he wasn’t telling her.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she asked.

“Nothing of any importance,” he murmured as he swept her up into his arms and carried her out of Mason’s little doomsday room, closing the door with his foot.

Setting her down by the bed, he reached for the hem of the sweater she was wearing. She shoved him away with both hands. “Tell me.”

“It’ll wait until tomorrow. I’ll leave early and go fetch your package if I can. I’ll bring a snowmobile back with me. We can dig out the other one in the shed, pack what we need, and get out. We’ll be long gone before anyone else gets here. I’ll keep you safe. Let’s let it be for the night. We’ll deal with the rest come morning. I promise.”

It wasn’t so much his words but the deep purring she could feel coming down the link that had her capitulating. He turned her in his arms so that she was facing away from him. The melodic sound of his voice combined with the purr and the way his hands roamed over her body convinced her, against her better judgment, to yield to him and her body’s own demands.

This time when he reached for the hem of the sweater, she covered his hands with hers and drew it over her head, tossing

it toward the foot of the bed.

“So much nicer,” he purred as his hands circled her body, taking each breast in one of his hands to play with them—palming them, tracing her areolas with his fingers before rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

Amelia sighed and leaned back into him, rubbing her backside against the rigid line of his cock held captive in his jeans. The harsh denim grated against her ass, not uncomfortably, though—just another sensation to be enjoyed. She brought one arm back above her head, wrapping it around his neck, and allowed her other hand to rest on his as it drifted down to cover her mound. Amelia moaned in pleasure as he slipped his hand between her legs.

She wasn't sure what it was that Carson did to her, but she was beginning to hope he'd never stop. That he was an alpha male and dominant wasn't in question, but it was an easy, self-confident dominance that invited her to surrender to him. In the end it didn't really matter that she knew very little about him—he was a geneticist, he had a twin brother, there were bad guys out to do bad things, and he was sexy as hell. The only part that mattered to her at the moment was the last part as arousal surged through her system, bringing with it heat and pleasure.

His fingers swirled around her clit, flicking and teasing as pleasure and erotic pressure began to build inside her. While one hand played between her legs, the other was busy playing with her breasts and nipples. She brought her one hand up to play with the nipple he wasn't busy tugging and pinching and received a sharp pinch for her troubles.

“Mine. You're all mine and from here on out, you take the pleasure only I give you or that I tell you to give yourself. Understood?”

She moaned, biting her bottom lip but letting her hand find his as he fondled the upper half of her body. Her nipples were so sensitive and swollen she thought they might burst. The thumb of his other hand pressed down on her clit as his fingers curled up inside her pussy, making her gasp. Unexpectedly the

gasp became something more as the sweet tension that had been steadily building erupted in a climax that caused her to shudder in his arms.

“Good girl,” he purred as she shivered in the aftermath. He turned her around, his hands reaching down to cup the globes of her ass and pull her even closer to his body. “I want you so much. We’re going to be so good together.”

One hand came up, his fingers tangling in her hair and fisting a handful so that he could angle her head where he wanted. He gave her locks a small tug and Amelia melted into him. His tongue traced the seam of her lips and when she opened for him, it surged inside. There was nothing awkward in kissing Carson. It was as if they’d done it a thousand times before. Was this what he meant by being a fated mate?

His mouth moved from hers, trailing feather-like kisses along her jaw and down her neck. He kissed a path to her breasts, circling one areola before licking its nipple before closing his teeth in the tiniest bite and sucking it into his mouth. Amelia sighed and trembled in his grasp as he lavished her nipples with affection and the occasional edge of his teeth.

He moved his hands so he could lift her up and set her in the middle of the bed, laying her out like some sacrifice to a gorgeous god of decadent sex. Carson removed his jeans, laying them across the foot of the bed with the sweater she’d had on. He loomed above her, looking every bit the salacious demon bent on taking the offering laid before him.

Amelia had never cared for the idea of a sacrificial virgin. She opened her arms, spreading her legs in wanton invitation. “Please, Carson.”

He smiled. “Well, since you asked so sweetly, how could I refuse you?”

He knelt on the bed between her spread thighs and then stretched out along her body, making a place for himself there. Holding her ass steady in both hands, he tilted her body up until she was in perfect alignment with his cock. He forced his cock inside her in a single, long, continual push.

Pleasure suffused her senses as her pussy spasmed around him, drawing him in deeper. He eased out and then thrust back in with a singular focus—to get to the end of her channel. Her head fell back as she moaned in pure bliss. Over and over again, he stroked into her with a relentless passion she had never felt before. There was no subterfuge or hiding from Carson. He was who he was, and he wanted her.

She felt him let slip the iron control he'd been exerting to raise the level of her pleasure to something not only had she not felt before but had not even known existed outside of really steamy romance novels. As he thrust into her repeatedly, she held onto him as if he was the only thing anchoring her to this plane of existence.

He held onto her as her inner walls shook and quivered. Amelia tried to wrap her head around the intensity of their connection and the way he'd been right about all of her senses being heightened, most especially that of touch. Her breath sped up and became thready as the noises she made went from moans to whimpers to sighs as her orgasm drove her toward the edge of the abyss. Her body stiffened in anticipation, and she began to pant, terrified of the amount of pleasure he was able to inflict on her and embarrassed that he could undo her to this extent.

Suddenly, he was right there with her, right on the cusp of pure ecstasy. He gave one hard, last, ruthless thrust deep inside her, and she screamed out his name, her pussy spasming as she clamped down hard, her legs trembling as she writhed in his hold, greedily milking his cock, savoring every bit of pleasure as he held her in his arms, grinding against her and emptying his cum inside her.

He rested on her, his weight pressing her into the mattress as he kissed her relentlessly, fusing their lips together as he held her face tenderly in his hands. Amelia was pinned down, surrounded by Carson in the most sensual, delicious manner. She was pinned by his weight and knew there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

Wrapping her in his arms, he rolled to his back, allowing her to slide off him but ending up with his thigh between hers

and her body about halfway on top of his.

“We’ll get through this, Amelia. We’ll find our way and we’ll be happy.”

She laughed quietly. “I may be crazy, but I believe you. Fated mates, huh?”

“Yep. How else would you explain it?”

“Do me one favor,” she said, fear rearing its ugly head. “Don’t promise what you don’t mean to deliver. If this is just for the duration of whatever it is that’s going on, I can be okay with that.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Amelia. Not without you.”

She nodded, not totally convinced, but wanting to believe. She snuggled down and pulled the covers up over them both. They woke and made love twice more. Amelia worried that a long trek on a couple of snowmobiles was not going to be fun, but she’d do it and offer him no complaint. Being with Carson, being held by him... making love with him... it was worth it.

The morning dawned bright and clear, and the cabin was lit by the sun streaming through the windows. She reached for Carson, but he wasn’t there. His side of the bed was cold. She looked toward the kitchen. No Carson. She looked in the bath. No Carson. She ran to the bed, intending to pick up the sweater she’d had on, but it wasn’t there, nor were his jeans. She looked at the front door and noticed his boots were missing. She pulled open a drawer and grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt. She ran to the front door and flung it open. No Carson.

She was alone.

CHAPTER 14



CARSON

Amelia was sleeping so soundly he couldn't bring himself to wake her. Besides, she needed to rest and to wake her would be to invite an argument Carson wasn't sure he could win. If someone had gone to the trouble to hire a bush pilot to make a dead drop, the information in that package had to be important. Given that it was in an area populated almost exclusively by shifters meant it needed to be retrieved.

Three times they'd made love the night before. He had yet to introduce her to the exquisite, pleased pain of his barbs, but that would come in time. Carson was still in awe of how well she seemed to have accepted that she was no longer human, at least not wholly. It shouldn't really surprise him—not because she had no other choice, but because she had recognized his sincerity in the fact that he'd had no other choice, and Amelia was immensely practical. He was going to count on that to be able to reason with her anger upon his return, and he had no doubt there would be anger to spare.

Carson and Mason had learned to SCUBA together in their teens. They had dived into the lake in which Amelia's plane now rested more than once. It was not an easy dive and had claimed the life of more than one unsuspecting diver. Most people considered freshwater dives to be safer, but that wasn't necessarily true. Low visibility and extreme cold could be just as deadly as a great white shark, and often killed with a threat not as easily recognized.

The lake had been formed in the same way as many others in the 'Ring of Fire'—a string of volcanic mountain ranges

that formed an arc that included Alaska. The lake had been born from the violent eruption of the volcano that had once stood there. It had blown, belching fire and rock before collapsing into a caldera, which over thousands of years had filled to become a deep lake of extreme temperature and low visibility.

He knew that Mason kept diving suits, tanks and other necessary diving gear in the same small hangar at the abandoned landing strip that he did the snowmobiles and SUVs. Carson's plan was to shift and get to the gear, load what he needed onto a snowmobile, get to the lake and retrieve that package. It sounded simple enough, but Carson wasn't so naive as to believe it would be that easy.

For one thing it was difficult to know how deep the plane had sunk or at what angle it might be. The lake had seen its share of debris from avalanches and landslides. Carson hoped the damn thing wasn't sitting at the bottom of the lake upside down. If luck was with him, it would be in a vertical position, tail down, but he'd be happy if it was just vertical.

Carson thought about digging out the snowmobile that was in the outbuilding at the cabin, but he wanted to have two snowmobiles for them to use. They could carry more supplies and make better time. Calling forth his snow leopard, he bounded away from the cabin, intent on making it to the lake before nightfall. He didn't believe he could make it to the hangar, collect what he needed, get to the lake, retrieve the package, and make it back to the cabin in one day. That wasn't necessarily true. He might, if luck was with him and he pushed, be able to do it in a twenty-four hour period, but it would mean completing the journey in the dark after a very long day. The promise of being reunited with his mate would make the additional effort worth it.

Several hours later he was galloping along and heard a plane overhead. Keeping to the tree line and knowing his spotted coat would camouflage him and make him difficult to spot, he looked up to watch the plane. The plane seemed to be flying in a search grid pattern. Who was it looking for? Him? Amelia? Mason? All of them? There was no way to know, and

it didn't really matter. Knowing someone was looking for one or all of them meant he had to push. He thought briefly about turning back, but he wanted that second snowmobile and if he was that close, it would be foolish not to try for the package.

One of his concerns was who had hired Amelia in the first place. Whose side were they on? He wanted desperately to believe it had been someone who opposed the Shadow League and was trying to get vital information to others who opposed them. Even in Iceland he'd heard rumors about a growing resistance group forming in the wilds of Alaska. Given what he'd learned from Zach and Deke, he suspected that was either Otter Cove or Mystic River. As Mystic River was on Kodiak Island, that would be his pick. One thing was for sure; before they turned over the package, they were going to be damn certain they knew who it was going to.

He arrived at the abandoned landing strip, shifted, and pulled on the dive suit. Loading the snowmobile with other supplies they might need, he made short work of reaching the lake. He parked the snowmobile where it wouldn't be easily spotted. The plane he'd seen earlier hadn't appeared to be searching the lake area, but there was reason to be cautious. He walked to the lake's edge, pulled on his fins and the hood of the suit and donned his goggles. Taking a deep breath, he walked into the water, hoping the suit would keep him warm enough to get the package and get out.

Diving down, he used a handheld underwater flashlight to try and illuminate the murky waters. The deeper he dove, the quieter the watery world around him became. The only real sound was that which the SCUBA gear made. He smiled as the bubbles it released made their way to the surface. As Jimmy Buffet had sung, 'bubbles up.' There was a kind of comfort in knowing you could count on some things.

Up ahead, a looming figure stood as if at attention. The plane had settled at a submerged degree and perhaps even a ledge formed within the caldera, but it was vertical. Reaching it, he was glad he hadn't closed the passenger door. Opening it at this depth would have been difficult. This way he didn't have to try to wriggle inside via the destroyed windshield or

one of the side windows. It was a tight fit, but he made it inside, and the plane seemed stable.

Not trusting it to remain that way, Carson made his way to the pilot's seat and found the intact, watertight container right where Amelia had said it would be. Securing the package, he made his way back to the outside of the plane. He paused, using the flashlight to search the surrounding area as he listened for anything other than his own breathing apparatus.

Putting a safe distance between himself and the plane, he completed a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree tour of the outside of the plane, looking carefully at the ruptured hull until he spotted a small diameter hose that he didn't think had any reason to be there. It disappeared into the internal structure of the plane, but following a hunch, he moved back to the crumpled nose of the aircraft. Sure enough, it appeared that the hose was feeding something into the plane's engine. He couldn't be absolutely sure, but Carson guessed that Amelia's plane had been sabotaged. He could easily see that if someone hadn't been looking for it, it could have been missed. Even more of a reason to return to the cabin as quickly as he could.

