



OTTER  
COVE  
*Shifters*

# FERAL

*Delta James*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# DELTA JAMES

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Acknowledgments As Always to My Team:

Development and Editing: Lori White,

Intuitive Editing and Development Services

Cover Design: Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs

Proofreader: Melinda Kaye Brandt

✿ Created with Vellum

# FERAL 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!*

# KEEP UP WITH DELTA ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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## CHAPTER 1



### COLBY

*W*indsong Manor  
Mystic River, Alaska  
Three Years Ago

“You must be daft,” said Mason Payne to the alpha of the lynx-shifters at Windsong.

Colby Reynolds leaned back in his chair, regarding the man he knew he needed to recruit if they were going to find out what the hell was going on at the Northern Lights Genome Project in Reykjavik. “I assure you, I am not.”

“Then you must think I am. Seriously? You want me to believe that the boogeymen from our collective childhoods actually exist, and they’re being controlled by some kind of evil genius playing puppet master?”

“I told you when I sent for you, Mason...”

Mason’s reflexes were far quicker than Colby had anticipated. The snow leopard-shifter who sat across from him was up, out of the chair, across the desk, and smashing his fist into Colby’s face before the latter was even aware he was moving. The force of the blow not only knocked him back into his seat but sent the chair flying backwards into the French doors that led out onto a patio and expansive lawn.

“About that,” snarled Mason. “If you ever send goons after me again, when I’m done with them, I’ll be coming for you.”

Colby held up his hand to stop his men from trying to take on the snow leopard. He was stronger, bigger, and faster than they were. That didn't mean that Colby doubted his men's ability to handle Mason, but he also believed Mason had every right to be angry. In his instructions to his men to invite Mason to a meeting here at Windsong, he had not been as clear as he might have been. When his men had encountered resistance, they had decided it was a summons and not an invitation. They had been a bit over-zealous in their enthusiasm to bring Mason to him. That enthusiasm had resulted in a number of broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a broken jaw, and one head injury—with nary a scratch on Mason.

Colby opened his arms, resting them on the chair with his palms up. "Message received, and again my apologies to all involved. I should have made it clear that I just wanted a message delivered and for them to offer to give you a ride back. While I appreciate your position, this is your one and only freebie—attack or harm my people again, and you and I will tangle. I don't think you'll like the outcome of that confrontation."

Mason searched Colby's face. The lynx-shifter was certain the snow leopard was trying to verify the truth behind his words. Colby would guess he was a far better poker player than Mason would ever be, which meant Mason trying to guess what went on behind Colby's serene mask would be an exercise in futility.

Still disgruntled, but mollified for the moment, Mason grumbled and took his seat. "Let's say for even a minute I believe the bullshit you're spouting..."

Colby shook his head. "We both know the Shadow League exists. We both know you've run afoul of them more than once. Your association with the Finder and the Hellhound has put you on their radar."

"Deke and Hayden are men I served with in my unit—nothing more, nothing less."

"Yet you spend more time with them than you do with your twin brother—why is that?"



“None of your business, and how the hell do you know?”

“I make it my business to know as much as I can about a person before I try to recruit them to my cause,” said Colby levelly.

“And just what is your cause?”

“Not to put too fine a point on it—and not to add to the belief that I am just a small-town mafia boss with delusions of grandeur—I’m trying to save the world.”

Mason snorted. “You really are certifiable, you know that?”

Colby leaned forward, locking eyes with the snow leopard. “Maybe. But I am also deadly serious.” That seemed to get through to him.

“How?”

“Let’s just say that I am not what people believe me to be. I came across information about ten years ago that indicated there was something going on deep within the shifter community. I’d grown up hearing tales about the Shadow League—”

Mason cracked a smile. “I’ll bet you wanted to be one of them.”

“Didn’t you?” Colby chuckled. “So much more fun to be the evil, sexy bad guy.”

“Yes, heroes don’t seem to have nearly as much fun as the evil villains, but then I grew out of that phase of my life.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Mason; so did I. I began establishing an intelligence network that could reveal information that the Ruling Council didn’t want anyone to have, and when I found the Shadow League was no myth, I began setting up a network of informants, spies, smugglers, and the like so that if and when we needed it, we would have the foundation already laid.”

“We?” Mason asked.

“The Resistance.”

Mason regarded him for the first time with a serious expression. “What’s happened, and why me?”

“There is a research lab outside of Reykjavik...”

“Northern Lights Genome Project. NLGP. My brother works there. What about them?”

“I know that they claim to be doing seed research, but my sources within the facility say that isn’t all they’re up to. They’ve got a secure lab that very few people even know about. I believe they are conducting human cloning experiments. I shudder to think what their ultimate goal is, but I’ve read too many medical thrillers to think their purpose is benign.”

“Ah,” Mason said, recognition dawning. “You want me to talk to my brother—to try and recruit him.”

“No. I’m afraid your brother has a little too much of the boy scout in him. What I want is to be able to send you in *as your brother* when we can be sure no one will know. The last thing I want to do is put your brother in any kind of jeopardy.” Colby chuckled. “He’s a bit of a nerd and is blinded by all the good NLGP could do.” Mason’s eyes widened, but he said nothing. “I’d be willing to bet you two posed as each other more than once over the years. This would be the same kind of thing, only this time it would be far more dangerous—for both of you—if you get caught.”

“Holy shit,” murmured Mason, shaking his head. “Cards on the table?” Colby nodded. “Hayden, Deke, and I served in the same unit. None of us are what you might call particularly social. The fact is, other than my twin brother, the only other people I see outside of my work are the two of them. Each of us started coming across tidbits of information and rumors that didn’t seem to be connected or make sense...”

“Until it started to, and now given what I told you, it makes more sense than you wanted it to.”

“Generally, Carson and I—due to the nature of our careers—have only been able to see each other twice a year, but you’re right, he’s a boy scout. I think Hayden was the first one

who suggested that there was something going on at NLGP. But how would you get me there?”

“I have planes and choppers, and you are an expert paratrooper. I have sources inside NLGP that will allow me to keep tabs on your brother and where he’s going to be at any one time. If we can insert you at critical times for a short period, you would be able to get us critical information we’d never be able to get otherwise.”

“There’s a major flaw in your plans. Despite what people think, identical twins do not have the same fingerprints or retinal scan signatures. I wouldn’t have the access he has.”

“I’ve thought of that. I have someone who can insert yours for Carson’s when you’re there and replace them with Carson’s when you leave.”

“Another problem is I’m not a genius like Carson, and the scientific stuff has always been gobbledygook to me.”

Colby nodded. “Yes, but we can teach you what you’ll need. Let me stress again, we will only send you in when absolutely necessary with a clear agenda.”

“Other than that, I’m just supposed to be a lumberjack?”

“I think you know me better than that. Your lumberjack activities will be a smokescreen and cover story; I have other ways I can use a man of your skills. Are you willing to join my little troupe of merry men and women?”

“You have to swear to me that no matter what, Carson’s safety will be a primary consideration.”

Colby stood, extending his hand. “I will treat him as if he was my sister, Kyra.”

“In that case, I’m in,” Mason said, taking Colby’s hand and shaking it.

“Good. I’d like to start your education on some basics now. We’re going to need to insert you before the end of the month...”

Several hours later, Colby watched Mason leave with his men. He knew what he was asking Mason to do, and he didn’t

like it but knew it was their best alternative. He felt the shimmer behind him and Hayden North, the hellhound, stood at his shoulder. Colby wondered how long he had been there. The hellhound's ability to move unseen for short periods of time was useful but unnerving.

“You were right about him,” said Colby.

Hayden nodded. “You’d best be prepared to get Carson out of Iceland on a moment’s notice. I’ll tell you now, if he calls on Deke and me to bring this whole house of cards down around your ears, we’ll do it without thinking twice.”

“Understood, and I appreciate both your and Deke’s trust in me.”

“Who said we trusted you? It seems that for now we fight on the same side. If that changes or if you betray us—any of us—” he said nodding toward the door, “I suggest you dig your grave because one of us will put you in it.”

The shimmer enveloped the hellhound once again, until only the faintest trace of a malevolent grin could be seen.



### *Mason*

Mason was shown what seemed to be a vast communication system. He had to wonder what he was getting himself into. The only thing he knew was that Colby’s explanation seemed to coincide with what he, Hayden, and Deke had been able to put together and offered Mason the best chance at keeping his twin safe.

He was introduced to several members of Colby’s staff, including his second-in-command, an elderly lynx-shifter who seemed to enjoy the respect not only of those within the clowder, but of Colby himself.

“The alpha says we are to teach you what you need to know,” said the wizened old man. “I understand the man you’ll be replacing from time to time is your twin brother.”

Mason nodded. “First things first, then. You’ll need to learn how to block the link without his detecting you have done so.”

*Time to go to work.* He’d felled, replanted, and sorted out old-growth forests all over the world. It seemed it was time to go after the dead wood in shifter society. He’d made it clear to Colby he wasn’t an assassin. He would have no trouble killing someone in order to save himself or Carson, but if Colby was looking for a cold-blooded killer, he’d come to the wrong man. If that was the case, Mason would move to get his brother out of danger and then be done with the Shadow League, NLGP and all the rest of them.

That evening as he stood under the pelting water of the shower in the guestroom he’d been assigned, his fated mate made her presence known, and his cock reacted accordingly. He felt the same aura of danger surrounding her as he felt surrounding Carson. So maybe he’d save his fated mate and his twin brother. This was not the first time she had appeared to him. She often came when he was stressed or tired and on more than one occasion, his dreams of her were incredibly erotic and visceral.

He shook his head, trying to dispel his need for her. He wanted to either beat his head against the wall, turn the water to cold, or both. What he wasn’t going to do was stand here and stroke himself until his cock spat out a load of cum onto the shower floor. There had been a time if he needed a woman and one wasn’t available, he thought nothing of jerking off. The problem now was that it wasn’t just any woman he needed. He needed *her*—the woman in his waking dreams—and nothing he could do for himself lessened that need. The fact that he didn’t know her name or anything about her other than a vague memory from another lifetime of how she looked and that she was in danger only increased his need for her.

Lately he’d seen her in a snowy or icy environment; the more he thought about it, the more he thought she might be in Reykjavik—not now, but sometime in the future. The visions of her were often out of sequence and set somewhere in the past, present or future.

The first time she moaned his brother's name, concluded that if she didn't work for NLGP, she at least lived and worked in the area. He couldn't—even in their dreams—tell her his real name or that Carson was his twin, but he couldn't bear to hear her call him by his brother's name.

Frustrated and worried, Mason finished his shower, stepped out into the warm bathroom, and dried off. As he headed into the bedroom, he didn't bother with any of the sweats or pajamas Colby's staff had supplied before rolling into bed. He laid on his back and stared at the coffered ceiling for the longest time, appreciating the craftsmanship that had gone into making it.

Something was wrong at NLGP—something that threatened his brother, and his fated mate as well. Something Mason meant to put right before it was all over.

## CHAPTER 2



EMERY

*I*nternational Scientific Summit  
*Reykjavik, Iceland*  
*Two Years Ago*

It was a small gathering as these things go, and she recognized some of the scientists, but many were completely unknown to her. For the topics that were on the schedule to be discussed, Dr. Emery Smoak would have expected a great many more well-known scientists to be in attendance. In fact, as she looked at the guest list she'd been given, the specialties listed seemed to be widely varied.

She meandered through those who had gathered for the opening festivities, acknowledging and speaking with those whose names she recognized and stopping to talk to those who wanted to engage with her. This was not the kind of thing she would normally attend, and in fact she had been surprised to get an invitation. The host was the Northern Lights Genome Project, which had an enormous facility just outside the city. For those who were interested, there would be a field trip and tour.

Emery recognized Kam Perkins as she made her way through the crowd, walking with purpose as if she had a specific person in mind she wished to speak to.

That person turned out to be Emery.

“Emery, I’m so glad to be able to finally meet you,” she said, taking hold of Emery’s upper arms and giving her the standard air kiss on both of her cheeks.

A bit taken aback and trying not to show it, Emery returned the greeting. “Dr. Perkins...”

“Kam, please. You don’t seem to have a drink. Let’s see what we can do about that.”

She linked her arm through Emery’s and guided them toward the open bar. It seemed as if everyone gave way to Kam. She was a power to be reckoned with. Her work in genetics was controversial and fascinating.

“What’ll you have?” asked the bartender.

“I’d like champagne,” answered Kam before both she and the bartender looked at Emery.

“I’ll have a glass of pinot noir if you have it.”

The bartender glanced at Kam. “Give her the 2015 Calera.” Kam turned to Emery. “If you like Pinot Noir, you’ll love this one. It’s my favorite.”

Emery knew enough about wine to know that Kam had just asked the bartender to serve her a very expensive glass of wine. She’d always wanted to try it but couldn’t justify the cost. Lifting the glass to her lips, Emery took a small sip. It was deliciously mature with enticing aromas, lovely flavor, and a long, complex finish. It was everything Emery had imagined it would be.

“This is amazing,” she sighed.

“Isn’t it? Have you gotten settled in your room?”

“Yes, it’s lovely, but I’m glad NLGP is picking up the tab.”

Kam laughed. “I’m hoping you’ll get used to it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Emery.

“Well,” Kam said in a hushed tone, “I’m not supposed to say anything, but I’m really hoping to get you to join NLGP.”

“Me?”



Kam nodded. “You’re a talented geneticist—one of the best I’ve seen in a very long time. I found your doctoral thesis regarding the work proposed in *Jurassic Park* to be brilliant, if theoretical. I’ll bet you had to fight the doctoral committee on that one.”

“You have no idea,” Emery said, laughing. Then, looking at Kam’s face, she continued, “Or perhaps you do.”

“It was very cogent, both in your theories and research; I thought your writing style was compelling as well. Like most of us in our field, I’d written off the movie as just great entertainment. Your argument about the difference in extinct species as opposed to those that still exist was persuasive.”

“Coming from a geneticist of your stature, that is high praise. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, and don’t turn me down, not until I’ve had a chance to show you the lab and introduce you to some of my people. Take the tour with everybody else, but at the end, if you’ll let me, I’d like to give you a more specific tour and then make my pitch.”

“I’m flattered, but I have a job,” stammered Emery, wondering just what kind of fantasy looking glass she’d stepped through.

“Where you are underpaid and grossly underappreciated. I can promise you NLGP is more than ready to make you a very rewarding and lucrative offer.”

Kam was called away to speak with someone else and Emery spent the rest of the evening in a kind of fogged daze. Nothing in her life had prepared her for her brief conversation with Kam.

Emery had learned from the time she was a small child never to reveal her deepest thoughts and yearnings. She had been deemed ‘special’ by the time she was seven and had been removed from the orphanage and placed in a center for gifted children. The Center and those who staffed it never knew just how ‘special’ she was, and the one person who found out

warned her never to let others know. With no one there to protect her, she had learned to protect herself.

There was no physical cruelty, but those who ran the Center had their own special ways of getting the children and adults, who ranged from her age to their twenties and thirties to behave in precisely the way they wanted. She learned early on if she didn't tell them what she wished for most in her heart, they couldn't use it against her, and by not showing them her true intelligence and all of her gifts, they were willing to turn her out on the streets when she was eighteen.

It was only once she was free of the Center that she had indulged her dream of finding a secluded place where she could allow the prehistoric cave lion that dwelled inside her to come forward and run. It had been exhilarating. After the release of her inner beast, when she lay down to sleep that night *he* had come to her in her dreams.

He wasn't the wealthy, powerful, or historical hero so many women dreamed of. Instead, he was a gorgeous hunk of alpha male who exuded confidence and passion. From the first time she'd seen him in her dreams, he had captured her imagination and her heart. From the very first erotic dream, she'd never once dreamed of another.

She'd had a few relationships, but they were not the grand passion she longed for. He only appeared to her in her dreams, and even the dreams were shrouded in mystery. Emery had long ago decided that even if she could never touch him in the real world, she would have him in spirit. They might not ever be together, but she knew they would never be truly apart.

Emery stayed far longer at the party than she'd thought she would. Kam kept checking in on her and introducing her to various people at NLGP mingling with the other guests. Instead of having to force herself to remain and be social, she found she was actually enjoying herself. Several times she was engaged in stimulating theoretical debates.

Finally, she made her way to the elevator and up to bed. Finding herself all alone, she kicked off her shoes, bent down to pick them up and then made her way down the hall to her

lovely suite. She'd never stayed in any place so luxurious. She grabbed a quick shower and then fell into bed, hoping her dream lover would join her. She could feel her dreamscape start to shift and knew her wish would be granted.

*He stood over the bed, looking down at her. For once, the surroundings weren't so out-of-focus that she couldn't tell where they were. Tonight, they were here in Reykjavik in her room. She rose up to join him, and he enveloped her in his arms, his mouth coming down on hers, as hungry as she was for what they shared.*

*His tongue passed over her lips, and Emery opened her lips for him, inviting his tongue to tangle and play with hers. Her nipples peaked and he pressed her into the hard, muscled planes of his chest.*

*There was no hesitation between them. They both knew why he was here. Lifting her up in his arms, he laid her gently on the bed, pressing her into the mattress as he crawled up from the end, moving between her legs and bending them at the knee so he could have full access to her.*

*In the real world, Emery had never cared much for oral sex—giving or receiving—but with him the experience had been so intense that she'd lost her shyness. He lowered his head, breathing in her aroused scent, and growled low and deep in his throat. Placing his mouth on her sex, his tongue took its first taste and she had to grasp the bed sheets to keep from crying out.*

*Running his tongue over her clit and then down to separate and suck the petals of her sex made her arch her hips. He rolled his tongue, spearing her pussy and then flattening it out to taste and lap all of her honey. He cradled her thighs in the crooks of his elbows and held her steady so he could feast on her.*

*The feelings he evoked were so intense, not only the physical ones, but the emotional ones, as well. He called to her and touched her in a way no man had done. He lavished his attention and his affection on her swollen nub before moving up her body to suckle and nip at her breasts while he*

*penetrated her with a single finger, curling it up as he began to withdraw it. He gave her nipples the barest edge of his teeth before moving back to suck on her clit.*

*She wailed as he withdrew his finger, and he chuckled, settling himself between her legs, his hard cock poised at the entrance to her core. He began to press himself inside her, her greedy pussy clutching at him and trying to draw him in more deeply. She lived for this; lived for when he mounted her and made her feel as if it were real.*

*Emery longed to be able to wrap her arms around him. While she could feel the sensations he created with his tongue, cock, and hands, there was nothing substantial to actually hold, and she mourned that loss. Her hands grasped at the bedclothes as he began to plunge in and out of her. Slowly and steadily, he increased the pace and rhythm of his thrusting—seeming to go harder and faster with each stroke.*

*She heard him groan, felt his breath on her ear and the warm rush of his cum filling her up. She could feel the weight of him pressing her into the mattress and surrounding her in a warmth and comfort she had only known with him. He withdrew from her long before she was ready.*

*“Don’t go, please,” she begged, hating that a mere fantasy could reduce her to doing so.*

*“In time, my beloved. In time,” he promised as he rose from the bed and dissipated into a dream that seemed to evaporate and escape through the doorway, onto the balcony, and into the night sky.*

Emery got up and rushed to the door, flinging it open to embrace the frigid air. She stood for only a moment, watching the aurora borealis dance and skitter across the night sky. Reluctantly, she returned to the warmth of her room and her lonely bed.



For the next few days, she attended the various seminars, panels, and other gatherings of the summit. Emery had to

admit that unlike most summits, this one was incredibly interesting, and she found herself increasingly excited for the tour and to hear what Kam Perkins had to say. She found herself being singled out for attention, not only by Kam, but by other executives of NLGP, often being moved to sit with them for lunches and breaks.

On the last day of the summit, those who had signed up were taken on an extensive tour of NLGP's main laboratory, but there were many buildings, labs, and offices that were off limits. Several of the more notable scientists voiced their objections but were given a polite no. Toward the end of the day, Kam found her and pulled her aside.

“Oh god, it's been nuts today. I thought we were on the verge of a breakthrough and then the whole thing came apart. I also didn't think the tour would last this long.”

“I think you have several guests that were disgruntled by their limited access.”

“Weren't you?”

Emery shook her head. “Not at all. I'm sure a lot of the research you're doing is highly confidential and probably classified, and although no one likes to admit it, the scientific and academic fields are no different than any other. They are highly competitive, and everybody is looking to solidify their name and reputation with the next big discovery.”

“I agree. Is there any way I could persuade you to stay an extra night? We'd pick you up first thing in the morning and give you an even grander and more thorough look at the facility. I've even arranged for a sleigh ride around the grounds.”

“I'm not scheduled back at my lab until Monday.”

“Even better. I'll need you to sign a general confidentiality agreement, but we'd be happy to pick up your hotel tab until you have to go back. I could show you around Reykjavik, and we could get to know each other better. Please say you will.”

Emery laughed. “How can I say no to such a lovely invitation?”

“Great. Is nine too early?”

“Not at all. I’ll see you then.”

Emery boarded the deluxe tour bus and headed back into town—excited at the prospects for her future in a way she’d never been before. Even leaving the center hadn’t filled her with the sense of freedom that now seemed to be embracing her. It would seem that her destiny lay in Reykjavik under the starry skies and magical lights of the aurora borealis.

## CHAPTER 3



EMERY

*N*orthern Lights Genome Project  
*Reykjavik, Iceland*  
*Six Months Ago*

It had taken longer to extricate herself from her former company and get onboarded at NLGP than she had thought it would. Her former employer had tried to play hardball and insisted she wasn't free to accept a new position with NLGP. NLGP's battery of lawyers had debunked that belief. Emery then had to arrange for a move to Reykjavik and all that entailed. She was grateful that the NLGP human resources and legal departments had been with her every step of the way.

Emery had opted out of the company-provided housing as well as several of the apartment and condo complexes many of the other employees had utilized. Instead, she'd taken a converted storage space over the most amazing bakery in the old town portion of Reykjavik. It wasn't large by any stretch of the imagination, but it was open, had a view of the harbor, and the walkability of the location couldn't be beat. It also came with a covered parking spot, so she was able to purchase a small SUV to commute to and from the lab as well as get around town and out into the country.

She didn't officially start her day until later, but she'd been given early access to her space in order to go and set up her station the way she liked it. Each of the departments had a main lab where scientists shared their work, experiments, and

data. Collaboration was a big thing at NLGP. Each of the scientists had their own ceiling to floor modular cubicle. They didn't have doors, but the glass cubicle walls did offer a certain degree of privacy. Emery had been asked to choose a basic layout of her cubicle so that the modular furnishings could be set and readied for her to personalize.

Her onboarding specialist, a woman named Heidi, with blonde hair pulled back in a severe bun and who she had yet to see smile had assigned her a laptop which would be delivered to her at the start of her workday. Emery knew she had a lot of reading to do in order to get up-to-speed with the work being done in her area.

She had been assigned to Carson Payne's team. Payne was one of the leaders in his field of genetic research and was considered nothing short of brilliant by others. She'd been flattered when Payne had picked her to join his people. They were working in one of the more secure labs within the NLGP complex, necessitating more extensive security and background clearances.

Emery had expected to be greeted by a guard manning the security desk. What she hadn't expected were three guards at the desk and an additional one to accompany her to her new workspace. The guard was polite but detached. She was a bit surprised when he offered to carry her boxes to her new space for her.

"I really appreciate this," she said as he tapped his security badge against the sensor, followed by pressing his thumb against the sensor and then peering into the retinal scanner. They entered the lab and automatic lights came on overhead, lighting the workstations in the middle of the room. He led her to the far end of the lab to one of the roomier cubicles that had a large window on one end overlooking an internal outdoor space. She was glad she'd chosen the furniture configuration she had, as she was certain had she chosen another, she wouldn't have been assigned a cubicle with so much natural light.

"That's part of what they pay me to do—help the scientists."



She sensed a wariness in him. Emery understood that. Shifters could usually pick up when there were other shifters around, but when living amongst humans, they tended not to befriend one another. There was little doubt that if humans discovered the shifter society, the results would be catastrophic—if not as a whole then certainly to that individual.

“That has to be a fairly thankless job,” she said. “I brought some pastries to share with everyone.”

He looked at the container she pulled out of her large shoulder bag. “Rolf’s? I didn’t know they opened this early.”

“They don’t but when I told them I was starting a new job and was going to take pastries from yesterday, they offered to let me take some fresh-made today. You’re welcome to one and to take some back to the other security guards.”

While not the most confident with strangers, Emery had learned early on that befriending security and janitorial personnel had distinct advantages. Most scientists paid them no mind and acted as if they weren’t there.

The guard seemed taken aback. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to,” she said, as he put her boxes down on the desk. “But I’d like to. And if you’ll give me a minute, I’ll set up my Keurig and you can have a cup of coffee to go with it. Please let your fellow security people know they are always welcome to come get a cup.”