Giving the plane a wide berth, Carson found his bearings by watching the bubbles and then slowly began kicking his fins to take him back to the surface. Once he was just beneath it, he swam underwater to the edge closest to the snowmobile. He had a polar expedition suit to change into so tearing the diving suit was no longer an issue. He climbed out of the water, removed his mask and fins and made his way to the snowmobile. He shimmied out of the diving suit and got into the warm, dry expedition suit and boots, drying off his hair before pulling the hood up and securing it with a ski hat.

He thought about just leaving the diving gear where he'd removed it but thought better of it. Instead, he rolled a good-sized boulder to one side, used the small shovel he'd secured to the snowmobile, dug a hole, and stuffed the diving gear into it, burying it and then rolling the rock back in place. He used his gloved hands and the shovel to try and disguise that anything had happened here. Food for game was scarce, he left some dried meat and fruits around the area, hoping to attract

animals whose tracks might cover the traces of his having hidden something.

Gunning the engine, he raced the snowmobile across the open ground toward the trees. Once he was out of sight, he paused and readjusted the load to be more equally balanced. Mounting the snowmobile, he headed toward the cabin. It would be past midnight when he arrived, but at least he would only have left her alone less than a single day—not that he thought that would do much to improve her temper at being left alone. He would need to explain that as he had always planned to return to her, he had not violated his promise.

He split his focus from the trail to get him back to the cabin and all the questions that might be answered by the contents of the pouch. He had left the watertight container in the hole with the diving equipment, but the sealed leather pouch was tucked safely into the saddlebags.

He would need to rest before they continued on, but he couldn't wait to get it to its rightful owner and see what it was. He would enlist Amelia's aid in getting them ready. He would dig out the shelter and make a path so she could take what supplies they needed to the outbuilding while he grabbed a few hours' sleep.

Once he had rested, they would ready themselves and the snowmobiles and head toward Otter Cove. He would have Amelia try the shortwave radio again. It would help to know if the person was friend or foe and if the former, that they had an ally who could give them shelter. He trusted in Deke's reputation not to betray them, but he had no inkling about the sheriff of Otter Cove. Maybe it would be safer to bypass Otter Cove and try to get to Mystic River. And do what? He didn't know anybody at all in the small village on Kodiak Island.

All of this thinking was giving him a headache. It brought him back around to how he had ended up here. An unintentionally overheard conversation between two scientists about a failed project in Seattle. When he really considered what had been said, it could have been completely innocent, but Carson hadn't believed it then nor did he believe it now. No, NLGP was up to no good. He could feel it in his bones,

and he began to wonder if Mason hadn't had more tangible information to back up his repeated warnings.

Seattle wasn't all that far from Bellingham. It didn't take a very long leap of the imagination to believe that whatever Amelia had been carrying had something to do with that failed operation, nor that someone had tried to stop the package from reaching its intended recipient by sabotaging Amelia's plane. Carson felt rage begin to simmer in his belly. Whoever had tried to harm his mate would pay for what they'd done.

Damn it, Mason. What have we gotten ourselves into this time?

For the first time in his life, Carson had something, or rather someone, that was more important to him than his twin. He would do whatever it took to keep his fated mate safe—not just because she was his fated mate, but because one of the things that had become crystal clear to him was that he loved her. Not because of destiny or some genetic link, but because she was brave, beautiful, and intelligent. He would ask nothing more of this life than they be happy together for a very long time.

CHAPTER 15



AMELIA

Amelia had tried the radio again with no results. No one had answered and she wasn't sure if anyone had heard her or was even monitoring the frequency. *Damn it, Carson.* He'd promised he would be with her. That promise hadn't even been good for twelve hours. There had been no note—nothing to indicate where he'd gone, for what purpose, or if and when he intended to return. That was what bothered her most. Had she surrendered herself into his keeping and followed her libidinous inclinations for nothing? Was she now some kind of mutant left to fend for herself? As far as she knew, snow leopards didn't mate for life. In fact, they only came together to breed and then the females were left to deal with the consequences. Not unlike some human relationships she knew.

She could hear someone moving around outside the cabin. She ran to the window. It would seem Carson had returned. He wasn't very far from the cabin and appeared to be digging away at something. She tried reaching out to him down the link but could feel nothing from his end. Last night she had experienced being able to feel his thoughts and emotions even when he was asleep. There had been something exquisitely intimate about it, but now there was nothing.

Watching him move, she realized there were slight differences from the man she had come to know over the past few days. Had it really been that short a time? And if so, why did the thought of his having left her hurt so much? Because she had believed him when he'd spun her his stories about

fated mates and how they lived through each lifetime together or bereft of a mate. She had actually begun to believe in love and that she might be falling in love with the enigmatic geneticist.

The more she thought Carson had returned, she tried to reach out to him on the other end of the link. Combined with the absolute silence on the other end—Carson had said it did have some proximity limitations—the more she began to believe that it wasn't Carson at all. His brother Mason had returned. He, too, had a lot of explaining to do. Remembering there had been a shotgun in the little communications room, Amelia retrieved it, made sure it was loaded and positioned herself so that she was facing both the front and kitchen doors.

She didn't have long to wait, the door opened, letting in frigid air as Mason stomped the snow off his boots on the front porch. He looked up to find himself confronted by a shotgun aimed at his middle.

“Who the fuck are you?” he growled.

“Were you born in a fucking barn? Come in and close the damn door. Who are you?”

Recognizing he was at a decided disadvantage, Mason did as he was told. “Mind answering my question?”

“How about you answer mine first?”

“Why should I? This is my cabin.”

“And I'm the one holding the loaded gun.”

“Point taken. Where's Carson?”

“Uh-huh. My questions first. Where have you been?”

Mason reached up slowly to push the hood of his parka off his head before removing the ski hat and hanging it on the peg to his right. He did the same with the anorak he had on. “I've been doing my job. Mind pointing that thing elsewhere?”

Her snow leopard growled quietly in the recesses of her mind. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

He eyed her up and down, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth as he scented the air. “I’m going to take a wild guess and say you know my baby brother.”

“I do.”

“Is he close by, or have you been playing Goldilocks all by yourself?”

“To tell you the truth, after promising me he’d always be with me and that we were fated mates, I woke to find myself alone.”

Up until that precise moment, she had been able to hold it together. Now she felt her lower lip trembling and had to focus on keeping the shotgun aimed at Mason.

“Look—what is your name?” Mason asked in a far gentler tone.

“Amelia.”

“Okay, Amelia. If you know my brother at all, you have to know he’s never broken a promise in his life. It isn’t in him. I’m not sure what brought either of you to the cabin, but given the message I just got from Carson, he’s spooked. Still, he wouldn’t have left you. If he says you’re his fated mate, you are. That isn’t something he’d just toss around without knowing it to be true. He must have thought there was something he needed to get...”

Amelia stomped her foot and lowered the shotgun. “Damn him! Sorry, I know he’s your twin brother.”

Mason laughed, sounding far more like Carson. “Trust me, I know the impulse to curse at him. He can be really annoying when he tries. Are we done with the you-holding-a-gun-on-me portion of this little family reunion?”

“I suppose so.”

Mason closed the distance between them and eased the shotgun from her grip, taking it back to the closet, laughing as he got there.

Amelia ran to join him. “What? By the way, it was like this when he showed it to me.”

“I would never have thought otherwise. Only my brother could have found the key. So, it was you on the radio?”

“But your voice isn’t the one that answered.”

Mason shook his head. “What a clusterfuck. Any chance Carson made something to eat and that there are leftovers? I think we should sit down like civilized people, share a meal, maybe some wine...”

“You should know we killed a great bottle of pinot.”

“Of course, you did. What are we eating, or do you want something different?”

“Shepherd’s pie made with venison.”

“Word of advice, anytime he offers a choice between shepherd’s pie or anything else, choose the shepherd’s pie. His potpie is on point, but he likes to make it with a biscuit kind of topping as opposed to pie crust and I prefer the crust.”

“Well then, I’ll make the crust, and he can make what goes inside. I’m not much of a cook, but I do love to bake.”

Mason wrapped his arm around her and gave her a quick hug. “You just became my favorite person in the family. I can make my way around the kitchen, but not like Carson. He’s been taking a lot of cooking courses in Iceland. I can’t bake at all, and I love desserts, but if you can bake artisanal bread, I may have to kill my brother and claim you for my own.” She pulled away and he laughed. “Sorry. It’s a long-standing joke between my brother and me. You have nothing to worry about from me. As you are my brother’s mate, that makes you my sister, which makes you off limits.”

She wasn’t sure why, but she believed him. “So that fated mate thing is real?”

He nodded. “I take it he turned you?”

“Yes. I was dying. He didn’t have any choice.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I am, but it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like you can change me back, right?”

“Right. Come on, let’s go raid the fridge and the pantry. Who picked out the wine?”

She grinned at him. “I did.”

“Then you pick the wine, and I’ll heat up our lunch.”

“Sounds good.” She entered the pantry door and selected another very good, very expensive pinot. “Are you rich?” she asked as she joined him in the kitchen.

“No,” he laughed. “I just enjoy good wine and living up here, I don’t have a lot of things to spend money on.”

“Why do you live up here?” she asked, opening the wine, grabbing a clean glass for him and a used glass from the night before for her. He stopped her, grabbed a second clean glass and handed it to her, removing the dirty glass from her hand.

“And bossy like your brother, as well.”

“We are twins, after all.” He finished heating the shepherd’s pie, dished it up, and brought two plates to the table. “Is he okay? The message he left was a bit disjointed. I didn’t get it until right before you radioed.”

“If you were there, why didn’t you answer him? He’s been worried about you.”

“He had cause to be. Once I got the message, I was going to head out to the meeting spot, but once I knew he was here, given the storm, I figured I could get here before you guys could get out. So, is he okay?”

She nodded. “For the most part. He overheard a conversation at work he wasn’t supposed to. It spooked him, and he bolted from Iceland.”

“Not the worst decision he’s ever made. How much do you know—about shifters in general, Carson’s work and what’s going on?”

“What makes you think he hasn’t told me everything?”

“Because I know if I had just discovered you were my fated mate, the last thing I’d want to be doing is talking about global and genetic conspiracies. I have to say, it’ll be good to

have Carson in our corner. We know the Shadow League—you know who that is, right?”

“Kind of. Group of bad guy shifters out to rule the world.”

Mason nodded. “Yep; that’s pretty much it. They are up to something—something big—and we think it’s based in genetics, but we don’t know for sure. There have been scientists and researchers who have gone missing over the past few years, and we think either they have been killed or recruited. What brought you into this mess?”

Mason seemed to have put his cards on the table, and she figured she’d do the same. After all, he was family. “I was hired by a company out of Seattle to do a dead drop of a package. It never occurred to me until now, but why hire me? I fly out of Bellingham.”

“Any chance the company was the Phoenix Corp?” She nodded. “Where’s the package?”

“At the bottom of a lake. Something went wrong with my plane and the engine fouled on me, which again doesn’t make sense as I just had the damn thing serviced.”

“My guess is,” Mason said, finishing off his food. “someone tried to ensure the package never got delivered. Let me guess, the dead drop was an old, abandoned landing strip. You were to send it down by parachute and leave it to be retrieved by someone you would never see.”

“I take it that someone was you?”

“Yep. I was out of the country, and when I got back, Colby said he had another quick job for me.”

“Colby?”

“Want more?” he said, getting up from the table.

“No, I’ll be good with this when I finish.”

“Yeah, Colby. Colby Reynolds, a lynx-shifter out of Mystic River. That’s not really true. He’s kind of an entity unto his own. He’s been working on this thing longer than anybody. He has an intelligence network second to none. Seriously, the CIA could take lessons from him. Anyway, he’s been

supplying the resistance that's gathering with information. I don't know how many of them know, but the guy has serious mojo. More wine?"

Amelia held up her glass. "You were to take the package to this Colby guy?"

"Yep. And if he was willing to do a dead drop, it must be important."

"Does he own the Phoenix Corp?"

Mason laughed. "He wishes. Phoenix Corp is owned by a group called the Phantom Fire—dragon-shifter mercenaries out of the Wind River Range."

"Holy shit. There are dragon-shifters?"

"They don't mingle a lot with other shifters, but word is they've stumbled across information they're willing to share, using Colby as the go-between. He's hoping he can get them to throw in with the resistance. Falkor, their leader, is a hard nut to crack, but some of the younger dragons—younger being a relative term—might be more amenable. Who gave you the package?"

"A guy named Tevryn. Do you know him? Is he a dragon-shifter?"

"Yes, but only by reputation. One of their most fierce warriors. Colby may want to pick your brain about him."

"Slim pickings."

"You'd be surprised. Our brains process a lot of images and information that takes us a while to realize we even have. Any idea when my idiot brother might return?"

Amelia froze, realizing she had been picking up on something. "Maybe sooner than I thought. You won't object if I kick him in the shin for not leaving me a note, will you?"

"I'd aim higher if you want him to learn the lesson," he teased.

The door flew open, and a half-frozen and obviously exhausted Carson stumbled in. Both she and Mason rushed to

greet him, with Amelia getting there first and launching herself into his arms. He staggered back, closing the door and holding her close.

“I thought you were going to kick him in the nuts?” quipped Mason.

“I changed my mind,” she said with relief as he set her down and she helped him strip out of the expedition suit.

“I got the package,” he said, handing it to her.

Amelia took it and tossed it to Mason. “I don’t care about the damn package.” She kicked him in the shin, and he winced. “Don’t you ever leave me again without telling me or at least leaving me a note.”

He grinned, taking her face in his hands, “Yes, baby,” he said as he lowered his head and captured her mouth, kissing her deeply and seeming to take both warmth and strength from her. Relief, love, and lust flowed down the link in an almost overwhelming rush.

“Oh hi, Mason, glad to see you’re alive. Me, too, bro,” mocked Mason.

“Shut up,” she and Carson said in unison.

“What the fuck, Mason?”

“It’s a long story. Why don’t you get some sleep? Between your mate and I, we’ll load up the snowmobiles. I don’t think the cabin is safe.”

“Nor do I. I spotted a search plane earlier today. Someone is looking for one or all of us. We need to get on the move, but I need at least a couple of hours sleep.” He kissed Amelia again. “Are you okay?”

“I am. You go sleep and while Mason loads up the snowmobiles and makes sure they have enough fuel; I’ll see if I can’t get some food put together to take with us that consists of more than dried or frozen rations.”

“Did you know your mate can bake?”

“Find your own,” growled Carson.

“Did he mention we shifters get kind of snarly and lose our sense of humor when other males get too close to our mates?”

“No, he didn’t, but if he isn’t careful, I’ll kick him in the shins again to remind him not to question my loyalty.”

“She’s mean, Carson. I like her.”

Carson chuckled as he wrapped his arm around Amelia. “Find your own. Can you help me to bed?” As soon as Mason got dressed for the outside and left them in the cabin, he turned to her. “You’re right. I should have left you a note, but I knew the package was important and wanted the second snowmobile.”

“I get it, and you should be nice to your brother. He was all about Team Carson, and he was the one who was supposed to pick up the package.”

“So, he knows where it was supposed to be delivered to?”

“He does, and we’ll tell you all about it as soon as you’ve rested and we’re out of here. I found comm units in that little closet that we can use to communicate on the snowmobiles.”

Carson fell back onto the bed, pulling her with him.

“This isn’t restful,” she murmured as his hand behind her head forced her lips to meet his.

“I don’t care,” was his response.

CHAPTER 16



CARSON

Getting Amelia to accompany him to the bed hadn't been a problem. Getting Amelia to help him get naked had been even easier. The problem came when she thought to leave him to sleep. He wasn't having any of that. Continuing on in the freezing weather when he was exhausted had been done through sheer force of will, and the only thing that had kept him going was the idea of getting back inside her, feeling her holding him close as her pussy spasmed along his length. Nope, his brother could wait outside, or he could bloody well watch, but Carson meant to have her and nothing on this Earth would stop him.

He began purring to her continuously, backing it with copious amounts of lust as he pushed it down the link to her like a tsunami making its way to shore with relentless intent. While he cupped the base of her skull to keep her mouth where he wanted it, pausing for only a moment, he reached down with the other hand, pulling the tank top over her head and pushing the sweatpants down over her ass and past her thighs.

“Carson, no. Your brother could see us.”

“I don't care. I need you. The only thing that kept me going in the darkness and cold was knowing you were waiting, and that I should have thought to leave a damn note. I need you, Amelia. I need you more than my next breath.”

The tension in her body only lasted a moment before her body melted on top of his and she rolled away to shuck off the rest of her clothing. Kneeling between his legs, she leaned

down and took his aching dick between her lips, swirling her tongue all around the head and making him groan.

“Heaven,” he sighed; grasping her hair in his hands, he held her head in place while he thrust up to reach the soft place at the back of her throat.

He could almost hear her thinking if she could get him off, he'd fall asleep faster. She wasn't wrong, but he had no intention of finishing in her mouth. No, the next time he came, he intended it to be buried balls deep in her wet, warm pussy. They hadn't had any time to explore one another. And tonight would be no exception, but that time would come. Some place warm where they were safe, and he had all the time in the world.

Holding her with a ruthless need, he shoved his cock in and out, watching it disappear only to reappear as she sucked him, all the while lavishing the underside of his cock with devoted affection. He drew back until only the head of his cock was inside her mouth before burrowing back inside. Over and over, he stroked her mouth, reveling in not only the physical sensation but the way she purred down the link and all around his dick. The vibration of it was almost his undoing.

Fisting her hair, he drew her up and flipped her on her back, settling himself between her legs before she could do much about it.

“This is a bad idea,” she moaned, pushing ineffectively at him.

“No. Leaving you this morning without a word was a bad idea. Going into that dark, cold water after that damn package was a bad idea. This is the best fucking idea I've had all day,” he said as he began to slowly press his hard length inside her.

She was tight, hot, and wet. She was ripe and ready. And she was all his. He continued to slide into her with deliberate precision and lack of speed. Slowly he surged forward until he was seated all the way to his balls. He allowed her a moment to adjust to his size and strength before he drew back, only to slam back in and make her cry out as her back arched and she clung to him, as much surprised by her climax as he was.

He grinned evilly. His poor mate, if he had his way, she might never be able to walk again. He knew he had to hurry now, but there would come a time he could fuck her for days, trying to find out just how many times he could make her orgasm, how quickly, and what she liked best. He would introduce her to the carnal pleasure of the barbs that he would allow to rise to score her pussy as he plunged in and out of her. But for now, he needed to drive her back to the edge of ecstasy so they could freefall together.

Carson was exhausted, but he had enough left to finish this with her. He began to pound into her savagely as her almost continual moaning indicated her pleasure. There would come a time she would yowl for him, but that time was not tonight. He thrust in and out of her with ruthless abandon and as she tightened around him, he felt that familiar tingle at the base of his spine as his balls drew up, and her pussy clamped down on him, forcing him to give up his cum in what seemed to be a never-ending stream.

When he finally finished, he collapsed on top of her, resting for only a moment until he rolled off. “I love you, Amelia.”

“I know,” she teased. “Now, go to sleep. I have work to do.”

“Mason’s right. You’re mean. Good thing for you, I like it, too.”

The last thing he heard before exhaustion claimed him was her gentle laughter.



When he woke several hours later, Amelia was curled up next to him and Mason was sprawled in the wingback chair, the shotgun propped on the arms. Well, they’d made it through the night.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered.

“I froze my ass off last night to let you two have some time. I ain’t doing it again,” growled Mason.

“And before you two go off on some raunchy bromance dialogue, you need to know I’m awake and we need to get moving. I’ll get ready first and while you two get ready and get the last of the stuff on the snowmobiles. I’ll make some breakfast burritos with the last of the shepherd’s pie, eggs and more cheese. Should we put out the fire?”

“No,” said Mason. “Don’t clean up. Leave everything as it is. We’ll make them think either we’ll be back, or we just left. I let Colby know to expect us. I programmed the coordinates into the nav units on the snowmobiles. He’ll have a boat ready to meet us. I also relocked the communications room and destroyed the shortwave radio.”

He and Mason had the snowmobiles set up and were sitting on them, ready to ride, when Amelia joined them. She handed each of them a burrito, before hopping on behind Carson. They engaged the engines and began the long trek to what they hoped was safety. As promised, Amelia had found comm units they could use so they could talk to each other without having to shout. They were making slow and steady progress.

Out of the corner of his eye, Carson saw what looked like a red laser light land on Mason’s back a split second before the crack of a sniper rifle split the silence. He only knew it was a sniper rifle because it sounded much further away than someone up close.

Carson watched in horror as Mason slumped over, backing off on the throttle as he did so. Riding up even with Mason’s decelerating snowmobile, Carson matched his speed planning to maneuver in front of it to try and keep it from careening down the hill. Despite their slowed speed, Carson was surprised when Amelia jumped from behind him and managed to get in front of Mason, wrapping his arms around her waist before they gunned the engines and tried to get as much distance between them and whoever had fired the shot as they could.

“Carson, we’re losing him,” she said calmly into the comm unit.

“I know. I can feel him slipping away. Much like the bonding link, twins share a similar link.”

‘Get away. Leave me. I’ll hold them if I can,’ whispered Mason down the link.

“No,” growled Carson.

‘I’m dying, little brother. Nothing you can do about that. Let me take as many of the bastards with me as I can. Get your mate and the package to Colby. He will keep you safe. I’ve got your back bro.’

“Carson?”

“The ridge. We need to get to the ridge.”

They pushed the snowmobiles to get to the top of the ridge amid intermittent bursts of gunfire barely missing them, stopping so that Carson could get his brother off the snowmobile.

“The saddle bag on the right side of my snowmobile has a couple of guns and a couple of grenades. Leave those with me. The two of you...”

“We’re not leaving you,” said Amelia.

“You have no choice, little sister. I’ll slow them down up here. Halfway down the ridge, leave the other snowmobile. Turn it on its side like it flipped and booby trap it so if they get there and move it, you’ll know how far they are behind you. At the foot of the ridge, drop all the other supplies. All you’ll need at that point is speed, the package, and each other. Get across the meadow and leave the snowmobile. That forest isn’t accessible to vehicles. You’ll be better off on foot. Colby will take it from there.”

“Mason,” started Carson.

“We don’t have time, little brother. I love you. You love me. I can die knowing what I was doing was important and that you will have her.” He took her hand and placed it in Carson’s. “Take care of each other. Love each other. Now go.”

Mason was right. Carson knew he was right, but it didn't make it any easier to lead her away and push her onto the snowmobile. He saw Mason take out a cigar and light it up, puffing contentedly as he scanned the ridge below them.

"I always told him those damn things would be the death of him."

"We don't have to leave him," she said with unshed tears brimming in her eyes.

"Yeah, we do. Our deaths will accomplish nothing. That package is important to him, if to no one else, and we're going to get the damn thing to Colby. Ready?"

She nodded, and they turned and began to make their way down the side of the steep slope. Some forty-five minutes later they heard a volley of gunfire before an explosion rocked the ground on which they rode.

Godspeed, brother. I'll see you when it is Amelia's and my time to join you in the light.

Halfway down the ridge, they rigged the snowmobile, Carson made sure it looked like an accident, and rigged a trap that would take as many of their pursuers out as possible. They had just hit the bottom of the ridge and were within five miles of coordinates for the rendezvous, when they heard the explosive device detonate. They jettisoned the rest of their supplies except the package, which he slipped inside his expedition suit, and a mobile first aid kit, which she slipped inside hers.

They were flying along the open, frozen landscape when he saw another red light target the snowmobile's fuel tank. Grabbing Amelia, he tossed her from the snowmobile, launching himself behind her just as the shot hit the tank and the snowmobile exploded. Carson covered her body with his and felt a piece of shrapnel from the exploding vehicle pierce his suit and embed itself just to the side of his shoulder blade.

"Take the first-aid kit out of your suit and lay it on the ground. Shift. Pick it up and run." He handed her a handheld geo coordinator with the meet-up location programmed in.

“I’m not leaving without you,” she growled. It was hard to believe she hadn’t been a snow leopard all her life.

“Not a chance. I’ll have the package with me. I’ll be right behind you. Don’t run in a straight line until you get out of the open.”

“You won’t leave me...”

He kissed her roughly. “No, baby, you’re stuck with me. Now go.”

He watched as the swirling mist enveloped her and she emerged as her snow leopard, picking up the first aid kit in her mouth and taking off in a hard run. Carson removed a couple of the grenades he’d kept with him and rigged them so they would explode if anyone stepped on or moved across them. Satisfied he had done all he could, he pulled the piece of shrapnel out of his back and called forth his snow leopard. The power and magic of the vortex did a lot to restore him, and he emerged still bleeding but somewhat rejuvenated.

Picking up the package, he bounded after Amelia, vowing they would join the fight against the Shadow League, and he would have revenge on those who had tried to kill his mate and murdered his brother.