“You brought your own coffeemaker for your cubicle?” he laughed, warming up.

“I saw the breakroom on my tour. The coffeemakers in there looked bleak. I am something of a coffee snob, so I always bring my own and am happy to share with folks.”

“That’s really nice of you, Dr. Smoak.”

“Emery, please, and think nothing of it.”

She fished out her red Keurig, which would provide a nice pop of color in her gray cubicle—soft gray furniture, and padded walls covered in some kind of gray wool material.

“You’ve got outlets all under your desk and the hanging file above it, plus this lateral file had a couple behind it.”

“If you’ll help me move the lateral file, I’ll set the Keurig up here. That way it’s easier for people to get to and I don’t have to worry about knocking it over and getting coffee all over my desk.”

“I can get you some water,” the guard offered.

“No need,” Emery laughed. “I told you I was a coffee snob. I brought my own purified water. And my own pods. If people like other kinds, they’re welcome to bring them.”

“This is going to be great. I’m Terry, by the way.”

Emery extended her hand. “Emery,” she repeated. “Good to meet you. You make your coffee—the black container has powdered creamer—not great, but tolerable—and then I have all these different kinds of sweeteners. You fix your coffee and let me get you some pastries to take back up to the front.”

Emery put together a small paper plate with Kleina, a sweet fried and rolled dough treat, as well as Hjónabandsæla, a delicious baked buttery mini tart filled with a fruit paste and topped with lattice.

“Man, those look delicious. I’ve heard Rolf’s makes the best Kleina.”

“I wouldn’t know,” admitted Emery. “I’d never had it until I came to the Summit last year, but I think it ought to be sold as a controlled substance.”

“True enough,” he said, taking the plate and his cup of fresh-brewed coffee. “Thanks for this. I really appreciate it, and I know the other guys will, too. If you need anything, you come to me personally.”

“Thanks, Terry, that’s kind of you.”

He placed his hand on hers, waiting until she made eye contact. “No, *anything*,” he said stressing the last word. “I mean it, Emery. If anything makes you feel uncomfortable, you should know you are not alone and there are those of us who will help.”

She realized as she searched his face that he was a shifter like herself. She'd schooled herself over the years to not seek out others like her. It was far too dangerous, but Terry's voice and words—although brief—were compelling, and she nodded.

“Well, let them know they're welcome to come get their own coffee.”

As she'd hoped it would, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee combined with pastries from Rolf's lured all of her new co-workers to her cubicle. By the time Heidi from Human Resources arrived, the other scientists and research assistants had been by to introduce themselves.

“I see you've introduced yourself and made yourself at home,” said Heidi.

“As I told Terry—” when Heidi quirked her eyebrow, Emery continued, “—the security guy who helped me with my stuff and let me in—I'm a bit of a coffee snob so I have my own Keurig. I don't think it's fair to fill a workspace with the aroma of amazing coffee and not share. Want a cup? I have French roast and bourbon barrel aged. Both are delicious and there's no alcohol in the bourbon one, just a really smooth aftertaste.”

“That sounds good. I'd love a cup. And did I see people eating Kleina?” Heidi asked.

“Yep, from Rolf's. Help yourself,” Emery said, pointing to the platter of pastries as she took the laptop from Heidi. “They converted their storage space upstairs, and I got to rent it. They let me buy pastries before they open in the morning.”

Heidi smiled for the first time since Emery had been introduced to her. “I don't mind if I do,” she said, biting into one and moaning in pleasure. “What a great add-on to renting from them. You've got your log on and password. Dr. Payne is running late, but I think you have plenty of reading to do. He'll stop by as soon as he arrives. I'm going to head back to HR, but if you need me just call me at extension seven-four-two.”

“Will do. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Thanks, Heidi, for all your help. I’m sorry it was such a pain to get me onboarded.”

“You were never the problem, Emery.” It had taken Emery months to get her to call her anything but Dr. Smoak. “And everyone agrees, especially Dr. Perkins. It was my pleasure.”

“Well, thank you again, and take another Kleina and a cup of coffee.”

Heidi grinned sheepishly. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Emery plugged her laptop in and logged on to the system. She began reading synopses of the work done not only by the team to which she’d been assigned but the other teams on whose research they were basing their own.

People wandered in and out of her cubicle but were careful not to disturb her. They were friendly and smiled, but only spoke if she looked up. Someone entered her space, but she was engrossed in a particularly interesting analysis of some genetic testing they were doing with what seemed to be a highly volatile substance.

Crumbs from Kleina fell onto her shoulder. Whoever had come in was standing behind her. She looked up to say something about getting bits of the pastry on her when she was stopped in her tracks. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Nothing at all.

It was him! The man from her dreams and fantasies, and unless she was mistaken, he too was a shifter. Terry had been right; she wasn’t alone.

He put his coffee cup and the pastry down on the lateral file. “Please excuse me. Look what I’ve done,” he said, taking his napkin and brushing away the offending pastry that still decorated her shoulder. “I’m Carson Payne, and you must be Dr. Smoak. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived. Terry and the boys are quite enamored of you already.”

He extended his hand to her, and she stood up, taking it in her own. “Emery, please.”

He grinned. He had the perfect smile—symmetrical lips that looked made for kissing over perfectly even, white teeth.

She'd bet there was a fortune in orthodontia in that smile.

“Intelligent, nice, and provides coffee and pastries. I knew I was right to challenge the EnGen guys to a duel to have you on my team.”

He was nice but Emery couldn't help but feel her hopes dashed as his eyes—while beautifully dark and kind—showed no recognition of having ever seen her before. None at all. While she knew they hadn't met in reality, it hurt to think that somehow his soul didn't recognize hers from the dream and fantasy planes where she knew him so intimately. She was glad of the sweater she'd worn, as it was a thick, loose knit and there was no way he could detect the way her nipples seemed to stiffen as if his chest, under his casual V-necked sweater, was steel and they were magnets. In fact, her whole body wanted nothing more than to melt into his.

Oddly detached, Emery had to admit that while her body was wildly attracted to and recognized his, that's all it was: a kind of animal magnetism; a primal physical response but nothing more. It was as if they were in some kind of black hole where no feeling or intellectual connection could escape. It made no sense at all.

Shaking his hand, she hoped all that had gone through her head had done so in far less time than it had felt. “It's nice to meet you, Dr. Payne.”

“Carson,” he said with a smile.

“Carson,” she acknowledged. “Don't worry about not being here. I have plenty to catch up on and everybody has been very kind and welcoming.”

He leaned into her and she worried that maybe she had misread something, and he might try to kiss her. He didn't. Instead, he said in a stage whisper, “It's just the great coffee and pastries. Soon enough you'll find out how rotten they all are.”

She was shocked and was about to defend her new colleagues, when all kinds of paper airplanes, rubber bands,

and nerf balls came flying out of nowhere aimed at him. He sidestepped them neatly, grinning.

“See how I got you ammunition?” Her expression must have registered that she didn’t get it at all. “We work in a high-pressure field, and some of the other teams give new meaning to the terms intense and spooky. So whenever one of us gets a little too big for their britches, we all take aim to bring him or her down a peg or two.”

Emery grinned. Maybe he was downplaying what he felt.

“I think I’m going to fit right in,” she said.

“I think so, too. Another tradition: when we get a new team member, we all head to our favorite watering hole, which also has the best shepherd’s pie. We have dinner and drinks on yours truly. I hope you can join us.”

“And if I don’t?” she teased, feeling very comfortable with him.

“We’ll go anyway. Trust me, this lot is not going to let you ruin their shot at running up a huge bill at my expense.”

More nerf balls, paper airplanes, and rubber bands came his way—one of the latter smacking him in his gorgeous ass. It looked like some Renaissance sculptor had carved it out of marble and then covered it with denim.

With a laugh, Carson left her office.

She spent the rest of the day going through reports and flagging things she had questions about. At lunch time, she found the team had another tradition: a potluck for the new person. They had their own table and chairs, and sitting and eating with them made her feel like she belonged in a way she never had before. She managed to cast several furtive glances at Carson, but he didn’t seem to notice.

That evening at the pub, it was more of the same. He was friendly, but nothing more. In some ways it was frustrating and in others it made things simpler. The last thing Emery needed was a hot, torrid affair with her new boss. It was sad, though, and when she finally parted company with the team, there was a hollow feeling deep inside.

Emery closed her eyes, expecting her sleep to be undisturbed. She was wrong.

*She drifted back to the semi-conscious state in which he always appeared as the head of his cock parted the petals of her sex and he stroked into her, pressing her down into the mattress and resting his body on hers. His hips began the oldest rhythm in the world, that of a dominant alpha male plunging in and out of his mate.*

*Over and over, he thrust into her, his cock moving relentlessly as his kisses stole her breath away, his hands tangling in her hair and angling her head to the exact position he wanted. He kissed her again and again as if he couldn't get enough and wanted her to know that despite what happened during the waking day nothing between them had changed.*

*He pounded into her, building tension and pleasure until she felt like a bomb with a lit fuse. As she began to slip over ecstasy's edge, he thrust in hard, and the orgasm encompassed the both of them in a storm of color and light. She felt her soul fly with his before settling back within her.*

*Emery felt him slip from her body and tried to grasp at him, but he was ethereal and there was nothing of substance to grasp.*

*"Cars..."*

*His hand covered her mouth. "Do not speak that name."*

*"I don't understand."*

*"All will be made clear in time."*

She opened her eyes, and nothing remained but confusion and frustration. How could he make her body sing at night and yet not acknowledge her during the day? Did he only recognize her in her dreams? Did he even dream of her at all?

## CHAPTER 4



### EMERY

Sleep did not come easily the rest of the night, and when it did, it was shallow and not at all restorative. The following morning, Emery grumbled to herself the entire time she was under the shower. *Fine. If he only wants to fuck me in my dreams, then fuck him. I deserve better than that.* Over and over, she told herself the same thing, steeling herself for seeing him later.

For the next few months, if Carson noticed she was ignoring him, he never gave any indication. For the most part, she was happy in her work but had begun to think of asking for a transfer at her earliest opportunity. Once or twice, he tried to broach the subject of what was bothering her. Each and every time, she turned ice cold and gave him civil answers and nothing more. And each night after she'd done so, he ramped up his lovemaking, often leaving her exhausted come morning.

Carson wasn't the only one to notice, several of her colleagues tried to interfere—no, that wasn't right, they were trying to help. She knew that. She also knew she had become a disruptive influence on the team, but her insights were helping them move forward, and as long as Carson wasn't around her, she was collaborative and helpful. She realized most had written her off as 'moody.' Brilliant, but moody.

In meetings, especially larger groups, she couldn't seem to stop herself from taking little digs at Carson. Never anything anywhere close to insubordinate, but a nasty streak she'd never known she had would rear its head, and out would pop a little toad of a remark.



He was the singularly most frustrating man on Earth. He never reprimanded her. In fact, her probationary review had been glowing, and for the most part he ignored her. Emery might have felt even more slighted save for the fact that most of the team was feeling a separation between them and Carson they'd never felt before. He wasn't around as much as he'd always been and seemed secretive about where he was going when he left the lab.

Carson announced he was going to work from home for the next few days and reminded them all that he would be on vacation before the end of the month. Lyssa entered Emery's cubicle to get her coffee. Emery couldn't complain about her colleagues in the coffee department. She had yet to buy more supplies. Various and sundry people just dropped off coffee pods, distilled water, creamer, and sweetener. One morning, she'd come into her cubicle to find her lateral file shoved to the back and a small, antique cabinet backed up to it, with room for the coffee maker and supplies needed on top and storage for future needs inside.

"I don't know what's gotten into him," said Lyssa.

"Who?"

"Don't who me. Carson. He's been... well, not Carson."

"He seems like the same old Carson to me."

"No, he's changed since you joined us."

"I have done nothing to him."

Lyssa was taken aback. "I didn't say you did, and it's really only been the last several weeks, but it's like something is bugging him. I hope it's not anything with his brother."

"I didn't know he had family."

"Not much. His brother is a lumberjack and does some kind of forestry consulting. Carson doesn't talk about him much, but I know they try to get together a couple of times a year. But whatever he's working on, he doesn't seem inclined to share."

“Agreed,” said another co-worker, Toby. “I go ask him questions or try to bounce ideas off him and get kind of distracted answers. I needed to get some input from him this morning, and he basically brushed me off. He was headed out the door and told me it would have to wait.”