CHAPTER 17



AMELIA

She glanced over her shoulder only once to ensure Carson was coming behind her. When she saw that he was, she stretched and began to cover ground as if running as a snow leopard had been something she'd done all her life. Inwardly she thanked her alter ego, who seemed to acknowledge the praise. Amelia released control so that her creature, who she realized had far more experience running over rough terrain than she had, could run where she felt they would be safest.

They ran for what seemed like forever. Her muscles ached and her lungs burned, but still they pressed on. They didn't dare stop until they reached the safety of the trees and the rocky shore beyond. If Mason was right, Colby would be waiting for them.

Mason. Her heart was broken. He'd been her brother for less than a day, and yet she still mourned his loss. She could only imagine what Carson must be feeling.

She reached the trees first and wondered why Carson hadn't caught up with her. As she looked back across the frozen landscape, she could see a blood trail. Carson had been hit. She watched him moving across the terrain with speed, power, and grace. There was no telling what that effort would cost him.

She waited until he entered the trees and then shifted. She was able to ignore the frigid temperatures because of her concern. Opening the first aid kit, she pulled out a vial of a blood coagulating agent and waited until Carson shifted before

pouring it into the wound. Carson winced but didn't make a sound. She started to open a large bandage that she meant to put over the wound before binding it.

“No. The bandages won't survive the shift. You're going to have to get out the suture kit and stitch it closed.”

She could feel the blood drain from her face. She didn't mind blood, but she wasn't sure if she could manage to stick something in him and pull some kind of suture material through his skin.

“You can do this, baby. I know you can.”

Gritting her teeth, she removed the necessary items from the kit and began to stitch the wound closed, gaining confidence with each stitch. It helped that Carson watched stoically throughout the process, refusing to show any sign of pain or distress.

When she was finished, she wiped the wound down with an antiseptic wipe and applied antibiotic cream. It wasn't great, but under the circumstances, it would have to do. She grabbed the bloodied bandage and first aid supplies and made a small false trail before coming back to him. He was pale, but his breathing was less labored.

“I love you,” he said. “The shift should help boost our energy and our metabolisms.”

She smiled. “I love you, too.”

They called for their snow leopards and the dual vortexes seemed to dance and feed off each other without ever touching. Amelia was still enthralled by the feeling of champagne bubbles running over her skin as her snow leopard leapt forward and she felt her body shifting from human to feline. As the swirling maelstrom fell away, they changed directions to get back on course.



CARSON

This time they ran in tandem, covering the last set of miles in what felt like excellent time. His shoulder blade hurt, but Amelia had done a damn fine job, especially considering the circumstances. Would that she could have done something for Mason. No. It was no good going there. She couldn't have saved Mason. Neither could he. The only ones responsible were the Shadow League and their minions and he would see they paid for what they had done.

As they exited from the trees, Carson ran to the top of the tallest rock and spotted the small boat bobbing on the stormy waters. It didn't look like much—an old fishing boat in sad repair, but maybe it was best not to call too much attention to them. He only hoped it could convey them to safety. An old fisherman raised and lowered a signal vertically. It was an old-time railroad signal indicating it was safe to proceed. Nudging Amelia's shoulder, he nodded toward the boat. He could feel her confusion and uncertainty and purred soothingly to her. She rubbed her head against his and then they bounded down the rocks until they were as close to the boat as they could get.

Carson gathered himself and leapt as far out into the cold water as he could. The frigid water stole his breath for a moment, and he waited until Amelia had joined him. Together they swam out to the boat. As they closed on the vessel, Carson realized that the 'old fisherman' was neither old nor a fisherman. It was Deke Campbell.

Two slings were lowered over the side and Carson and Amelia swam into them, allowing those on deck to haul them on board, Deke scowled. "Mason?" Carson shook his head. "I'm sorry. We'll get them. Let's get the two of you inside."

Once inside the wheelhouse, Carson shifted, accepting the clothing Deke handed him before stepping out to give Amelia some privacy. Carson held up a soft blanket and wrapped it around her as soon as she emerged from the swirling mist. He rubbed her briskly with his hands until the shivering stopped.

Each of them grabbed a towel, dried their hair, and Amelia pulled on warm clothing before Carson opened the door for the others to join them.

“What happened?” asked Deke.

“What happened is you and your boss or whatever the fuck this Colby Reynolds is are so busy playing your games that somebody sabotaged an innocent woman’s plane and she almost died,” he snarled. “It’s bad enough that my brother was killed by somebody looking to kill him, me, or finish the job with Amelia. I want a word with Reynolds and this Tevryn guy. I thought dragon-shifters were supposed to be old-world chivalrous.”

“For the most part, they are,” said Derek.

“You call sending someone who (a) has no part, not to mention knowledge, of whatever secret war you and the Shadow League are conducting; (b) has no point of reference and doesn’t even know it’s dangerous; and (c) is provided with no backup chivalrous?”

Deke nodded. “Well, when you put it that way...”

“What other way is there to put it,” snarled Carson.

“Sweetheart,” Amelia laid her hand on his shoulder. “I’m all right, and do you honestly believe I wouldn’t have taken the job if I had known all the risks?”

Carson shook his head, his demeanor softening. “You have a point, but still.”

“She does have a point. All I can say is knowing Tevryn, he never dreamed you’d be in danger, and the package he sent was important. Is it still in the plane? Do we need to retrieve it?”

He had to give it to Campbell, he hadn’t even tried to reach for the leather pouch. “No. It’s right here. You might want to take out whatever is in there. We ditched the waterproof container in favor of ease of carrying.”

Deke picked it up, his eyebrows raising at the intact seal. “You didn’t look?”

“That wasn’t part of my job. Mason...” her voice caught on his name, “... indicated this Phoenix Corp, Phantom Fire, or whatever they want to call themselves... is rich. I want to

be paid the balance owed on the delivery and they can bloody well buy me a new plane. I almost had that damn thing paid off.”

Deke grinned. “I’m sure the Phantom Fire will step up, but if they don’t, I can guarantee you Colby will. He’s been anxious about getting you to Windsong and only slightly less worried about the contents of this pouch. Let’s see if we can’t get that first part done. Stay out of sight. We’re going to try and just nonchalantly make our way back to Kodiak Island, but if we have to, we’re prepared and capable of running or fighting.”

Carson moved to the front of the wheelhouse, sinking down in the comfortable seating area and drawing Amelia into his lap.

“I’m so sorry about Mason. I wish I could...”

“Baby, you did everything you could have. He was right; even if we’d been next to a hospital, they couldn’t have saved him. He went out the way he wanted—giving us a chance to get away and knowing I’d found my fated mate.”

One of the deckhands brought them hot coffee and food, which they consumed greedily before settling down to sleep. He woke first with Amelia cuddled up in his arms. He could hear and feel her peaceful slumber and he had no wish to disturb her. He’d meant what he said about Mason, but already he could feel his brother’s loss, but at the same time could feel Amelia’s spirit filling and binding that wound, much the way she’d taken care of his shoulder.

He raised himself up enough to look out the window. They were *not* headed to Kodiak Island. Carson jerked his head toward Deke. Had they been set up? Was Deke actually working for the Shadow League?

“Take it easy,” rumbled Deke. “Otter Cove is closer. Colby thinks it’s time we let some of the others know what’s going on. Besides, he’s hopeful you’re going to join us. We had a look at these papers. To be honest we can’t make heads or tails out of them, but after speaking to Tevryn, he thinks it’s right up your alley.”

Carson nodded. “And I was able to smuggle out some of my research and that of a few others. I left in a secure storage box in Toronto.

“By the way, I mentioned your mate’s concerns to Tevryn. He asked me to assure her the balance of the money owed, as well as a substantial bonus, has been wired to her account. He told me to let her know all she needs do is pick out a new plane and the Phantom Fire will be more than happy to pay the purchase price.”

“Thank you.”

“And Colby wanted me to express his deepest condolences on the loss of your brother. If you’ll tell us where you had to leave him, we’ll retrieve his body.”

“I doubt there’s anything left to retrieve. He knew he was dying. He made us leave him so he could hold them off and take as many of them out as he could.”

Deke nodded, smiling slowly. “Sounds like Mason. He was a good man and a better friend. Both Colby and I want you to know that regardless of what you decide, those responsible will be held to account for your brother’s murder.”

“What am I going to decide about?” he asked, regarding Deke.

“We think they’re playing with genetics. They’re trying to weaponize it. We have soldiers galore, a good group of medical staff, even some researchers, but not one of us could tell an X chromosome from a Y chromosome. That means all of this,” he said holding up what looked to be the papers from the pouch, “is gobbledygook to us. We’re hoping you’ll join us and be able to make some sense out of it.”

“Do you have any idea how much money is involved in genetic research? And I’ll need trained researchers—the kind NLGP has—and I’m damn sure not going to leave those people to fend for themselves.”

Deke grinned. “Colby was kind of hoping you’d feel that way; he has more money than he knows what to do with and has a group of extraction experts. All we’ll need from you is a

list of who to get and some kind of code or phrase they'll know is from you."

Carson shook his head. "No way. We're not going to want to risk you. I'm not flattering or bullshitting you when I say we're convinced you're the lynchpin of this whole thing, being a cave lion." He chuckled. "But no pressure."

"Yeah, you know no pressure, no me pointing out your brother died to save you so you could do this—nothing like that." Deke grinned at him, and Carson could easily see why his brother and the cave lion had been friends. "Also, if I was going to put pressure on you, I'd point out your mate would be safer if you were with us."

That made Carson laugh out loud, waking Amelia, whom he nuzzled and purred to, sending her back to sleep. "I'm going to do you a favor and never tell her you questioned her ability to fight the good fight and survive."

"You have my sympathies. I've got one like that as well. Annie is hell on wheels and most of the time, I'm just running along behind her, trying to keep up and keep her alive. Let me give you a little background on where we're taking you. Zach used to be alpha to a second clan of polar bears in Otter Cove. His old man was banished, and he moved part of the clan up to Akiak and left part here at the lighthouse. The clan isn't liking being split up. Zach thought he'd offer it to you to set up your research facility and house your people there."

"I would think a lighthouse might be fairly vulnerable."

Deke grinned. "Not when you have a bunch of orca-shifters patrolling the waters and a state-of-the-art security system."

"Tell him we're in," murmured Amelia, and looking to Deke said, "I flew heavy cargo planes in war zones as well as Apache and Viper attack helicopters. It sounds like we may need air support."

"I think Colby's going to want your mate to make him a shopping list. We have all kinds of places we can hide those choppers. I know he has a couple of guys who are rated to fly

planes and choppers, but I don't know how much actual combat experience they have.”

“Like I said, her ability to fight the good fight and survive are top notch. My brother was proud to call her his little sister.”

Amelia leaned up to give him a kiss.

“Doc Hadley is en route to Otter Cove. He wants to take a look at that wound, but from what I could see, your mate did a damn fine job.”

The rest of the trip was uneventful, and they arrived at Otter Cove's lighthouse to be met by men with a stretcher, Zach Grayson, and a man Carson assumed was none other than Colby Reynolds.

“I could punch him in the face for you,” offered Amelia, causing both Carson and Deke to chuckle.

“Not this time, baby.”

Over his strong protests and much to his consternation, Carson was given no choice about being taken up to the cottage on the stretcher. Deke had the papers back in the pouch, which he handed over to Colby. Amelia walked up to Colby and before the lynx-shifter could open his mouth, she'd land a right cross to his jaw, whipping his head around. Colby growled instinctively and Deke stepped between them.

“For what it's worth, Reynolds, I'm on her side,” said Deke.

“Why does that not surprise me,” said Colby with a bit of humor in his voice.

After the doctor's examination, which Carson pointed out hurt far more than when Amelia had stitched him closed, Doc pronounced Amelia had done a fine job cleaning and closing the wound. The shrapnel had been imbedded in Carson's shoulder and Amelia had removed it all. They were dealing mostly with blood loss and exhaustion.

He and Amelia were given the primary bedroom with the attached ensuite, and despite his plans to stay awake and talk

to Amelia privately, he found himself succumbing to her melodic purr as he closed his eyes and slept.



He was watching her sleeping, thinking about what a peaceful feeling it gave him when she opened her eyes.

“What are you doing all the way over there?” she asked, getting out of bed and coming to join him. Being careful of his injured shoulder, she curled up in his lap.

The bonding link was strong between them, and he could easily feel her love for him and the grief she felt for her own loss of his brother as well as his.

“I think it might be a good thing that you and Mason didn’t get to know each other better. I think the two of you would have ganged up on me.”

She smiled and he could feel her grief lighten. “Absolutely. We’d already talked about it, and from now on we will only have potpies that I make the pastry crust for.”