Lyssa nodded. “I also noticed he never leaves his laptop or phone unlocked if he has to leave them—even if it’s just to get a cup of coffee or go to the bathroom.”

Emery realized she hadn’t been paying attention. She’d been so caught up in his not seeming to notice her during the day and visiting her in her dreams and fantasies. He was as elusive in her figments of imagination as he was in the real world. But Lyssa and Toby were right. Carson, who had always been the heart of his team, had withdrawn from them, becoming secretive and aloof. When she’d first joined the team, Emery had thought it was just her. Now, she realized, it had expanded to incorporate the whole team, and the team seemed to be suffering from it.

Sitting in her cubicle, analyzing some raw data, she took notice that the normally happily buzzing lab had gone eerily silent. There was only one person who seemed to have that effect on the team—Kam Perkins. Emery liked Kam, but the rest of the team seemed uncomfortable in her presence. At first Emery had chalked it up to Kam’s intimidating intellect or her position of power within NLGP, but after a while she had noticed a more sinister quality to Kam’s presence.

“Emery,” Kam said, sticking her head in. “Have a minute?”

“For you? Sure,” said Emery, pushing her chair back from her desk. “Can I get you a cup of coffee or some coffee cake? I’m trying to perfect my recipe.”

Kam smiled indulgently. “I’ve heard about this team’s indulgence in their own personal coffeemaker and penchant for pastries and other goodies on Mondays.”

Emery grinned. “We figured after a great weekend, it’s sometimes hard to come into work. Knowing there’s going to be a treat of some kind helps us ease back into the work

groove. In fact, Carson even encouraged me and then encouraged the team to contribute to bringing things in. It's kind of nice."

"I don't disagree. Management has heard about it and is thinking of revamping the break rooms but is also encouraging other team leads to look at doing something similar. If your coffeemaker gives up the ghost, let me know. I'll see that you get a new one at company expense." She took a bite of the coffee cake. "And your recipe doesn't need tweaking. This is delicious, and I don't like coffee cake."

"Thanks."

"So, I actually came down to talk to you about meeting me for a drink later tonight. I have a couple of things I want to talk to you about, and I'd rather not do it here at work. Will eight work for you?"

Emery tried to mask her surprise. Ever since Kam had convinced her to come to work for NLGP, she'd been pretty hands-off. Emery understood—she didn't want to appear to be playing favorites, for which Emery had been grateful.

"Sure. Where do you want to meet?"

"Harbor Light? They have the best bar food around."

"Harbor Light it is."

"Don't work too late. Finish up and go home. I'll send a company car for you."

That surprised her. "Great. I'm looking forward to it. Anything I should bring?"

"This isn't a work thing, Emery. I just feel like I've been so busy that I've neglected you, and I'd like to make up for that."

"You don't need to feel that way, but I'd love to catch up."

"Good. See you then."

Kam left, and Emery was left wondering what the hell that had been about, and what Kam's true agenda was. While Emery didn't consider Kam to be the malevolent cartoon

villain many did, she also didn't see her as a benign fairy godmother. Kam Perkins was a force of nature and ambitious as hell.

At the end of the day, after her team had given her side-eye all day, she headed for home. Grateful to find leftover chicken pot pie in the fridge, she took a quick shower and changed into a warm, cozy sweater and jeans that she tucked into her mukluks. Sitting down on her sofa, she propped her feet up on the antique Swedish trunk she'd found, restored and now used for a coffee table and turned on her television to find something to watch until the company car and driver came for her.

At a few minutes before eight, Emery headed down to the street to wait for the car. After fifteen minutes, she realized for whatever reason, it wasn't coming. She texted Kam to let her know what had happened and that she'd head over to Harbor Light on her own. Tucking her cell phone into her purse, she went and got her own car and then headed for the bar.

After parking, Emery made her way cautiously across the hazardous parking lot. Once inside, she stomped her feet, trying to dislodge the snow and ice from her boots. She looked around the dimly lit bar but didn't spot Kam. Emery took a seat at the bar where she could keep an eye on the front door and ordered a coffee nudge. The warm coffee cocktail tasted good and worked to smooth all the rough edges of her day.

When she'd finished her drink, she pulled out her cell phone and glanced at it—there was nothing from Kam. Emery texted her and then headed back out to her vehicle and drove herself home.

*Well, that was a big waste of time.*

She trudged up the steps to her apartment and questioned again whether or not she'd made the right decision in coming to Reykjavik. The work was challenging and exciting; NLGP paid really well, and the benefits were amazing, but more and more anything away from the lab made her disappointed and increasingly frustrated. And if the dream version of Carson showed up one more time and then told her 'in time,' she was

likely to pull her hair out and run down the streets of Reykjavik naked and screaming. Considering the temperature outside, that last part probably wasn't a good idea.

There was no way Emery could have known, but the next time she saw Carson, it would be lying strapped to a hospital bed, and it wouldn't be Carson... it would be her fated mate.

## CHAPTER 5



MASON

### *A*leutian Range, Alaska Peninsula *Present Day*

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 you. 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 his hand slipped off and landed limply on his thigh.

"*Mason!*" his little brother cried down the link—the kind of 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 Amelia's 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 one of the very expensive cigars 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—the 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. Colby had damn well better take care of them. If he didn't, Mason would find a way to come back and haunt the lynx-shifter to the end of his days.

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. Darkness closed over him with the sound of the explosions, 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.

His only regret was that he was leaving her, his fated mate, here in a dangerous world alone. Perhaps he could find a way from the other side of the veil to at least keep her safe.



The first time he came to, he was aware he'd been tied down on some kind of sled being pulled by a snowmobile. Snow and bits of frozen foliage hit him as he bumped along at speed.

*What the hell was happening? He was supposed to be dead, dammit.*

“We need to get him to a medical team. He’s dying,” said the killer on the snowmobile hauling the sled he was tied to.

“We can’t let him die. Bad enough we lost four men. If we fail to bring this one back alive, they’ll kill us too,” answered the other survivor.

Good to know they saw value in saving him, although he wasn’t sure that dying wouldn’t be preferable to what they had in store for him.

“How the hell did this thing go so sideways? How can one nerdy scientist mean so much to them?”

“I learned a long time ago not to ask questions like that. One guy on my first team did and got his throat slashed for his troubles. They dropped him where he stood. None of us ever asked questions again.”

His killers must have realized they had no chance of catching Carson and Amelia. No matter what happened, Mason knew they would be safe. They would survive and they would have each other. More importantly, those who might have been trying to kill Carson or Amelia would have failed. Colby would keep them safe, and if not the lynx-shifter then Deke or Hayden. In any event, regardless of what happened to Mason, his brother and his mate would be safe, and perhaps

the information he and Carson had gathered would help the Resistance defeat the Shadow League and their puppet master.



## *Northern Lights Genome Project*

### *Reykjavik, Iceland*

Mason came back into the world, surprised to be there. He was in a cold, sterile room devoid of color or 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 and forcing his body to succumb to the darkness.

He would never be sure how long he drifted in and out of consciousness. The trip from where he had planned to make his last stand over and through the frozen landscape had been painful. When they'd abruptly changed direction and headed back down the hill, the pain had been excruciating. He faintly heard what sounded like a large helicopter heading towards him—the *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* all too familiar. Many times, that had been the sweetest of sounds. This time, however, was different. This time there was no rescue or salvation at the other end. This time, he feared, there was only torture and agony.

The rush of air being moved by the chopper rotors as it landed made the snow whirl all around them. When they released his bindings, he had waited until he heard them move away before rolling off the sled and trying to get to his feet.

“Shit!” snarled one of his captors.

Mason knew escape was not an option, but death here was better than what waited for him wherever they were taking him. His greatest fear was that he would wake up in

Reykjavik. Even as a non-scientist, he knew that place was an abomination. Any doubts he had about working with the Resistance had been quickly dispelled on his first mission, which had been to simply confirm that there were hidden and highly secured labs where experiments were being conducted that were crimes against both humanity and shifters.

Two of the men grabbed him and dragged him back to the chopper.

“Damn it! Be careful with him. They need him alive,” snarled someone within the chopper.

There came the feel of cold metal, the spine of a knife, cutting his clothing away and allowing the frigid air to hit him with an agonizing blast before numbing his.

“This guy’s a mess. I don’t know if I could save him if I had him in an operating theatre, but in a chopper in rough air?”

“If he dies, we’ll toss you out when we dispose of the body. Got it?” was the only response.

“Got it,” said the man, poking and prodding him.

Between the pain and the cold, Mason mercifully passed out. He was only vaguely aware when the chopper landed with a thud and he was offloaded onto a gurney that rolled along with all of the grace of a grocery shopping cart with one bad wheel. Through the swollen slits of his eyes, he could see a land covered in snow and ice, but it seemed warmer than the area on the Alaska Peninsula from which he’d been taken.

“That should help with the pain,” said a calm voice. “They thought you would sleep until they could put you under anesthesia. I’m glad I thought to check. Everything will be okay, Carson.”

Once more a soothing warmth rushed through his veins, bringing with it peace and an absence of pain. That cycle repeated over and over again. He would begin to regain consciousness, and someone would come in and inject him and he would fade out once more.

Now, as he began his journey back to the light, pain began to overtake him. He could hear someone approaching, and he swore he wouldn't beg for relief, but the pain seemed more intense than usual. He could hear the familiar sound of someone injecting something into his IV and he waited for the cessation of pain, but this time oblivion didn't come.

As the pain faded, he became aware of her presence. His fated mate was near, in person rather than merely in his dreams. Mason opened his eyes again, focusing on the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. They were set in a beautiful face with a pair of incredibly sexy lips. 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?

Given that whatever was going to happen would most likely not be pleasant, perhaps thinking about the beautiful woman with the silky hair, killer curves, full lips and eyes he could happily get lost in forever was not the worst idea he'd ever have.

There was another pinprick in his hip. "That's an anti-nausea drug to counteract some of the vertigo. It should help."

He reached for a tendril of her blonde hair and brought it to his nose so he could inhale her scent. She smelled like heaven. He might have thought he was in heaven had it not been for the amount of pain he was still in.

## CHAPTER 6



### EMERY

It had been a week since Kam had stood her up. There had been no note, no text, no email, nothing. Nothing to explain why Kam had sought her out to meet at the Harbor Light and then failed to show. Emery had seen her briefly in the hall, but when she'd tried to talk to her, Kam had been distracted and brushed her off.

But if the rumors about Carson were true—and Emery couldn't believe they were—Kam had every right to be distracted. Security was on high alert, and everyone seemed tense. The rumor was that Carson had hacked into the company's mainframe and drilled down into files for which he didn't have the security clearance. It was also believed that he had downloaded proprietary research and files and absconded with them.

Security had been tightened. Nothing went in or out without being scanned and examined by Terry and the rest of the security team. People whispered that it was one of the worst cases of corporate espionage and betrayal they'd ever heard of and the *only* one at NLGP. Workstations, laptops, and bags were routinely searched. Those who lived in company-supplied housing found there was a clause in their lease giving the company a right to search their quarters—without notice.

The atmosphere was rife with tension. It was as if they were all on tenterhooks just waiting for something to snap. The other teams shied away from having anything to do with Emery's team. At first, the team had banded together, but as each of them had been escorted from the lab to be questioned

by security, HR, and then executive management, they'd succumbed to the air of suspicion and begun to keep to themselves. It hadn't helped that they'd all been admonished to keep anything they knew, or they were asked, to themselves.

It seemed they'd not only been sequestered from the rest of the teams, but that management wanted each of her team members to be isolated from each other. For the most part, Emery, like everyone else at NLGP, just kept her head down and tried to focus on her own work. But the days of collaboration and teamwork were gone, and Emery wasn't sure they'd ever be back.

Lyssa had come to get a cup of coffee. Emery had been away from her cubicle and when she touched Lyssa's shoulder to move past her, the woman had almost jumped out of her skin.

"I didn't think you'd mind," she stammered.

"No, Lyssa, of course, I don't mind. This is getting ridiculous. Everyone has become so paranoid we're all starting to look at each other suspiciously."

"I don't think that should be a surprise. After all, given that Carson was our team lead, and he stole all that information..."

"Allegedly stole. We don't know anything. I choose not to believe that Carson is some kind of corporate spy or traitor."

"They may not have arrested him, but that's because he slipped out of the country. They've got teams searching for him on the ground in various places, and corporate security is watching for any electronic trail."

"Did it ever occur to anyone that Carson is innocent?"