Carson laughed. “Oh yeah, I would definitely have been outnumbered.”

“I keep asking myself how I could miss someone I had barely known twenty-four hours...”

“Mason was like that. He decided almost instantaneously whether he liked you or not. I, on the other hand, take the more conservative approach by pulling you from a certain death and then robbing you of your humanity before declaring my undying devotion. You know, the much longer week or so.”

There was a knock on the door and both Colby and Doc Hadley entered the room. Doc took his vitals, reminded him to take his antibiotics and pain pills if he needed them and to call him if he didn’t continue to improve.

When the doctor left, Colby turned to Amelia and Carson. “I know you said it wasn’t necessary, but I sent a group of men

to see if we couldn't recover part of Mason's body. There was nothing there."

"Maybe you weren't at the right spot," said Carson.

"No," Colby said, shaking his head. "That isn't it. We found what was left of the snowmobile and a bunch of body parts, just none belonging to Mason."

"Why take just Mason's?" asked Amelia.

"I suspect they want to know if it was him or me. Problem is, we're identical twins—the DNA is a perfect match," explained Carson.

"That was my thought, as well. I'm not yet sure how we can exploit that to our advantage, but I think we may finally have put them on their back foot. Deke says I need shopping lists from both of you. I take it you're amenable to using the lighthouse as a base?"

Carson nodded. "I am. I want to look at the living quarters, but my guess is we'll be able to get who we need out of Iceland. I also want to ensure that anybody else who wants out—like support personnel—can get out."

"I can make that happen," said Colby. "You two take a couple of days and get settled in. We'll start coming up with a game plan to get your people out." He looked at Amelia. "Don't let him do that."

"Do what?" they answered in unison.

"Blame yourselves—either of you—for Mason's death. He knew the risks when he joined us, as does everyone else. If anyone's to blame, it's me," Colby said, turning on his heel to leave and looking like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Colby?" called Amelia softly. The lynx-shifter paused but didn't turn around. "It wasn't your fault, either."

CHAPTER 18



CARSON

Carson stood at the end of the dock, watching the orcas peacefully patrolling the water. There was a lot of work to be done in order to defeat the Shadow League, but it would help take the edge off his and Amelia's grief. Mason wouldn't have wanted sad faces or sad songs. They were planning a small celebration of his life with just a few people with whom he'd been close. They planned to make several kinds of potpies. He could almost hear Mason chuckling in the background of his brain.

The playground had never been a fun place for kids like Carson—undersized, intelligent, nerdy, shy—it hadn't mattered that he was a shifter. The only thing that had helped was his taller, stronger, louder twin brother. The bullies in school quickly learned that Mason had no trouble defending his younger twin. Carson had often found himself trying to help some of the other, less physically adept kids, which meant Mason had to defend them, too.

"Sheesh, Carson, it's bad enough I have to protect you. Now you've got me protecting every single geek in school."

"If not you, then who?" Carson had asked quietly. "I'm lucky. I have you for a brother, but a lot of these other kids don't. And while bigger and stronger might work in elementary school, there will come a day those of us who can think faster than throwing a punch will prevail."

Mason looked shamefaced. "I guess you're right. The days of warrior culture are rapidly declining. I just want you to

remember that when I need you to take an algebra test for me.”

Carson grinned at his twin. “I got your back, bro.” That’s what Mason had always said to him. And he’d been right. There wasn’t a single time that Mason hadn’t had his back.

When Carson’s lazy hormones and growth genes had finally decided to kick in one summer, having each other’s back had taken on a whole new meaning. Over and over, they had substituted themselves one for the other for a myriad of reasons. A hangover, a date with two different girls at the same time. They had learned the nuances and differences in the way they could move so that no one could tell them apart.

“I got your back, bro,” he said quietly. “I will find those responsible and make them pay.”

No one had ever been able to tell them apart, except Amelia. She had known the man who shared his DNA and his face was not her mate before he’d ever had a chance to try and fool her. Mason had said Amelia in sweatpants, rolled down to her hips, a tank top, and a shotgun was about the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. At first he’d wanted to punch Mason and then had realized that while true, Mason was just giving him shit.

Carson wondered when they’d exchanged personalities. Growing up, Mason had been the jokester, the one with an easy laugh, while Carson had been the serious, studious one. Somewhere along the line they’d flipped. Mason had become guarded, distrustful, bordering on paranoid. Carson, on the other hand, had learned to lighten up and had found the girls flocked to him. More than one tutoring session in high school had ended in a heavy make-out session.

Even as they’d grown apart in their career paths, where they lived, and what they wanted, they had remained close, always getting together at least two to three times a year—always in some place new neither of them had ever been. He wanted to take Amelia to all those places. Somehow, he knew she would understand.

“Carson?”

He turned to see Colby standing not three feet behind him. The lynx-shifter gave a new definition to the word 'stealthy.'

"I don't want to bother you or intrude, but I thought you might have a few questions that I could answer."

Carson turned back to watch the ocean and dorsal fins of the orcas as they glided through the water. "A 'few?' Oh, I have a lot more than a 'few.' How did Mason get involved in all of this? Last time I checked, my brother was a lumberjack, not some kind of espionage operative. What was he doing for you, specifically? Why did the Shadow League want him dead? Was it him they were after? Why did you and the Phantom Fire involve my mate, who, at the time, didn't know anything about shifters? For the record, Colby, Tevryn is a fucking dragon; why the hell didn't he just fly those papers up here himself?"

"We were trying to keep a low profile."

"You failed."

"Yes, I'm afraid that is my assessment as well. The Phantom Fire has never involved itself in squabbles amongst shifters, not unless they were being paid to. We thought keeping their involvement as low profile as possible was the way to go. We were wrong. We put Amelia in the line of fire with no protection, no backup, and not a clue. Mason chose to get involved because of you."

"Oh, no, you don't get to put his death on me."

Colby waved his hand. "No. You misunderstand. Mason never trusted that the people you worked for were on the up and up. The more he learned, the more concerned he got. He came to me, and I kind of fobbed him off, but once we started hearing rumors about genetic research, trying to breed super soldiers, weaponizing what they were doing and the like, I realized we had a unique opportunity with Mason being your twin. We sent him in here and there to do some light sleuthing and planting electronic recording devices. But then he got seen some place he shouldn't have been. We had planned to get you out, but then you heard a little something about the EnGen Project having gone wrong in Seattle, and he knew you'd bolt.

I was worried perhaps you were actually working for them. He broke my nose.”

Carson laughed.

“He was working to set that up—to get you and most likely your entire team out of there. He knew they were all shifters and that we’d have to sort out their loyalties, but he also knew you’d never leave without them.”

“So, they were after both of us.”

Colby nodded. “Yes, and then you saved Amelia, and they realized you would most likely have those papers. Please tell me you can make out what those notes and symbols mean.”

“I only caught a glimpse of them, but I believe I can. And there’s an animal geneticist, specializing in extinct and very old animals...”

“Like dragons?”

“Just like. Her name is Emery Smoak. She lost a fellowship at Oxford over a theory she had that dragons once walked the earth. She’s been on the EnGen Project from the beginning. Alexandra Neal. My guess is that she is clueless as to what is going on. NLGP keeps things very compartmentalized. She could be invaluable to the team.”

“Start making a list.”

“I want my brother’s death to count for something.”

Colby reached out, laying his hand on Carson’s shoulder. “It did. Long before you and Amelia, his contributions mattered. He got us into places we would never have dared to go. The more we learned, the more he knew we had to stop them. Saving you and your mate? The Mason Payne I know would have considered that a good and honorable death. So if the only reason you want to do this is to make his death count, that was done long before you got involved. But if you want revenge...”

Carson swung around to face Colby. “You know I do.”

“Then fight with us. If you say Amelia’s out, and you don’t want her flying, I will honor that, although if she could at least

train our other pilots, I'd be grateful. Do you know she is an Air Force Cross and Silver Star recipient?"

Carson was stunned. "I had no idea."

Colby nodded. "She was nominated for the Medal of Honor but got passed over because she was female. The bastards. Three of my people know who she is, as does the sheriff of Mystic River and the head of the Park Rangers here in Alaska."

"I'm okay at least with the training stuff. Part of me wants to keep her out of danger, and part of me doubts I can do it."

Colby laughed ruefully. "Trust me when I say, I feel your pain."

"I didn't know you had a mate."

"Nor does anyone else. I'd appreciate if you kept that little bit of information to yourself."

"I see," said Carson with a wry grin. "Does *she* know?"

"Hard to say," chuckled Colby. "Either she does and is ignoring it, or she hasn't a clue. I can't decide which is worse."

"Keeping her out of this can't be a bad thing."

Colby laughed again. "How I wish that were possible, but it isn't. She's right in the thick of it, but that's a story for another time and a really good bottle of scotch."

"You pick the time, I'll bring the Macallan's."

Colby smiled and pointed to Carson. "I'm going to hold you to that. And speaking of headstrong mates, I see yours is headed my way."

"About the nose..."

Colby grinned. "Think nothing of it. Happens all the time. I think it gives me character."

Amelia passed Colby, who gave her an exaggerated wide berth. "If he was pressuring you..."

He dragged her around to stand in front of him. Wrapping his arms around her, he said, “He wasn’t, but I love you for being concerned. I know what we said last night, but I think we ought to throw in with them.”

“Agreed. I believe they’re fighting the good fight and that whatever your old company is up to is wrong. I also think they killed Mason. I’m afraid, I’m a little biblical in my take on justice—eye for eye; tooth for tooth; life for life.”

“Mason wouldn’t want us risking our lives to avenge his.”

“Liar,” she said with a laugh. “He wouldn’t mind if you did, but he’d want to keep me out of the fray. For the record, he’d be wrong, and it’ll never happen.”

“Why doesn’t it surprise me that you would say that?”

“Mason said it was because you were always the smarter brother.”

“Mason was right.”

“Come and run with me. I want to clear my head.”

They joined hands and returned to the cottage before removing their clothes, shifting into their snow leopard forms, and beginning to explore not only the lighthouse and its property but all of the land surrounding it. They ranged from a run along the rocky shoreline to up into the cliffs and hills above the isolated harbor that was somehow separate, yet a part of the larger Otter Cove. They galloped through the hills, taking numerous breaks to catch their breath or simply nuzzle one another in a form of solace and connection.

Numerous people called or waved to them in welcome and recognition. Carson was beginning to understand why Mason had chosen this place to call home and why he had wanted to stand with them against the coming darkness. Mason was gone. Nothing would bring him back. But his death would not be in vain, and he would be remembered for as long as he or Amelia took a breath.

Watch over us, Mason. We’re going to make them rue the day they decided to challenge the Payne brothers. They should have paid attention to our last name—Payne, pain. It means

*the same and those who would serve the servants of evil will
feel our wrath.*

CHAPTER 19



CARSON

The sheriff of Otter Cove, Zach Grayson, was waiting for them when they returned to the lighthouse property. He leaned against the wall of the cottage he had once called home. Carson and Amelia had shifted and changed back into clothes they had left in a storage box at the end of the dock before heading up to Zach.

“Zach,” said Carson, extending his hand.

Zach took Carson’s hand and shook it, inclining his head toward Amelia. “Amelia, Carson. Just wanted to see how you’re settling in. I understand from Deke you’re planning to stay.”

“We are. I appreciate your generous offer of the lighthouse, but we can pay you for it.”

“No need. It gave me the impetus I needed to get all of my people up to Akiak,” Zach said with a smile.

“Can I ask why your clan was split?”

“My father and I never got along. I could pretty much ignore him until he tried to kill my kid brother’s mate. With the support of the Ruling Council, I banished my father and assumed the position of alpha. My second, Wyatt, stayed here at Polaris, but more and more the clan missed the unity of being together. It was actually Wyatt’s idea to gift you and those who join you with the lighthouse property. It makes sense from a lot of different perspectives.”

“As Colby explained it,” said Amelia, “and as we’ve seen, there are enough structures already built and functional that when we get Carson’s team here, they’ll have places to work and live in relative comfort.”

“The only thing I can see that we’ll need is a large building to house the research facilities and labs. There seems to be enough smaller buildings that each of my team members can have their own residence.”

“Exactly. Colby asked if I’d check in on you and remind you both that he needs, as he calls it,” Zach said with a faint smile, “your shopping lists. Given that I know Amelia has flown combat missions, I’m not sure I really want to know what’s on hers.”

Amelia laughed. “I need to know what all he has up at Windsong, and I’m going to need to meet with the pilots.”

“So you’ve decided to let her fight?” asked Zach. “Don’t get me wrong, that’s a decision only the two of you can make, but I vote no.”

“The matter is still under discussion,” admitted Carson. “But why would you be opposed?”

“It’ll send the rest of the females into a tizzy. Deke already has his hands full with my sister, Annie, and her involvement with the Shadow Sisters.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “He was my brother, too. I’m going to fix breakfast burritos—my one not-baking claim to fame. Zach?”

“I’d love to join you.”

“Good. Then let’s head inside.”

Once inside, Amelia made quick work of getting breakfast made and on the table.

“So, what really brings you here?” asked Amelia. “Carson is the brilliant, but I’m finding socially clueless, member of the family.”

Zach chuckled. “I don’t doubt Mason took an instant liking to you. Not to worry, Carson, Sienna often has to negotiate or

explain things to me, as well.”

Carson raised his mug of coffee. “Then I am in good company. So why are you here?”

“Until recently most of the resistance’s activity has been on the peninsula at Mystic River, but with the research facility being set up here and Amelia taking on some kind of position with air support, Otter Cove is going to become more of a focal point. I doubt you’ve had a chance to really look at those papers, but do you have any idea what the Shadow League is up to? I mean we can all agree that it’s world domination, but how do they plan to get there?”

“From the little I’ve learned from what I overheard in Reykjavik, scanning the papers, and talking to others, it looks like they are planning to weaponize genetics, although I’m not sure how. There seems to have been a failed experiment in Seattle that looks like they were trying to either clone or breed dragons, which makes me think some kind of super soldier. What we, as scientists, were told by NLGP is that we were trying to isolate specific genes dedicated to specific diseases.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” said Zach.

“No, it doesn’t. But what I’m beginning to believe is that they planned to turn those genes and their mutations into targeted diseases. There is a specific cancer, for instance, confined only to Tasmanian Devils. It is always fatal and has all but wiped out the species. Imagine if we could isolate the gene and its mutation that causes that and then introduce it to other species. The cancer is transmissible, but at this point only to other Tasmanian Devils. There are equally transmissible cancers, but of a different sort and less lethality, in some breeds of dogs and soft-shell clams.”

“Shit,” breathed Zach.

“Exactly. It’s only now that I’m realizing what those bastards at NLGP are up to. Teams are sequestered from each other and fraternization outside of one’s team is forbidden. That way no one gets a look at the bigger picture, or has the opportunity to understand the more deadly ramifications of what’s really going on.”

Amelia brightened. “That’s why you’re insisting that everybody work together. You’re creating transparency.”

“But shouldn’t what you’re going to be doing be kept secret?”

“To the outside world? Absolutely. But within our own community and especially those here at Polaris?” Carson shook his head. “Absolutely not. Scientists actually work better, in my opinion, when they feel free to talk with their colleagues, share information, and collaborate. How far outside of Polaris we want to share details, I will leave to those in charge of the resistance, but you’re right to be concerned.”

“How so?” asked Zach.

“If and when the Shadow League figures out what we’re up to, Polaris, and by extension, Otter Cove is going to become a major target. The disadvantage of having us all in one place means you can devastate our research all in one fell swoop, but I believe the advantages far outweigh that.”

“What I can’t figure out,” said Amelia, “is why the Phantom Fire, using the Phoenix Corp as their façade, wanted to get the package they gave me, that had all the research, to Colby? He doesn’t have scientists.”

Zach nodded. “True enough, but what he does have is an almost impenetrable fortress at Windsong. His people are deadly loyal, and what we’re only now beginning to grasp is just how far and how strong his intelligence network is. Up until recently, when Colby chose to tip his hand, everyone believed the resistance was being headed up by Mark Hadley, Doc’s son. And you may want to talk to him—it seems that arctic foxes can use the earth’s magnetic properties to find food, and what they are discovering, is a way to use that force and *push* it as a weapon.”

“Fascinating,” said Carson, already beginning to think of how they might research that and use it in their fight against the Shadow League. “We also need to figure out how the League knew Amelia was carrying the package.”

“They didn’t...” she started.

“They did,” stated Carson. “When I retrieved the package, I had a chance to look at your plane. I saw a funny little rubber hose attached to what looked like a small air bladder that led to the fuel line running to the engine.”

“Those bastards sabotaged my plane!” she cried.

“Now they’ve done it. She’ll be after her own revenge,” chuckled Carson. “She could handle them trying to kill her and the rest of us, but causing her plane to crash is unforgivable.”

Zach laughed. “Women are practical that way.”

“The thing is,” said Amelia, thoughtfully, “when it happened, it felt like I’d hit something in the air, which of course I hadn’t, but all of the instrumentation went bonkers, and then the engine started spewing oil and smoke. If it hadn’t been for Carson, I would have died, and those papers and I would have ended up at the bottom of the lake.”

She shivered as she closed her eyes. Carson put his arm around her and purred soothingly until Amelia opened her eyes and gifted him with a small smile.

“That’s the one thing I really envy about you big cats,” Zach mused.

Carson nodded. “It can be most effective.”

“I’m going to see about increasing the size of the sheriff’s department so we can patrol out here more often.”

“We would welcome your help, but Colby has already asked if he can have one of the cottages for a small group of rotating security personnel, although I’m planning to task some of my colleagues to see what they can come up with.”

Amelia laughed. “Fun games for nerds.”

Zach grinned. “I think you’re going to fit right in. I know we’re going to benefit from your addition to the community. Amelia, thank you for the burrito. It was delicious.”

Zach took his leave, and Carson went into their bedroom, reached under the mattress where they’d put the package and brought it back out to the kitchen table, where he sat down and spread the papers, beginning to organize them into what he

thought were logical groupings. Of the most interest were the graphs showing the results from various experiments.

Looking over his shoulder, Amelia asked, “Aren’t those documenting their failures?”

“It appears so, but often we learn as much, if not more from the experiments that didn’t go as planned. It looks like they were able to get some samples from the dragon and experimented with them. I think they were trying to either clone him or at least figure out how to use samples from him to fertilize the eggs of humans or other shifters...” Carson shook his head, letting his voice trail off.

“Bad?”

“Horrific, and NLGP was behind it. Makes me want to puke. This will be a powerful argument in getting the people we need to upend and endanger their lives to join us. Didn’t Zach say the head of the resistance was Doc’s son?”

“I believe he did.”

Carson grabbed his cell phone and dialed. “Doc? It’s Carson Payne. Any chance you can arrange a meeting between your son and me?”

“I can do that; I know he’s been anxious to talk to you. Let me call him right now, and one of us will get right back to you.”

Carson ended the call, but before he could set the phone down, it rang. “Carson Payne.”

“Carson, Mark Hadley. How are you feeling?”

“Well on the mend. I understand you’re the head of the resistance.”

Mark laughed. “My father said you didn’t mince words. I don’t know that I’d claim leadership; I’m more a focal point for all of our efforts. I understand you may hold the key to whatever the League is up to.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far, but I may be able to figure out how they’re planning to do it and find ways to shut

them down. Zach mentioned something about foxes having the ability to tap into the magnetic properties of the Earth?”

“That’s a little grandiose, but foxes have always been able to tap into the magnetic poles to locate prey. What we’ve only recently found out is that shifters once had, but had forgotten, the ability to use that as a kind of weapon. It’s probably easier to show you than explain it,” said Mark.

“Invite them for dinner,” Amelia suggested.

“Would you and your mate be free for dinner this evening?”

“If we wouldn’t be too much of a bother, I think Nova would really enjoy that. Would six work for you?”

“We can make it work. We’ll see you then.” He ended the call with Mark and turned to Amelia. “Do we need to get groceries?”

“No. I think Colby stocked us up with pretty much anything we could need. Are you ever going to tell me what you wouldn’t tell me back at the cabin?”

Carson had to think what that might have been. He’d told her he loved her. He told her they were fated mates. It would appear she believed and accepted both. *Barbs*. Ah yes, that must have been it.

“It would be far easier to explain if you were naked and we were in bed.”

Amelia laughed. “So far, explaining something to me seems to be the last thing that you have on your mind when you have me naked and in bed.”

He stood up, took both her hands and backed toward their bedroom, pulling her along. “Trust me, this explanation is better experienced than told.”

Amelia grinned, feeling the lust running down the link to her and responding with a push of her own. Leading her to their bed, they helped each other out of their clothing, interspersing kisses with whispered words, trailing lips and little nips. It was a more slow and sultry kind of lovemaking.

They were safe and for the moment they were alone with no one needing anything from either of them.

A gentle breeze from the window they had left ajar, and the smell of the sea permeated the room, the chill causing goosebumps to rise along their skin and her nipples to stiffen not just from desire. Carson purred deeply, increasing the vibrato from that which he used to soothe to arouse instead. He tipped her back into the bed, catching her so that she was eased down, and he could feel the tension from the past few days evaporate as she gave herself into his keeping.

Lying naked in their bed, she was an innocent combined with a temptress. She was everything he'd ever needed and never even known he wanted. Carson stretched out alongside her, pulling her toward him and then onto her back. He brushed his lips with hers briefly before whispering kisses along her jawline and down her throat. Mostly he used his lips and tongue, occasionally nipping at her skin, igniting an arousal that seemed singularly unique to her.

Amelia moaned in pure pleasure as one of Carson's large hands closed over her breast, squeezing it gently and possessively, while his tongue swirled around the nipple. Moving his mouth to her other nipple and suckling, he slid both hands down her side and slipped them under her body, cupping her ass.

"You're mine," he rumbled.

"I know, and you're mine," she purred.

Neither was asking a question nor permission. Instead, it was a simple declaration and acknowledgment of ownership and possession, dominance and if not downright submission, acquiescence. She was his. She'd been his from the moment her plane started to fall from the sky. His priorities had changed and clarified. He knew what he was meant to do—love and care for his fated mate until his dying breath. The rest, they would figure out together on this craggy coastline they now called home.

As Carson rolled over to cover her with his body, his cock throbbed against the inside of her leg, seeking her core. His

was a greedy cock. It wanted her as often as it could have her and today was no exception. The texture of her skin excited him and the skin was stretched tight around his cock, the barbs beginning to bubble up, straining to get out.

Carson brought his hands up to cover and play with her sensitized breasts as he moved up her body, spreading her legs and settling into the place that had always been his. She was his fated mate and had been so since the beginning of time. That would continue to the end of time and beyond.

Holding her steady, his mouth captured hers as he pressed forward and entered her in one, long, hard pass, the nubs along his cock emerging, lighting up nerves in her wet heat she would never have experienced before. She gasped, more in surprise than anything else.

“Carson?”

“It’s fine, Amelia, just your mate’s barbs coming out to play.”

“Barbs? Like in tomcats?”

“Just like.”

“Kinky,” she laughed. As he drew back, she purred. “I think I’m going to like this.”

He chuckled and then pushed back in, allowing the barbs to scrape her inner walls. The sensation had her squirming beneath him. Carson withdrew only to thrust back in, making her moan, but it wasn’t a moan he was seeking. No, he meant to make his mate yowl. Dragging himself back caused more friction and discomfort as the barbs stiffened and scored her anew, but the pain didn’t seem to bother her and she wrapped herself around him. Amelia cried out as the first climax crashed down on her like the ocean on the rocks along the shore.

Carson stroked back into her, allowing himself to rest his weight on top of her as his body forced hers into the bed. This time when he pulled back, she yowled in pleasure as the barbs bit into her tender flesh. Carson began kissing her, his tongue plunging into her mouth the same way his cock plunged into

her wet heat. Her hands came up to tangle in his hair, returning kiss for kiss as he continued to thrust. As he fucked her hard, her body catching his rhythm as it always did, trying to match him stroke for stroke. But he held fast and controlled her response.

He hammered her pussy, driving in and out with more speed and power as she gave up the fight and ceded supremacy to him. His dominance claimed her submission and feasted on it. A last, ruthless thrust and she yowled again as she orgasmed. He flooded her with his cum, its creamy essence soothing her plundered pussy. When his cock had finally spewed its last drop, he kissed her deeply, rolling from her body and dragging her into his embrace.

They were complete and resplendent in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Carson could feel the winds of change shifting. The Shadow League had held sway for a long time. Their reign of terror and oppression was over. Regardless of whether the Phantom Fire joined them, the Shadow League would be destroyed.

CHAPTER 20



AMELIA

*A*melia had risen quietly from the bed, hoping Carson would rest. She got online and found a good recipe for a two-crust chicken pot pie that looked easy enough and for which she was sure they had all the ingredients. She made her standard flaky pie crust recipe, putting it in the fridge to let it cool and rest for a couple of hours. Then she took a whole chicken, whacked it into pieces and set it in chicken stock with various herbs and seasonings to cook and stew. She'd need to let it cool before she could remove the meat from the bones and combine it with vegetables and the rest of the filling ingredients. She'd serve it with a salad, homemade bread, and dessert. The bread needed to be started next.