"No," Lyssa snorted. "Because that makes no sense. Do you really believe he just up and left without telling anyone at the same exact time as a bunch of highly classified information was downloaded? Even you can't be that naive."

"Or," Emery said evenly, trying not to give in to her irritation, "someone else—someone from outside—might have broken in and downloaded those files. Maybe Carson got in their way. Maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong

time. Or maybe they kidnapped him, either because he saw them or he had the knowledge to interpret the information for them.”

“Do you really think so?” Lyssa asked hopefully.

Emery shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t know. The only thing I do know is that from what I know of Carson Payne, it doesn’t lead me to believe he is capable of this kind of duplicity.”

“Duplicity? The company is calling him a traitor.”

“I think that’s a little harsh.”

“Is it?” said Kam Perkins from behind them.

“Excuse me,” said Lyssa, grabbing her coffee mug and exiting Emery’s cubicle like the devil himself was hot on her heels.

“Coffee?” asked Emery. When Kam declined, Emery continued, “For the record, from what is being said you have no empirical evidence that if something was stolen, Carson stole it. Circumstantial evidence? Perhaps, but nothing you can take to the cops.”

“And how would you know that?” asked Kam, archly.

“Because it isn’t all over the internet or the paper. No one is talking about it anywhere other than NLGP, no cops have questioned anyone, and NATO does not have a red notice put out on him.”

Kam looked taken aback. “For someone who says she doesn’t know Dr. Payne very well, you certainly seem determined to defend him.”

“I don’t know enough to have a strong opinion, but from what I do know about Carson and what I’ve observed going on here in light of his disappearance, I’m inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, and it bothers me that I appear to be the only one willing to do so. As I said to Lyssa, for all you know, someone else is responsible and has either killed him or is holding him for whatever reason we have yet to determine.”

“What reason do you think some unknown third party would want to hold Dr. Payne hostage?”

“I can come up with two right off the top of my head. One, information is no good if you don’t know how to interpret it; and two, ransom.”

“Ransom?”

“I know when Heidi was onboarding me, she mentioned that the company had a K&R policy for all of its scientists.”

“No one outside the company knows that.”

“I don’t know that you’re correct. Last time I checked, it was on the company’s website under employee benefits.”

Kam looked shocked. “Are you serious?” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, you are.” Shaking her head as if to dispel something unpleasant, Kam regarded her with the friendly smile Emery had first seen when she met her. “If you can put your feelings for Dr. Payne aside—and I would caution you about letting others know what you think—I’d like to pull you from the team. Between you and me, I think management is going to reassign all the people who worked for Carson to different teams and get rid of some of the people who aren’t pulling their weight. I’ve got a special project for you that I believe is better suited to your skills and talents.”

“I’m not sure I’m a good fit for NLGP, Kam. I’ve been thinking about taking a break—maybe do some traveling and then find another place to work where it’s warmer.”

“You have a contract...”

“The terms of which do not kick in until my probationary period is over—and that doesn’t happen until next week.”

Kam seemed to sense that trying to bully Emery was not going to work.

“I think that would be a mistake. Not only would it not look good on your CV, but NLGP would not give you a good recommendation.”

Emery was taken aback by Kam’s bullying, but Kam held up her hand to wave off Emery’s objections. “I think your



talents have been wasted down here. What I have in mind is right up your alley but would require discretion and absolute confidentiality.”

“What is it?” Emery asked, not able to contain her curiosity.

“Given the parameters I’ve just outlined, why don’t we go over to my office? Have you had lunch?” She didn’t wait for Emery to answer, and Emery guessed it was because she knew the answer. “I’ll have the company’s executive chef prepare lunch for us. Just come with me and hear me out. I think I can make it worth your while.”

Kam turned and headed out of the lab with Emery walking behind her. Once they were in Kam’s spacious and well-appointed office, Kam waved her over to her small conference table. “Don’t I remember you and I talking about how finding a good burger here in Reykjavik was hard if not impossible?”

“Sadly, it’s true. Some of them aren’t bad, but nothing to write home about,” agreed Emery.

“Well, the chef is not one of those cheffy guys who only does frou frou food. He makes the best cheeseburger, and his fries are amazing.”

Kam ordered two cheeseburgers with fries and two Diet Cokes.

“So, despite what I overheard you say this afternoon, I think you’re about as loyal an employee as they come. In fact, even though I know it is misplaced, I find your loyalty to Dr. Payne to be not only refreshing, but admirable.”

“Thanks, Kam, but what is the job you wanted to talk to me about?”

Kam laughed. “Straight to the point. In spite of the coffee machine and goodies, you really are almost singularly focused, and that’s precisely what I need. We’re exploring some cutting-edge research—some things that are light years ahead of anything else NGLP or anyone else is working on. In all honesty, your doctoral thesis is what sparked the germ of an idea that got the whole thing started. You’ve proven, even in

the short amount of time you've been here, that you have what it takes to catapult NLGP's next generation of research into the stratosphere—research that will position us to command the market and provide so much good throughout the world.”

One thing about Kam, she was a true believer. “I'm flattered.”

“Don't be. I'm not a flatterer. I never sugarcoat anything. Before I go any further, I'll need you to sign a far more exclusive and restrictive NDA.”

Emery tried to keep from overreacting. She'd just told Kam earlier in the day she was thinking about leaving NLGP, and now Kam wanted her to sign something Emery was sure was far more binding than the original agreement she'd signed when she first came on board.

“Emery, we need you for this project. Your personal research, as well as that you did for your thesis, is what made NLGP come after you so hard. We see you for the shining star you are. I'm asking you to trust me. The agreement is part NDA and part modified employment contract. Before I can go any further, I need your signature on the NDA. The employee agreement can wait. If after you hear me out, you still want to go, I'll make sure the company pays your way home.”

Emery wasn't sure that she trusted Kam at all, but even her vague descriptions had certainly intrigued Emery. Reaching for the pen, Emery scrawled her name on the NDA.

“Excellent,” said Kam, sounding truly excited. “If you're finished, I'd like to take you into a secure wing of the compound.”

She ushered Emery into the corridor and toward the far end of the building.

“One of the underground labs?” she teased.

Kam stopped and regarded her. “I know a lot of employees have made up some pretty wild tales, but there are several levels of the complex that are, in fact, underground.”

Emery stared at her with growing awareness that Kam wasn't joking. Kam ran her keycard through the electronic

lock, pressed her thumbprint on the digital scanner, and then leaned down to have her retina scanned. The lock flashed green, and the elevator doors opened. Kam stepped inside. “Coming?”

Tentatively, and not knowing what she’d gotten herself into, Emery joined her.

“Lower Level One please; authorization Perkins, Kam. Employee ID Alpha, Bravo, Echo.”

The doors slid shut and the elevator car began to move down below the ground. Once it stopped and the doors slid open, Kam stepped out, turning to a thick set of glass double doors and repeated the door lock sequence, holding the door open until Emery stepped through.

They walked down the corridor, Kam’s Louboutin heels clicking with a staccato rhythm that would have made any metronome proud. There were small windows in the doors that they passed. From what Emery could see, some had what looked to be lab facilities, others exam rooms of some kind, and still others hospital rooms.

“We’re hoping that Dr. Payne has as much loyalty to us as you expressed for him. The fact is, we located Dr. Payne. Unfortunately, there was a small dispute around whether or not he would return with our people, and I’m afraid he was badly injured. Our surgeons, doctors, and nurses have worked night and day to get him stabilized and on the mend. He almost didn’t make it. He still might not.”

“Wh... What happened?”

“Our people tried to be reasonable, but Dr. Payne refused to return our property. There was a physical altercation that got out of hand, which ended in several of our people and Dr. Payne being severely injured... to the point that it was questionable whether or not Dr. Payne would survive. As we believed your theories held the most promise to get him healed, we brought him back here.”

“I’m not a medical professional. I’m a researcher,” said Emery.

“True, but your expertise is in repairing and replacing DNA. Dr. Payne has had some cellular disruption, and we think might benefit from some of the theoretical approaches you suggested.”

“I am years away from even clinical trials, much less using them on a human subject.”

“No one’s asking you to do anything right now. We can keep him in a medically-induced coma while you and our best teams do what you do best—come up with innovative solutions to complex and unique problems.”

For the third time that day, Emery watched as Kam went through the security procedures in place to unlock a door. Emery stifled a gasp as she stepped inside. Carson Payne was laid out in a hospital bed attached to monitors, IVs, a feeding tube, and a nasal cannula.

“As I said, there’s still no guarantee he’ll survive. With your help and your research, he has a chance. Without...” Kam shrugged her shoulders and let the sentence trail ominously off.

An old-fashioned pager attached to the pocket of Kam’s lab coat beeped, and she looked down.

“Bad timing. I need to deal with something. How about if you just go inside and sit with Dr. Payne. Maybe someone he considers a friend and colleague will make him rest easier.”

Emery stepped in and tried not to flinch when she heard the door close and lock behind her. She made her way to the foot of his bed. A wave of familiarity washed over her as she looked down at the man in the bed.

Unfortunately, no clinical chart or notes were hanging conveniently there. She began to scrutinize the monitors. All of his vital signs as well as other indicators of physical traits, capturing, tracking and recording a patient’s status were listed. She looked at two bags hanging next to the bed. One was a nutritional solution—which seemed high in protein and fat for a human. Had they figured out the man was not precisely, wholly human? If they’d figured that out, did they know what

he was? The other bag held antibiotics, pain suppressants and a powerful sedative. There was no way the patient would wake up with that amount of sedation.

She glanced nonchalantly around the room and located two small cameras that could monitor the area. Positioning herself where she could use her body to block what she was doing from both the doors and the window, she discreetly turned down the sedation. To turn it off might trigger an alarm, but slowing it to a mere trickle shouldn't.

Retreating from the bed, Emery found a chair and positioned it so that she could block most of what was about to happen from prying eyes, but not in a way that would raise any suspicion. Taking hold of the man's hand, she waited.

His eyes fluttered open, then closed, then opened again, and he groaned. He squinted, flinching in pain at the bright light. Emery didn't know who the patient was—although she could make a good guess—but the one thing she knew for certain was that he wasn't Dr. Carson Payne. He groaned, and Emery gave him a push of morphine to try and ease his suffering.

No. He wasn't Carson, but he *was* her fated mate.

All the confusion and disappointment she'd felt working alongside Carson dissipated. The reason Carson had looked so familiar, but felt so wrong, was now easily explained. Her fated mate was the brilliant scientist's twin brother, Mason.

She wiped away the tears that managed to leak out of her eyes. No. She wasn't going to lose him. She'd just found him. She had so many questions, but first she had to figure out what was going on and how she was going to get Mason out of here.

## CHAPTER 7



### MASON

Slowly Mason began to swim his way through the muck to reach the surface of consciousness. He'd been schooling himself to do so without alerting anyone to that fact. Days and nights held no meaning as he was in a windowless room. If his memory served him correctly, he was also underground.

Before he could open his eyes, he could feel her presence. What was she doing here? He had to get her out.

*Good luck with that buddy. You can't save yourself. What makes you think you can save her?*

Down the link trickled an answer in a voice he'd only heard in his dreams. *What makes you think I need you to save me? Maybe I'm here to save you. Better yet, how about we save each other?*

She'd used the link. She'd have to be a shifter to even know such a thing existed, much less how to use it. Bonding links only existed between fated mates and identical twins.

He could feel her fear and concern for him, but also had the distinct feeling his fated mate was laughing at him. The surface was getting closer. He tried to reach up, fighting how heavy his arm felt. It was restricted at his side. Two soft, feminine hands took his hand.

"It's all right," she whispered soothingly in a voice so quiet he wasn't sure if it was verbal or down the link. "Try not to move around. Restrict your movements. From where I'm standing, I don't think they can't see you, but they have you

wired up to all kinds of monitors. I don't know how long we have, but they want me to help with your care.”

Opening his eyes, he saw her staring back at him. In a more normal tone of voice, she said, “Dr. Payne. It's Emery, Dr. Smoak. Do you remember me?”

She didn't know he wasn't Carson. Disappointment seared, and he closed his eyes. Had she felt something for his brother? She tapped the top of his hand with her index finger, drawing his gaze again. Slowly she traced an M. When he locked eyes with hers, she smiled. *Yes, I know.*

“How?” he asked in a gritty voice.

“Did you get here?” she replied. “Unknown. Dr. Perkins only advised me that they had recovered you this afternoon. You've been under NLGP's considerable and superior medical attention since they brought you back. Kam believes some of my gene sequencing might help you.”