When the cell phone rang, it startled her. She wiped her hands down and answered.

“Amelia? It’s Colby. I understand Mark Hadley is headed to your place for dinner. I wonder if I might invite myself.”

“Sure. We should have more than enough thanks to whoever stocked the fridge, freezer, and pantry.”

“Good. Can I bring anything?”

“I know we have booze and hard liquor, but I haven’t checked for wine.”

“I think you’ll find you’re well stocked there, as well. But tell me what we’re having, and I’ll bring the wine.”

“Homemade chicken pot pie, salad, homemade bread, and I’m not sure what for dessert. Nothing fancy, but I think it’ll

be tasty.”

“It sounds divine. I’ll find a good pinot grigio.”

“Perfect.”

“Six?”

“That’s when Mark and Nova are arriving. We’ll see you when you get here.”

“How’s Carson? He looked done-in last night.”

“He’s doing better than I would be, but he has had a chance to start looking at those papers Tevryn wanted me to deliver.”

“Just tell me he could make some sense of it.”

“Unfortunately, yes. It’s part of the reason we invited Mark and Nova. I’m pretty sure he’ll like the idea that you’re coming. He also thinks with just what he has, he’ll be able to persuade people to risk joining us.”

There was a pause. “That bad?”

“You’re asking the wrong person, but my feeling was the potential for really bad—like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* bad, *Frankenstein* bad, or *Jurassic Park* bad.”

“Oh, that’s really not good. Unless you have strong objections, I’m going to plan to bring a small contingent of men with me to ensure your safety. Actually, I’m bringing them whether you object or not—we’ll fight it out once we get there. See you tonight.”

He hung up before she could tell him she didn’t think there’d be much of a fight. Both she and Carson meant to keep their people safe. Their ‘clan’ might be made up of different shifters, but they would protect them just the same.

Once Carson got up, he joined her in the main room of the cottage, settling down to study the papers, further refine his piles, and begin to make notes. He was completely absorbed in his work, only lifting his head when the slowly simmering chicken was ready to cool and have the meat removed from the bones.

“That smells great,” he said, “and I get points for not attacking the freshly baked bread.”

“I told you, I can bake, but regular cooking is not my forte with the exception of chicken pot pie as well as a lobster mac and cheese. I’m making a crepe cake with cream filling and raspberries for dessert. There’s the most beautiful container of fresh, organic raspberries in the fridge. Oh, and Colby called and invited himself.”

“Good. We probably should have thought to do that.”

“Agreed. He said he’s bringing a small group of his men. I think that’s a good idea, as well. I’m going to ask him if he wants to house his pilots out here. I’m not agreeing not to fly myself, but right now, I think my skills are better put to use training other pilots.”

Amelia cherished the way they had fallen into an easy, working rhythm with one another. They could go for long periods of time without saying a word. It allowed Carson to focus on the information they did have and figure out where the holes were. He was already outlining avenues of research to pursue.

Upon hearing the *swoosh! swoosh! swoosh!* of a good-sized helicopter, Amelia looked out as her phone rang.

“It’s just us,” said Colby. “I picked up Mark and Nova as well.”

Amelia ended the call and walked out to greet them, looking over her shoulder at Carson who had yet to raise his head. Shaking her own, she walked outside, stopping just outside of the chopper’s deadly rotors. She was impressed. The H225M had proven its reliability in combat conditions around the world—Lebanon, Afghanistan, Libya, and numerous other countries and conflicts. While a non-militarized version could be purchased by a civilian, this one was most decidedly ‘militarized,’ and the cost had to have been astronomical.

Colby hopped out, followed by a good-looking man who bore an uncanny resemblance to what Amelia imagined Doc

Hadley had looked like in his younger years. He in turn, helped out a lovely young woman who Amelia was immediately drawn to.

“Amelia?” she called. Amelia nodded, and ducking, she broke into a run, catching both of Amelia’s hands in hers and squeezing them. “I’m Nova. I feel like we must have been friends in another lifetime.”

Amelia grinned. “I felt the same way. So in that case, it’s so good to see you again.”

Colby and the other man joined her. “You know Colby, and this is my mate, Mark Hadley.”

Mark shook her hand before Colby stepped forward, kissing her cheek. “It’s good to see you. I take it he’s got his nose down in the papers?”

Amelia laughed. “Yes and is most likely going to be annoyed when I tell him we’re going to need to eat on that table.”

“Ha! I’m a step ahead of you,” called Carson as he came out of the cottage. “Colby, I understand you want to station some men here. I think Amelia disappeared at some point this afternoon and opened up one of the larger residences.”

“I did. And I also made sure we had enough food for them and your pilot. By the way, how many of the H225Ms do you have.”

“Three. They’re stationed up above Windsong.”

“I’d like one down here, what else do we... oh lord,” Amelia said, “listen to me. That conversation can wait.”

“I brought you a list of what we have. I thought it might make your shopping list a bit easier.”

Mark laughed. “And here I thought we were just getting a head scientist.”

“Quite the contrary,” said Colby. “Amelia is a combat veteran in heavy aircraft and choppers. She has agreed to train our other pilots. We will have all kinds of air support.”

“Colby,” said Carson, “let’s get your men down to their new quarters. As she said, Amelia made enough to feed everyone.”

The two of them left as Amelia showed Mark and Nova to the cottage. When Colby and Carson returned, they had five very large men who were dressed in quasi-military garb. She was convinced she and Nova had been friends in another life. The beautiful arctic fox shifter moved in the kitchen alongside her, throwing the salad together while Amelia brought the pot pies out of the oven and put them on the island which they would use as a buffet. Nova added the salad, and they got out plates, cutlery, bread, and butter.

“This smells divine,” said Colby.

They sat down to eat, and Amelia felt as if they’d been a part of this group from the beginning. It was as if the group had been waiting for them to join so it could coalesce and begin to come together. When they were finished, they decided to light a bonfire and move outside for coffee and dessert.

It was a lovely evening and it might have felt like a group of regular friends just getting together if it weren’t for the enormous military helicopter and heavily-armed men. Amelia started to excuse herself to head back inside and start to clean up, when the pilot stopped her.

“No ma’am. Let us take care of that. You just sit here by the fire. I understand you and your mate have been put through a ringer. You’re one of us now, and we look after each other.”

The five men headed back to the cottage.

“I don’t mean to cast aspersions, but the pouch with the documentation is locked up,” said Carson.

“So where does this leave us?” asked Mark.

“If I may,” started Colby, who was not only an alpha but a natural born leader. “Amelia is going to look at the list I gave her with what we have and let me know what we need. I have some room up at Windsong, but I suspect she’s going to want most of the aircraft down here, which makes sense.”

Amelia nodded. “Carson and I have done a bit of exploring. There are some nice sea caves where we can put some of the choppers. We’ll have to retrofit them like they do on aircraft carriers, but there’s also a really nice stretch of land that would make a good, hidden landing strip where we could build hangers. Easy to get to from here. Given how many people Carson wants to bring here, we could easily house the pilots, your security personnel and the researchers.”

Mark agreed. “And we have people working on using the magnetic poles as a kind of offensive weapon.”

“It seems our ancestor shifters had that ability but it got lost,” explained Nova. “We’ve been wondering if there was some kind of genetic link, but honestly we’re just shooting in the dark.”

Carson nodded. “If so, and we can identify it, we might be able to scan for it to see which of your people might have the gene and if there’s some way to enhance it or help them develop the trait.”

“That’s what we were hoping.”

Carson turned to Amelia. “You’ve suddenly gone quiet.”

“Just thinking. If we could find a way to use that as a weapon in our choppers and planes, we could be virtually undefeatable.”

“If we fight a war in the air, aren’t the humans going to know?” asked Colby. “It’s the same, though, with any kind of open conflict.”

“Our best bet,” said Carson, “is beating them at their own game and never letting them get a foothold.”

“Again, I agree,” said Mark. “We need to take the Shadow League down and shut down their research facility or facilities.”

“My guess is most of the researchers have no clue what they’re really working on. I know NLGP keeps their teams isolated from one another. I want my teams to be able to collaborate.”

“Are all the members shifters?” asked Nova.

“Yes. When I first started there were a few humans, but little by little they got phased out. There are some teams and some individuals we’ll need to work around, but I’m working on a plan to get them out. Colby, you said you had a way...”

“Not so much a way, but a group—the Shadow Sisters. I’ve forged a good working relationship with them. I can almost guarantee they’ll want in. Deke will be inclined to help as his mate has worked closely with them in the past. We’ll want to stress that getting out is not dependent on helping us and regardless of what happens we’ll make sure they’re taken care of—either a place here or set up somewhere.”

“That’s awfully generous of you,” said Amelia.

“I don’t want anyone to feel like their choice is side with us or die. We have to stand for something better than the Shadow League.”

Nova shook her head. “Who’d have thought it—Colby Reynolds, Mystic River’s answer to a gangster, is really a romantic idealist at heart.”

Colby grinned ruefully. “I’d appreciate you keeping that to yourself. At some point I’m going to have to come clean, but for now, the fewer people who know what I’m really up to the better.”

“So you’re just another arms dealer selling us weapons?” teased Amelia.

“That’s me,” Colby laughed. “Just your average, friendly neighborhood arms dealer, which by the way leads me to something we need to start thinking about...”

“Who’s in charge?” said Mark, nodding.

“Yes. Don’t get me wrong, Mark, we would be so far behind the eight ball without your return and kicking the others in the butt, but it’s about to get big and about to get serious. We’ve been responding to threats and inroads by the League on a catch-as-catch-can basis.”

“As Mason would have said, we’re playing defense not offense,” said Carson.

“We are. I think we need some kind of tribunal or war council—something with checks and balances running our various areas. Mark, you’re the natural for general command...”

“No, Colby, you have the best overall picture,” protested Mark.

“What about Deke?” suggested Carson. “He seems to have a good handle on things and can move around pretty freely.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Mark.

Colby smiled. “So we have our first member, but Mark you need to be in the group—a lot of the resistance is centered in Vulpecula. Carson, you’ve got to be on board because of the research, and frankly, Amelia has to be involved because of air support. That’s going to be critical, not from a fighter jet dogfight in the sky, but getting things and people where they need to be.”

“That makes four,” said Nova. “I don’t know about the rest of you, and it can stay within the group for now, but Colby, you have to be in. Your intelligence network is second to none.”

“Agreed,” the others said in unison.

There was a pause. “That’s it, then. Deke will head up the group, with his seconds being Colby, Carson, Mark, and Amelia,” said Nova, lifting her glass. “And they shall be called the Fire Star Alliance.”

“Fire Star Alliance,” repeated the others one by one as they raised their glasses as well.

CHAPTER 21



CARSON

One Week Later

He stood in the same spot where Zach Grayson had taken his vows to his fated mate, Sienna, not so very long ago. So much had happened in such a short time. He'd come to realize the company he worked for was actually a front and doing perverted research for a group of dark shifters known as the Shadow League. He had met and claimed his fated mate, Amelia, and lost his twin brother, Mason. He had become one of those leading the resistance movement known as the Fire Star Alliance and was now involved in planning what he believed to be a rescue operation for those he had left behind. Construction and renovation on the land and buildings granted to him and known as Polaris had begun.

Now he stood waiting for Amelia. He mused to himself that if the women involved with the resistance were any indication of ability, dedication, and hard work, the Shadow League didn't stand a chance. A week ago none of them had even known Amelia; in a very short period of time, they had put together the wedding of Amelia's dreams—dreams Amelia hadn't even known she had.

Colby's top pilot had been dispatched to Bellingham to fly the contracts Amelia had in place and to keep her company running. Phoebe, Amelia's able assistant, had been given a promotion and had felt there was too much to do with Amelia relocating to Alaska. As part of Phoebe's upgraded compensation package, Amelia had included allowing her to

live in her waterfront condo, arranging for only a handful of cherished possessions to be flown to the cottage.

His inner reflections were interrupted when the entire crowd of guests that had been milling around went quiet. He looked up and thought he saw the embodiment of every romantic fantasy he'd ever had—and she was his fated mate. The long-sleeve lace ballgown was elegant, sophisticated, sexy, and sparkled in the late afternoon sun. He wasn't sure how it was done; the skirt seemed to float, as did the delicate patterns created throughout the dress. She'd told him a lot of the dress was made of something called 'tulle.' He wasn't sure what that was, but he was a big fan. Layers of the stuff, sprinkled with lace and sequins created a frothy, sparkling creation that was ethereal, bohemian, and absolutely perfect.

She joined him in front of the officiant. "You look like you're going to faint," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

"The shoulder wound is all but healed. I'm fine. You just took my breath away, but then, you always do."

They took their vows and danced, entertained, and laughed the night away. At one point, Amelia wrapped her arms around him from the back. "He's here, you know. He's here with us at Polaris and in everything we do."

Carson nodded. "I feel him too. Sometimes it's like I forget he's gone—like I can almost reach down the link—and then it's gone."

The following morning came all too early, with only thoughts of finding erotic pleasure and solace in his mate's arms, the sound of his cell phone ringing with the theme song from the *Mission Impossible* franchise—the ringtone he'd assigned to Colby—was not wanted or needed. He picked up the phone, thought about tossing it into the wall, and growled as Amelia plucked it from his hand.

"Be nice."

"Nice is for a week from now. Nice is not for the morning after my fated mate and I exchange vows. I'm telling you I am going to get even with him when it's his turn. Deke and I are

thinking about drugging him and then putting him in a full-body cast and not telling him for a week.”

Amelia chuckled. “You’re bad.” She answered the phone. “Hang on, Colby, he’s right here.”

Carson groaned as he took the phone, and she managed to elude his grasp as she headed into the bath.

“For the record, I hate you.”

Colby laughed. “I don’t doubt it. I thought I’d give you a heads up—the Shadow Sisters are in. I’ve got a proposed timetable to run past our tribunal, and I’ve got more men headed your way to work on the research facility. I know the timing sucks...”

“But it is what it is.”

“Tell Amelia I need her to make a delivery to Anchorage. Nothing too dicey, but I’d rather keep it as low-key as possible.”

Carson groaned and dropped his voice, “Any news on where they took Mason’s body?”

“None, but Tevryn says they have more information and Warrick, the dragon they took the samples from, is amenable to coming up to meet with us. I’d rather we do it at Windsong. I’m a known entity to them. I’ll need you there as I won’t have a clue what to ask, but until they commit, the less they know about our structure and placement, the better.”

“You don’t trust them?”

“I trust them to be dragons. They aren’t big on fighting with other shifters. They’re rather arrogant bastards and the legend says those of the Phantom Fire are immortal.”

“Do you think that’s even possible?”

“I have no idea, but who knows. I’m not looking at making some kind of super shifter or even super soldier.”

“But to be able to study the DNA of an immortal creature might lead us to things that could help us find clues to offset many afflictions that affect the aging.”

“The Shadow Sisters think that the League may be approaching Elron Whistler...”

“The high-tech mogul?” asked Carson.

“One and the same. I can’t see anything good coming of that.”

“Nor can I. I wouldn’t discount that information. There was a rumor going around NLGP last year that he’d been spotted flying in.”

“Good to know. Any chance you could just have Amelia drop you off here? She can take the Apache I have here. It has stealth capability.”

“You do know it’s not nice to bribe a man’s mate with her favorite toy.”

“I saw the way she looked at you last night. Trust me, my brother, nothing holds a candle to you.”

Carson sighed. “Was she not the most exquisite thing?”

“Yes. You are a lucky sonofabitch. Don’t fuck it up.”

“I’ll try, and yeah, we’ll head over. I’ve got a couple more things to add to my shopping list, but I have to tell you the things that have been delivered have been top-of-the-line and the crew is doing a masterful job at installation and getting things ready.”

Carson ended the call as Amelia emerged from the bath, clad in a flight jumpsuit, which was normally a shapeless garment, but which she managed to make look incredibly sexy.

“Colby wants you to drop me at Windsong. He said you can fly the chopper with stealth mode.”

“Ohh, goodie!” she exclaimed. “Get your ass in gear. We need to get a move on.”

Carson rolled out of bed, taking her arm. “You will be careful, right?”

“Always. Remember last night we both vowed that no matter what happened or where our paths took us, we would always return home to each other.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

Carson was ready to go within fifteen minutes, and Amelia was waiting for him with three breakfast burritos in hand. “One for you, one for me, and one for our pilot.”

“I thought you were our pilot.”

“No, Colby wants someone to fly us both over and wait for you to bring you back. I’m going to fly into Anchorage and bring the Apache back here. That way if trouble comes before we’re fully operational, we’ll have two choppers, and the Apache is far more maneuverable.”

They were airborne within minutes and flew directly to Colby’s estate on the fringes of Kodiak Island. The pilot hugged the shoreline making the short jump from the peninsula to the island at the narrowest point before moving north along the shoreline of the island. They flew so close to the water, Carson thought if he leaned out, he could touch the sea.

They landed and after a kiss that was all too brief, Amelia was whisked away to the Apache helicopter. Carson headed inside where he was shown to Colby’s study. Two very large men stood inside, flanking his desk on either side. Colby pushed back and stood.

“Carson Payne, may I introduce you to Tevryn and Warrick of the Phantom Fire.”

Tevryn stepped forward, extending his hand. “My deepest condolences on the loss of your brother, and my most profound apologies for putting your mate in danger. None of us ever dreamed it would be dangerous for her.”

Carson took his hand and shook it. “If you weren’t a fire-breathing dragon, I’d punch you in the mouth.”

Tevryn dropped his hand and raised the other to stop the forward motion of the dragon known as Warrick. “Hold, Warrick. If it had been Dani, you’d have done more than punch me. And if that would help soothe your ire, Dr. Payne—what a delicious name, by the way—I am happy to let you take your best shot.”

“He’s right about if it had been Dani and also that we never thought she was in danger.”

Carson nodded. “Somehow I think you’ve taken all the satisfaction I might get, but I’d lead with your buying her the best de Havilland Beaver ever made when you meet her.”

Warrick groaned. “I don’t think I want Dani to meet your Amelia.”

Tevryn laughed. “Knowing Dani, she’ll punch you in the nose.”

“Colby said you wanted some fresh samples to compare with those they took from me in Seattle,” said Warrick.

“Yes. They could be helpful. We’ll have to duplicate some of their experiments, within reason, to make sense of their results.”

Warrick nodded. “I don’t know if you need to know, but they kept me doused with seawater, which is toxic to dragons in our dragon form. And in the early stages they were dosing me with some of the date rape drugs.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. Hopefully we’ll be able to figure out what they were after and beat them at their own game.”

Carson spent the next several hours collecting samples and meeting with Colby about a lot of, as he called them, ‘housekeeping issues.’ The flight back to Polaris seemed long and he found he was missing Amelia far more than he should. Looking out the window at the storm-tossed sea, he once again felt the fleeting presence of his twin.

He shook himself from his melancholy. Anything, anything, he did that helped to defeat the League would avenge his brother and help his shifter brethren defeat the evil that was now known as the Shadow League. They might not know it yet, but the Fire Star Alliance was coming, and they would prove to be undefeatable and victorious.

EPILOGUE



*A*leutian Range, Alaska Peninsula

They were flying over the ground, making good time. They might actually get to safety. He hadn't shared with his brother that the Shadow League was closing in. He'd been sloppy, but then again, he hadn't known Carson had seen the light and flown the coop. Someone must have seen him. It didn't really matter; all of their lives were in danger.

A small, red light caught his attention as it seemed to bounce off the trees before heat and searing pain penetrated his body. The sound of the sniper rifle having been fired only came on the heels of agony that was spreading throughout his system. They said you never heard the bullet that killed. They were wrong.

As he slumped over the front of the snowmobile, he knew he was dying. An inability to control his limbs was spreading quickly, and breathing had become unbearable. He tried to gun the engine, but he couldn't maintain his grip on the throttle. He watched as it slipped off and landed limply on his thigh.

"*Mason!*" his little brother cried down the link. A link that existed only between fated mates and twins.

As his snowmobile decelerated, Carson's came up alongside his, slowing until Amelia leaped from one to the other, managing to get in front of him and wrap his arms around her.

"Carson, we're losing him," Amelia said into the comm unit. She was cool and steady. His brother had, in Mason's

opinion, been gifted with an extraordinary mate.

“I know. I can feel him slipping away,” said Carson over the comm unit. “Much like the bonding link, twins share a similar link.”

‘Get away. Leave me. I’ll hold them if I can,’ whispered Mason down the link to his brother.

“No,” growled Carson. Carson had never been one for subtlety or subterfuge.

‘I’m dying, little brother. Nothing you can do about that. Let me take as many of the bastards with me as I can. Get your mate and the package to Colby. He will keep you safe. I’ve got your back, bro.’

There was another volley of gunfire as they tried to make the crest of the ridge. They pushed to make it to the top amidst intermittent gunfire, which only barely missed them. Once at the top they stopped. Carson was at his side in an instant—the way he’d always been.

“The saddle bag on the right side of my snowmobile has a couple of guns and a couple of grenades. Leave those with me. The two of you...”

“We’re not leaving you,” said Amelia. His brother’s mate was no pushover. She wouldn’t submit easily, but when she did, Mason thought she’d be well worth it.

“You have no choice, little sister,” Mason said, hoping he could make them both understand he was dying. He didn’t want to die, but he didn’t think he had much choice. All he could do was make his death count. “I’ll slow them down up here. Halfway down the ridge, leave the other snowmobile. Turn it on its side like it flipped and booby trap it so if they get there and move it, you’ll know how far they are behind you. At the foot of the ridge, drop all the other supplies. All you’ll need at that point is speed, the package, and each other. Get to the coordinates. Colby will take it from there.”

“Mason,” started Carson.

“We don’t have time, little brother. I love you. You love me. I can die knowing what I was doing was important and

that you will have her.” He took her hand and placed it in Carson’s. “Take care of each other. Love each other. Now go.”

Mason knew he was right and knew Carson knew it as well. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a very expensive cigar Colby Reynolds had hooked him on. He lit it up and puffed contentedly as he watched the ridge.

He could barely hold the cigar between puffs, and it hurt like hell to smoke, but he didn’t care. It gave him something to focus on other than the feel of the warm blood draining out of his body—lethargy creeping through his limbs, but he’d find a way to slow down those who wanted them dead. He would find one last way to protect his little brother.

Three-quarters of an hour later, he saw them creeping down the hill. His killers had thought to mask the sound of their coming by abandoning their snowmobiles and coming on foot. Well, he was about to make plenty of noise.

He waited for them, watched them coming—five, no six of them. Apparently, the Shadow League didn’t count pennies when they wanted someone dead. They must be very afraid of what they’d thought Carson had heard.

The light was starting to fade, but so was his ability to handle a weapon. It wouldn’t take much to use a grenade, but could he wait for them to get to him? He decided by the time they reached him, he wouldn’t have the ability to do anything. He was out of time, and he knew it. He lobbed both grenades at the approaching men. The darkness closed over him and he prayed he’d given Carson and Amelia enough time to get away. He died believing they would live on, and he would see them when they left this plane of existence to move into the light.



Northern Lights Genome Project

Reykjavik, Iceland

Mason came to in a cold, sterile room devoid of color and life. What it did have was light—way too bright for his eyes to remain open. The pain was unbearable; it seized his body and squeezed until it made him want to vomit.

A needle pierced his arm and something warm rushed through it, easing the pain and the nausea.

“That should help with the pain,” said a calm voice. “They thought you would sleep until they could get you anesthesia. I’m glad I thought to check. Everything will be okay, Carson.”

He opened his eyes again, focusing on the bluest eyes he’d ever seen. They were set in a beautiful face with the sexiest set of lips he’d ever seen. Lips he could well imagine being wrapped around his cock. As the sedation kicked in, he chided himself for two things. One, she thought he was his baby brother, and two, what kind of sick fuck who was dying looked at an angel of mercy and wondered how she’d look naked and giving him a blow job.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



I hope you enjoyed reading *Accidental Mate* (Otter Cove Shifters)! The next book in the series is [Feral Mate](#).

He thought he had died but when he awakens on a table in the enemy's laboratory, he realizes there are worse things than death. As he struggles to understand what happened, an unexpected ally appears and offers aid. But is she a true angel of mercy or is she harboring a hidden agenda?

With twists and turns at every corner and a powerful emotional journey, this book will keep you hooked until the very end.

BONUS SCENE



I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Carson and Amelia as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

[SIGN UP HERE](#)



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Wayward Mates Box Set Two

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Murder Before Dawn

Paint Me A Murder

Deadline To Murder

Murder in the Afternoon

Relentless Pursuit (Duet)

To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Charade

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The Scavenger

The Rookie

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Claiming Her Heart

Taming her Heart

Finding her Heart

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Tamed on the Ranch

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ABOUT DELTA JAMES

Other books by Delta James: <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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