Damn, she was good. He was beginning to see why Colby valued his female operatives every bit as much his male agents. If the watchers couldn't see her face or feel her emotions down the link the way he could, there was no way they would know what she was saying out loud bore little similarity to what she was communicating to him.

*We need to get out of here.* The link was the only way to communicate with her securely. Mason was quite sure the room was being electronically monitored, both visually and auditorily.

“Dr. Payne, if I'm going to work on applying my sequencing theories to your case, I'll need to see just how badly you're hurt.”

He could feel the exhaustion and headache that trying to use the link too strongly and too frequently was causing her. In his weakened state, he was having trouble maintaining the link himself. As they weren't physically bonded—yet—it would tax them until that transition took place. It was a bit different for him. He'd been using the link to communicate all his life with his twin. They could go days without actually speaking

before it bothered either of them. He rather imagined this was Emery's first time.

"Thank you, Dr. Smoak. They haven't told me much, but I can tell I'm in pretty rough shape."

"That you are," she said calmly. "From the little I can observe, and that Kam was able to tell me before being called away, I think I might be able to help. I'm not sure why NLGP wants to help you. They believe that you stole their intellectual property. Did you do that, Dr. Payne?"

"Am I dying?" he asked.

"I think you were, but NLGP has nursed you back to health. I don't think anyone wants to see you die. I do think NLGP will want back whatever you took, but that seems only fair to me."

"They did this," he rasped. Maybe he should have played along, but he needed to know she realized the danger they were in.

She dropped the placid mask from her eyes and stared at him with a keen awareness of the circumstances, but then played dumb.

"That's ridiculous, Dr. Payne. NLGP doesn't go around trying to hurt or kill their employees. That's just not good business."

She was right. They needed to make their captors believe Emery was the good little soldier who didn't believe in the evil corporate villain.

"You're a fool, Dr. Smoak. Open your eyes. Look around you. NLGP has all kinds of secrets to hide. They're only keeping me alive until they find out how much damage I've done to them."

He could hear the door from the hallway open and Emery released his hand, moving hers effortlessly back into her lap.

"I see you're awake, Dr. Payne." Kam Perkins' voice was cheerful, but Mason could see past the façade to the ruthless,



cunning woman beneath. Kam examined the monitors and the IV line. “Can you tell me how you’re feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot, tromped on, dragged over the snow and ice, and flown back to Iceland while some guy who could give Frankenstein a run for his money pulled out bullets and shrapnel before stitching me up, all without the benefit of anesthesia,” growled Mason.

“When we found you, you were near death. We hadn’t prepared to find you half dead, abandoned by your companions. We also underestimated your lethality, Dr. Payne.” Kam turned to Emery. “Dr. Payne killed four of the men we sent after him.”

“Only after they tried to kill me,” he returned.

“Only when you refused to surrender to a superior force.”

“Dr. Payne? Dr. Perkins? Lobbing accusations at each other isn’t going to do anyone any good. I’d like to take a look at Dr. Payne’s medical records before agreeing to help. I have to say, all of this makes me uneasy, so unless I’m convinced that my theoretical therapies might help, and I have Dr. Payne’s full and informed consent, I’m going to have to ask to be returned to the surface so I can consider my future with NLGP.”

*‘Full and informed consent.’ That was an interesting way to put it. It was the hallmark of transitioning. Most shifter species would not turn another species or human unless the one being turned had been fully informed and given their consent unless it was a matter of life and death.*

“I don’t think that will be an issue, Emery,” said Perkins. She turned back to Mason. “We both know you took valuable and proprietary information that you had no right to. The company is prepared to be magnanimous and forgive and forget, provided you are willing to get back on the team and work in solidarity with us. I’ve assured my superiors that you have always been a team player and a leader who inspires others. There’s no reason we can’t put this little bit of unpleasantness behind us and move forward, is there?”

There was every reason he was never going to do that, but he had the distinct impression that Emery was trying to buy time; trying to give him more time to heal. He called forth the same sense of outrage and anger he'd felt from his brother Carson. He didn't know what it was that Carson had found, but even if he had, he doubted he'd know what it meant.

“Why would I help you? We both know I have evidence of the heinous and unethical experimentation you're conducting—cloning, trying to create super soldiers,” he sneered at Perkins.

Perkins deliberately upped his sedation. “You're wrong Dr. Payne. What you are saying is untrue. I don't believe when you left you thought anything of the sort. If you had, you'd have gone to New York to one of the twenty-four-hour news stations and made your findings public. But you didn't do that. What you did do was steal proprietary and trademarked information, which you probably planned to sell to the highest bidder.”

Perkins looked at Emery. “You can see he's delusional. We're hoping whatever weakness in his genetic makeup that made him lash out at us can be healed.”

Emery nodded. “It's most definitely a possibility.”

“Good. Then we can count on you?” Perkins asked Emery.

“Tentatively, I would say of course, but I do want to review his full, unredacted medical records.”

“Unredacted?” asked Perkins.

“Yes, unless I know everything about his medical condition it would be too risky to try my gene therapy—after all it has yet to have any clinical trials. I would never want to see as brilliant a mind as Dr. Payne's snuffed out or compromised when I might be able to save him.” She laid her hand on his. “Try not to worry, Dr. Payne. I'll be doing everything I can to bring you back to your old self.”

“I'm so relieved to hear you say that, Emery. I think with you on board, we'll be able to save Dr. Payne from himself.

Why don't you knock off for the day? I'll have Terry move your things down to your new office."

"Tell him to leave my old coffee maker. A parting gift to the team. I'll buy a new one and bring it in with me in the morning."

"That will be wonderful. Terry will have your security clearance upgraded and will show you to your new office in the morning."

"Great. Thanks, Kam. And Dr. Payne, I'll be working hard to see you restored to your former self."

When the door closed, Perkins lost all her warmth and charm. "If her theories are correct, when she overlays your genetic sequences in charge of memory and intelligence, it'll be as if you never knew anything different. She'll be able to help us program you to be exactly what we need."

She turned to leave, stopped, and turned back to him. "You have no idea what you took, and even if you did, it won't be long before you know nothing other than what we have programmed you to know. You need to get well, Dr. Payne. We need both you and Dr. Smoak to reach our goals. We are on the brink of a new age—one which you and Dr. Smoak will have helped to bring about."

The door closed behind her. The woman was certifiable. Slowly but surely, he could feel the sedation kicking in, but Perkins hadn't noticed how far back Emery had dialed it to begin with. This time as the darkness closed in, it wasn't nothingness that he succumbed to, but rather a dream sequence with his mate.

*He could scent her and her arousal long before he could see her. Once she was in sight, she whirled and ran. Mason gave chase, his blood and arousal rushing through his ears. He galloped along the frozen earth, his feet pounding through the snow.*

*For the first time in all his dreams, he unleashed his snow leopard, shifting as he ran, chasing her down with total*

*abandon. He was stronger, faster and would be able to shift and pin her beneath him when he caught his quarry.*

*As he galloped over the hill, he caught sight of her—only she wasn't a snow leopard. She was a much larger, far more prehistoric beast than he was. If Deke Campbell hadn't been his friend, Mason wouldn't have known that Emery, his fated mate, was a cave lion. This could prove interesting.*

*Knowing the terrain gave him an advantage and he was able to anticipate some of her turns, lessening the distance between them. Finally, she was within his maximum leap capacity and gathering his strength, he leaped, closing the distance between them and slamming into her haunches, dragging her down and grappling with her until she submitted and shifted.*

*He did the same but held her in place when she struggled. Shifting back, he settled between her legs.*

*"I told you all would be made clear in time," he purred, drawing her arms over her head and holding them tight.*

*They were both naked, their bodies slick with exertion and need. Mason leaned down, pressing his nose into the crook of her neck, inhaling deeply. As Mason filled his lungs with her scent, he purred deeply before dragging his lips and tongue across her skin in something that was a cross between an open-mouthed kiss and a sensual tasting. There would be more to taste at a later time.*

*He spread her thighs with his own, settling in a place made only for him. His cock throbbed between them. There would also be a time to explore and savor to learn every intimate inch of each other's bodies, but for now he needed to be buried deep inside her, to feel her sheath spasming along his length.*

*Unerringly the crown of his cock found its way to her swollen labia, parting them as he used her free-flowing honey to lubricate his staff to ease it inside her. As it began to penetrate her, she bucked up, trying to impale herself on his rigid member. Releasing her hands, he wrapped his around her hips and then pressed in. One single long, hard, pass and he was inside—all the way to the depths of her core.*

*It was a tight fit, but he held still, allowing her body to accommodate his. Her inner muscles clenched around his shaft, trying to draw him in deeper. Holding her steady, Mason began to thrust in and out. Everything around him blurred as it faded away until there was nothing left but the feel of her beneath him as he pounded into her over and over again.*

*Mason thrust harder and faster, his barbs rubbing against her as he pushed forward and elongating and becoming rigid as he drew back, scoring her inner walls to accept and nurture his seed.*

*Emery's body tensed as she clung to him and called his name—his name, not his brother's. Her moans became pants and then mere whimpers as she yowled beneath him. He could feel the moment she flew free of her body and into the freefall of a powerful orgasm that left her clinging and writhing in his arms. Holding her tight, having given her what she needed, he began hammering her pussy—harder and harder until at last he felt his balls draw up and he drove deep with a final, brutal thrust that triggered a feral response as she yowled in complete ecstasy, her pussy spasming and as she clamped down hard, he filled her with his seed, her sheath greedily milking him for every last drop.*

As he collapsed on her, wanting to burrow into her as he pressed her into the earth, the darkness overtook him completely and he lashed out, wanting to roar in defiance but knowing it would do no good.

His mate was here, and she was in danger. He needed to succumb to sleep and let his body begin to heal itself. Tomorrow would see the dawn of a new day. They would cripple NLGP and obliterate as much data as they could. Once he had her safe, Mason would rendezvous with his brother and together they would coordinate with the Resistance to destroy NLGP and its masters, the Shadow League.

## CHAPTER 8



### EMERY

Cloning? Was NLGP trying to clone humans? That would be bad enough, but trying to clone shifters or worse yet, shifter/human hybrids? Madness.

Emery walked rapidly down the hall, shedding her lab coat and popping it into her cubicle as she picked up her purse. She chanced a look behind her, aware of a growing sense of danger and perhaps even paranoia. She had begun to wonder if there wasn't a dark side to what NLGP's ultimate goals were, but never would she have expected them to be involved in any kind of cloning. She had sensed both Mason's distress and veracity. If they were willing to do that, what else were they willing to do?

What the hell was the NLGP up to? Kam Perkins wasn't talking about trying to repair Mason's DNA; she wanted to overwrite it. Kam might not be a geneticist, but she had to have enough education in genetics to understand that. They wanted to reprogram him, but to what purpose? And if they were willing to do that to one of their own, what other evil designs did they have for her research? Stopping the NLGP was paramount, but even more important was getting Mason out of there.

She'd known from the beginning that not everyone at NLGP was a shifter, and she'd figured out early on that most of those who weren't shifters had no knowledge that shifters even existed. She could tell Mason was a shifter and having been able to spend some time with him, she knew that he was most likely feline, which was good.

There were parts of Mason that would take months to heal if he remained human. Even in his shifted form with its greater capacity and speed for healing, she didn't like their odds for keeping NLGP at bay.

As she drove home and made dinner, Emery came to what she believed was the logical and most sensible solution, although she was pretty sure her mate wasn't going to like it.

In the shifter world, the stronger shifter's DNA overwrote the less robust strain. Turning a human was relatively simple as shifters had the superior DNA. Turning one genus, e.g. canine to feline, was usually fairly straightforward, as once again the stronger DNA would overwrite the other. But, oddly enough, turning one species from the same genus to another seemed to be fraught with complications and dangers. The two DNA sequences were similar enough that they seemed to fight one another. The stronger always won, but irreparable damage could be done.

Given she was a cave lion shifter, one of the largest of the prehistoric big cats, she was fairly sure her DNA would emerge the victor, but at what cost to Mason? That was the downside. Turning Mason would allow her undamaged DNA to take over and heal him; only he would be a cave lion for the remainder of his life. There would be no way to change him back. Transitions were irreversible.

Normally male shifters bit or had some kind of ceremony in which they claimed their mate and if they weren't of the same type, began the transition. She had no idea if she, as a female, could bite Mason to trigger the transition. The other thing was that the bite from her cave lion would be savage and noticeable.

She arrived home, parked her SUV, and went up to her flat. She shook her head. There were other issues to consider if she tried to inflict a claiming bite on Mason. For one thing, she doubted he'd even allow it, much less welcome it. At the threat of a superior predator, his snow leopard would make itself known. And would he lose his twin link with Carson?

The last thing they wanted to do was provide any additional proof to NLGP that there were shifters in the world. They might know there were shifters, but she and Mason didn't need for them to know they had a snow leopard and a cave lion in their midst.

And cloning, or worse yet, trying to create a new species? The resulting creatures would be, at best, mutants or genetic freaks. Besides, while the clones might not be sterile, thus far they had higher degrees of infertility, and it was rare for a breeding to be successful. Emery felt confident that any clone or hybrid created wouldn't produce viable breeders.

Once inside her loft, Emery locked herself in and then turned on a recording of the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma. She found the cello to be soothing to her frazzled nerves. She pulled off her work clothes and felt a need to take a shower. The magnitude of the evil she now believed NLGP was up to was bone-chilling and made her feel dirty that she'd ever had a hand in helping them with anything.

Once she was clean, she pulled on her favorite chunky cable-knit sweater that was several sizes too big and hung down almost to her knees. There was something about a fire and running around barefoot in her old comfy sweater that made most bad things fade into nothing. NLGP wasn't nothing, but at least she felt cleaner and more relaxed.

As she began to chop vegetables for an omelet, she began putting together a plan and a timeline. She'd felt Mason's concern for her safety, and while she didn't dismiss it, it wasn't her first consideration. The first thing she needed to do was turn Mason so his cave lion could take over and begin to heal him. While that was happening, she would need to ferret out just exactly what NLGP was up to and how to stop them. Doing that covertly would be difficult, but she had to find a way.

That night her dream was far more intense than it had ever been. She'd seen Mason in his shifted form, and he'd seen her. She'd worried that the elegant snow leopard might find her sturdy, less graceful and much larger body to be a major turn off, but that hadn't seemed to be the case. He'd brought her



down and pinned her with little trouble and then made love to her in a primal, savage way that had left her with feelings that remained with her throughout the day.



Terry, the security guard, met her at the door and showed her to her new office. He grinned as he saw her new Keurig in her arms as she entered the building.

“I got the rest of your stuff moved down to your new office. I think it’s really nice that you left your old coffee maker for the team.”

“Kam said they might split the team up. If they do, grab the Keurig for you and the rest of the guys.”

He showed her to a secure area behind large, thick metal doors. It was a small foyer that housed four small elevators.

“These are the only ones that go down to the lower level.”

He ushered her in and showed her how to use her key card, thumbprint and retinal scan to access the areas of the building to which only a select group had access. Once on Lower Level Three, he showed her to her office. She had expected a small, dark, and dismal office with no natural light. When Terry flipped on the light, she realized how wrong she was.

The office was large and comfortable, and she even had a private area with a toilet and sink. But the big surprise was the enormous wall of glass that took up the entire back wall. She knew they were underground, but what lay before her made her question that.

“How?” she said, looking at a beaming Terry.

“They created artificial sunlight so they could grow plants.”

She walked up to the window and gazed out. They had created a fairly good-sized atrium filled with rich, green, and blooming plants. A stream trickled along the floor. She felt as

though she knew what Alice had felt when she'd first seen Wonderland. It was amazing and breathtaking.

“Being on this ground floor is best. This window right here is actually a door. If you unlock it, it slides out of the way and you can go for a walk in the garden. There's a couple of benches and a nice little pavilion. Only those of you on this floor have access.”

She smiled, but then her scientist kicked in. “If they can make artificial sunlight that can give life to these plants, why isn't NLGP sharing that technology with the world? It would make solar power a viable option for people that don't live in areas where they'd normally get enough sun.”

“I've often wondered that, but you learn pretty quick around here not to ask a lot of questions.”

“That makes no sense. The very essence of scientific inquiry is asking questions and trying to find the answers.” She silenced herself, knowing that Terry was correct. NLGP was not a place where you asked questions. “As always, Terry, thanks for your assistance.”

“Like I said, if you're ever in trouble, you call on me.”

“Do you think I'm in danger, Terry?”

“It's not my place to say, but yes, I do. There's a lot of nasty shit that goes on down here. I've even heard that they found Dr. Payne and brought him back more dead than alive.”

She nodded subtly but said nothing. He nodded to her and said, “Well, I'd best be getting back upstairs, but you call if you need anything.”

As usual, Emery was first in her office. She spent part of the morning getting set up and then realized Kam had sent her a lot of new information, including Mason's medical records. She was no physician, but even she could see he'd been close to death when he arrived at Reykjavik. She looked through the medications noted and realized one of the chemicals being used to sedate him would also inhibit both his ability to shift and to heal himself. Emery wondered if NLGP knew or

understood shifter physiology. Mason was a shifter—were they aware of that? What were they trying to accomplish?

She spent the rest of her day wrapping up the work she had done on Carson's team, combing through Mason's medical records and reading the files Kam had sent her. She had already formulated an answer for Kam if she asked why she'd spent so long on Mason's medical records. After all, she needed to know the full extent of his injuries and the progress he'd made thus far before she could even begin to suggest what gene therapies would have the most efficacy.

Emery planned to explain to Kam that the new protocol might throw Mason for a loop so she could explain his body reacting to her cave lion DNA. Once she'd allowed her brain to rest, getting her genetic material into Mason should be easy enough. She'd prepare a syringe and would simply inject him. The new DNA could be introduced either by saliva or blood. Blood was faster, but saliva was gentler and fairly difficult to detect, while blood's red color was pretty much a giveaway.

One-by-one, Emery watched the other NLGP scientists on this floor turn off their lights and begin exiting the building. She continued to work until Terry knocked on her door.

"I don't know anyone who puts in as many hours as you."

"I believe in working hard to accomplish the goals I want."

"I believe that. I need to finish my rounds; my shift is almost up," he said as he ambled out.

Emery remained at her desk for another painstaking hour and watched the clock closing in on midnight. Leaving her light on but setting it on dim, she put on her lab coat and crept out into the hall, making sure there was no one around. Walking briskly like she knew exactly where she was going and had every right to be there, she made her way to the bank of elevators.

She pushed the button for Lower Level One. Once she was in the corridor, she walked with purpose to Mason's room. She entered quietly, not wanting to disturb him if he was asleep.

He was sedated and sleeping. She surreptitiously dialed back the sedation and waited for him to come back to the world.

His eyes opened slowly and in the darkness of his room, they glowed with an ethereal light.

“I’d be careful about that. It isn’t human,” she said softly.

“I think the ship may have sailed on that. I’m not convinced they don’t know.”

“Where do I go?”

Knowing what she was looking for, he said, “One floor down—Lower Level Two.”

“Can you hang on a little longer? I’ve got the beginnings of a plan but I’m going to need to be a bit more familiar with these lower levels.”

“I don’t like you being out there on your own.”

“Any more than I like you lying here in this bed, while they keep you out of it. Kam wasn’t wrong when she said you almost didn’t make it. I had a good look at your medical records, and you were more dead than alive when they arrived. Just hold on. We’ll get through this.”

Emery went back to the elevator and pushed the button for Lower Level Two. She thought access would be restricted and was surprised when the elevator took her down a floor. Stepping into the hallway, she glanced both ways to ensure she was alone. This seemed to be a floor of laboratories. Starting with the first one, she entered and began to poke around.

There was evidence of unethical experiments, complete with preserved body parts, journals, notes, and DVDs dating back years. She feared removing the journals or DVDs even back to her office might give her away so slowly but surely, she began searching for thumb drives and loose hand-written notes—things she could put in her own office hidden in plain sight amongst her own notes.

Even a brief scan of the notes made Emery want to vomit. NLGP made the Nazis and their ‘genetic and medical experiments,’ pale in comparison. This was monstrous, and

Emery figured she was a good judge of that. After all, most people would consider her cave lion a monster.

## CHAPTER 9



### MASON

Lying on a bed hooked up to machines and knowing his mate was all alone in a building surrounded by enemies was the hardest thing he'd ever had to endure. As Emery had dialed back the sedation, the fuzzy mind he'd been dealing with whenever he managed to claw his way back to consciousness was slowly receding. The offset to that was all of his senses were now on high alert, and he was straining to hear, see, or scent anything that might give him a clue as to what was going on outside of the bed and room where he was kept prisoner.

Within his mind, his snow leopard prowled, snarling and slowly flicking his tail back and forth. The drugs they'd been feeding him seemed to have lost their effect on his inner beast. When he'd first started to surface from the depths of his unconsciousness, he hadn't been able to connect to the other half of himself. He'd felt the pang of being truly alone for the first time in his life. From the beginning, he'd always had his snow leopard and his twin, Carson, within his reach. Over time he'd come to trust and embrace Deke and Hayden as brothers, as well. But in this place, until Emery had come and somehow awakened his snow leopard, he'd been utterly alone.

*Easy, ole son. Our time will come. Our mate will return, and we will be free of this place.*

The snow leopard within grimaced at him, indicating his unhappiness at their present situation. He was sure there were those who thought having a power apex predator as your shifted self would be incredible, and for the most part it was.

But when it thought you weren't acting in your combined best interests—not so much. Showing weakness was almost like extending an invitation for the great beast to take over.

Lost in his musings, Mason almost missed Emery's approaching presence. She entered his room, looking spooked and uneasy. She was doing her best to quell her feelings, but it was obvious that she'd found something and that something that made her skin crawl. The idea of her facing whatever it was that NLGP was up to while he was confined and shackled to a bed was terrifying. The restraints might not be actual shackles, but combined with the iron collar around his neck that kept him from shifting, they might as well have been.

Schooling his own thoughts and emotions, he reminded himself that there was nothing more he could do at the moment other than share with her whatever he could and heal. Once he was strong enough, they'd get out of this place, report back to Colby, and then Mason could put her someplace safe.

Emery moved directly into the position she liked to use to block their video surveillance. She pretended to look at read-outs and check his IV.

"I take it from your discontent that you had a productive, horrifying trip into what these bastards are doing," he whispered in a voice low enough that it wouldn't be overheard. By combining his words with their telepathic link, he was able to communicate with her in a way that wouldn't exhaust her.

She nodded discreetly. "You're not healing as quickly as the doctors think you might. I worry that without my genetic therapy you might never fully recuperate. The company set me up in a lovely private office on the third floor. I can see some of the labs on the second floor, but I'm far more interested in my own research and the atrium outside my office. It's really lovely."

So, she knew about the cloning and breeding labs on the second lower level. That must be what had her rattled so badly.

"Research is good. I always enjoyed gathering as much information as I could. If you know the parameters for *what*

you can find, it can be key to your success.”

“Agreed. Tell me Dr. Payne, have you been able to recover the memories of your own research?”

“Bits and pieces, but most of it is gone. The hell of it is, they tell me I stole proprietary data. I don’t remember that at all, and if I did steal it, not only don’t I remember doing it, I don’t remember what it was or what I did with it. I hope you’re ensuring that all the data you’ve collected is safe and secure.”

“I have. Right now, I’m working on figuring exactly what mutations to your DNA sequence would be the most helpful.” She checked the IV again, adjusted something and then said, “For the most part I’m finding all that I need. Try to get some rest and let your body heal. I will look in on you tomorrow.”



Mason woke as his inner snow leopard snarled in warning. With the dialed back sedation, the difference between actual sleep and unconsciousness was becoming more greatly exaggerated, and he could feel his body actually beginning to heal itself.

He came back from the depths of sleep to see Perkins plunging a syringe into his IV line. Mason was sure that even if he’d been awake, the painful rush of medication as it surged through his veins would have brought him back for sure. It was just this side of agony and made his body arch up out of the bed.

“What the fuck did you do to me?” he snarled.

She smiled down benignly—that is if you considered a great white shark, swimming up from beneath you, its mouth gaping widely and showing rows of jagged teeth to be a benign sight.

Ignoring the question, Perkins commented. “Emery worked late last night. Her last stop was here to see you.”



*They were watching her. Was she aware of that? Did NLGP suspect something?*

“She was checking up on me. What’s the harm in that? My guess is in order to come up with the best gene therapy, she needs to collect as much information as possible.”

Perkins tapped the IV line. “Nothing really, but she should have been home sleeping. She’s got a lot of work ahead of her, and NLGP has big things planned for which we need her help. I don’t want you to become a distraction.”

It would have taken a blind man not to see that Perkins was suspicious. Last time he heard, his vision was twenty/twenty. He needed to do whatever he could to bolster Emery’s explanation without putting her in a corner.

“I think it’s just another case of a scientist playing Florence Nightingale. You know, healing the sick and all that. Besides, it was pretty well known that she had a crush on me—always making goo-goo eyes behind my back.” Mason managed to pull off a chuckle. “I could never decide if it was flattering or creepy.”

Perkins regarded him coolly. He could tell he’d given her something to think about but hadn’t completely dispelled her suspicions.

Leaning over, she ran a long nail down the bridge of his nose, over his lips, chin, and then down the column of his neck. “Why is it I don’t quite believe you?” she all but purred at him. “You and your team always thought you were so much smarter than everyone else, and yet you never realized the true value of your research. So many women thought you were the ultimate combination of brawn and brains. What would they think of you in your weakened state? Probably not much. But I like you like this—at my mercy. But don’t fret, dear Carson, I will ensure you enjoy your stay. Maybe we’ll even bring Dr. Smoak into the fold.”

Mason tried to lurch up to get at Perkins and her evil, smiling face, but the restraints held him in place. He fell back onto the bed as Perkins spun on her heel and sashayed out of the room. Every muscle in his body was tense, his nerve

endings were on fire, and he was covered in sweat. Whatever it was that Perkins had pushed through his IV made him woozy, nauseous, and shaky.

Perkins stopped outside in the hallway. The door hadn't closed all the way.

"I'm tired of waiting," she said. "I want him given the accelerated healing treatment. We're running out of time and there are those who are demanding results. I don't want to waste more time or other experimentation on a specimen that could keel over at any minute. If he's to be worth all the trouble we've gone to, he needs to be in prime condition."

"I thought the EnGen project..." said a man Mason couldn't see.

"Was a complete and utter failure," interrupted Perkins. "We were told to leave the dragons alone—that they were too volatile and too difficult to control."

Their voices droned on, sounding more like bees buzzing around than words. He was fading into the darkness when he realized two orderlies were coming inside, wheeling a stainless-steel gurney with a squeaky wheel.

## CHAPTER 10



### EMERY

Exhausted from her lack of sleep and nerve-wracking day, Emery managed to drag herself back to her flat over the bakery. She'd managed to smuggle out the documents and information she had obtained in her laptop bag. The night before she had figured out places she could hide the documentation she knew she would be gathering, and had been surprised to find she had several—the cardboard tube of the paper towel holder attached to the bottom of her floating shelves in the kitchen, behind two electrical outlet covers, and between the picture and the slide in backing of a picture frame.

The more she'd looked, the more places she'd found to hide things. If they had to flee, it would take time to retrieve them, but they would also be safe if they had to leave and come back at a later date. Emery figured if they were scattered around, even if someone found one stash, they might not find the others.

Emery was a huge fan of espionage thrillers and had learned some common tricks of the spy trade for being able to tell if anyone had entered her abode. It would be difficult to do when the bakery was open as they'd be heard walking around by the employees and patrons of Rolf's. Quickly, she checked her outside door and found the small piece of the matchbook cover she'd left between the door and its frame. To even see it, someone would have to be looking for it.

Assured that no one had entered her flat via the door, she entered cautiously, turning on the lights as she searched the large open space and bath. One thing about her flat, it would

be difficult to hide in. None of the windows opened, and there was only one door. Once she was sure she was safely locked in for the night, she plopped down on the couch—nervous and edgy.

She needed to go to bed. With a groan, she managed to get up off the couch and drag herself to bed, pulling off her clothes and letting them drop to the floor as she did so. She didn't even turn down the covers, simply flopped onto the bed, reaching down to grab the down comforter she left folded on top of the pretty quilt. Having covered her naked body, she fell asleep. He joined her, but this time it was to spoon his warm body against hers, wrapping his arm around her waist from the back and snuggling against her. Emery knew it wasn't real, but she would take the comfort he could offer her and be glad of it.

The following morning, Emery woke far more refreshed than she'd thought she would be. She took a shower, got dressed, had breakfast, and headed out for the NLGP lab. Today she did have some legitimate research she wanted to do. She could make it look as though she was running some preliminary tests and experiments regarding her theories on gene splicing and replacement of damaged genetic materials from one individual with that of others.

Emery worked for several hours and then made herself a cup of coffee and ventured out into the atrium. She stayed on the well-maintained paths and tried to look as nonchalant as possible. She kept her head in the same position—straight forward, eyes down, but beneath her half-closed lids, she managed to get a good look at each of the other offices that had entrances onto the spectacular courtyard filled with plants, trees and even a babbling brook. Already she was beginning to collect data that might help them escape.

First, though, she had to get Mason well enough to travel. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that turning him into a cave lion was the best option. The medical records she'd been given were not complete, and without those she had no idea how damaged his DNA might be. The superior

strength and resilience of cave lion-shifters should prove the best and safest way to ensure his and her survival.

After her stroll through the garden, Emery returned to her office and began running computer simulations for experiments that would—from an outsider’s perspective—appear to be working toward using her genetic theories to create therapies that would cure whatever they had done to him. She intended to ensure that nothing she left behind would help NLGP, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to use any of the things she came up with on Mason.

Finally, after having lunch in her office and appearing to make notes, she headed up to Mason’s room. Spotting two men who looked like orderlies, but who she was sure were guards, made her slow her walk for a step or two. Deciding to brazen it out, she ignored them and reached out with her keycard to activate the lock.

The ‘orderly’ standing closest to the door handle put his hand in front of the lock, blocking her from sliding her key.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Smoak, but access to Dr. Payne has been restricted.”

“That’s probably a good thing, but I’m working on his new treatment therapies and need to be able to monitor him in person and speak with him.”

“I don’t know anything about that. All I know is that no one gets in without the approval of Dr. Perkins, and you aren’t on that list.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Dr. Perkins is the one who brought me in on this.”

“Then I suggest you speak with her directly. I don’t know what to tell you, Dr. Smoak. All I know is that access to Dr. Payne has been heavily restricted. There’s only three people on the list, and you aren’t one of them.”

“I’m sure it’s an oversight. Why don’t you go speak with her, while I visit Dr. Payne.”

As Emery tried to step forward, the orderly blocked the entrance. “No can do. If you believe there’s been a mistake, I

would urge you to speak with Dr. Perkins. Upon her confirmation that you should be added to the list, we'll have your security access upgraded, and when that's done, I'll be happy to let you in."

Emery could see she wasn't going to get anywhere with the orderly. She turned on her heel and headed for the bank of elevators that would take her to the top floor where Kam's office was located. She held her breath as she accessed the secure elevator lobby and didn't breathe easily until the doors opened. When she pressed the elevator button for the top floor, the doors closed with a soft whoosh and the car began to make its way up.

Once on the top floor, Emery again held her breath as she moved to leave the elevator foyer which was enclosed by thick, bullet-proof glass walls with heavy, locked doors. Again, her card, thumbprint, and retinal scan gained her entry, and she walked to Kam's office feeling a bit like a dead man walking.

Had Kam somehow discovered that she had copied data? Had she figured out that Mason wasn't his brother? Did Kam know she and Mason were in collusion? Troublesome thoughts raced through her head as she made her way down the hall. Respectfully Emery knocked on the door.

"Come," Kam called as Emery heard the electronic lock operated from Kam's desk click open.

Kam was on the phone and pointed to a chair. Emery wasn't in the mood to sit so remained standing.

"Yes, yes," Kam said. "I know what the EnGen team has been saying but I don't have much faith in their ideas or their abilities after that fiasco in Seattle. Look, we can talk about this later. One of my scientists has taken time away from her very important work to meet with me, and I value her time far more than yours." Kam didn't wait for any response and simply ended the call. "Emery, what an unexpected surprise."

"I doubt it is unexpected or a surprise. I was barred from Dr. Payne's room. Want to tell me what's going on?"

From behind the desk Kam regarded her coolly. Emery could see she'd made note that Emery hadn't taken a seat as Kam had indicated she should do. Hopefully, Emery didn't appear as nervous and frightened as she was. After seeing some of the results of the experiments that NLGP was conducting, nervous and frightened didn't begin to cover it.

"Why don't you take a seat, Emery?"

"Thanks, Kam, I'd rather stand."

She and Kam regarded each other without either woman saying a word. Emery was sure it was some kind of test or contest, but she was not going to just do nothing. She sensed that Kam did not respect those she saw as weak, and if she was going to get access to Mason back, she needed Kam to see her as an equal, or at least close to an equal.

"You might not know this, but part of my job is the supervision, and specifically, the security of our lower levels and their personnel. Every morning I receive a report of any anomalies that occurred the day before. Care to guess what I found this morning?"

"I can't even imagine, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here and play games with you. If you aren't going to answer my question..."

"The logs showed you visited Dr. Payne late last night and then spent some time on Lower Level Two."

"And so instead of asking me, you just restrict my access to a patient you say needs my help? That's bullshit, Kam."

"It's an anomaly, Emery. I really do wish you'd sit down and explain it to me."

"I have to tell you, given the way I'm being treated, I don't know that I care much about your wishes. For your information, I often wander when I'm thinking. I took a walk in the atrium this morning so I'm sure that'll show as an anomaly as well."

Kam smiled as she lifted her coffee mug up to her blood-red-stained lips. "I'm sure you're right. Please go on? I'm sorry; where are my manners? Would you care for a cup of

coffee? I have to say I followed your lead and got my own Keurig.”

Emery wasn't completely convinced that taking a cup of coffee from Kam would even be safe. Instead, she said, “No. Thank you. What I'd like is an explanation.”

“As would I. Why did you visit Carson Payne?”

“Because you recruited me to try and save him. I have to say if all anyone is doing is sitting and watching monitors, his chances for recovery are slim. Injured patients need rest, yes, but they also need human interaction. Dr. Payne appeared to be confused and fearful. I thought if he got used to seeing me on a regular basis—a familiar face, as it were—that it might help and reassure him.”

“Maybe. He thinks you have a crush on him.”

Emery laughed. “Of course, he does. He's gorgeous and has the vanity that all men who look like him have about women who don't look like supermodels. Do I think he's handsome? Yes, certainly. Do I harbor some secret longing for him that drove me to his room?” Emery snorted. “Hardly.”

Kam spun her monitor around so that Emery could see it. Her nails clicked across her keyboard. “How do you explain this?”

A video came up showing Emery on Lower Level Two, looking around furtively as she made her way down the hall, peeking and entering into several labs. The video switched and showed Emery entering one, clapping her hand over her mouth and shaking her head.

“Something seems to have upset you.”

“Look, Kam, I was wandering around some place I probably wasn't supposed to be, although in my defense you never told me that level was off limits. You have to know there's all kinds of stories making the rounds about subterranean levels. I'd had a brief glimpse of one and three so naturally, my curiosity got the better of me, and I wanted to see two. That reaction was to the sight of a lot of what looked to be improperly stored or disposed of medical waste. If it's



that big a deal I can give you my resignation or you can fire me. We're still in my probationary period."

"I'm beginning to question your loyalty. That's the second time you've threatened to resign."

Emery shook her head. "That's not true. Neither time was I making a threat. Both times I was giving you an alternative to firing me."

Kam nodded, seeming to try and process not only what Emery had said but the veracity of it. "You're right. The room you went in is medical waste of failed experiments. We do dispose of it properly, but most of it is recent. We have a huge facility here in Iceland and they have strict protocols. We tend to kind of save it up—I know, not best practice—but we also want to make sure it is truly waste and not something we'll need in the short term."

That sounded reasonable enough, but Emory knew it was complete and total bullshit.

"Apparently, I committed a huge faux pas where Lower Level Two is concerned. You can either accept my apology, restore at least my security clearance to access Dr. Payne and what I need to devise a treatment therapy, or I can leave. I'm not going to test my theories with my hands tied behind my back. Your choice."

Kam thought for a moment and then nodded. "I'm going to accept your explanation for now. I'll restore your security access to Levels One and Three but be advised you may be monitored more closely for a while. I believe in you, Emery," she said, leaning forward sympathetically, "but not everyone at NLGP does. If you have any concerns in the future, I hope you'll come to me."

"Of course, Kam. Thank you."

She turned, schooling herself not to take the breath she'd been doing without or rush toward the office door. Once outside, she put her head down and tried to get her beating heart and breathing under control. That had been close—too close.

## CHAPTER 11



### EMERY

Emery's breathing, pulse, and heartbeat didn't return to anything resembling normal until she'd returned to her office and made herself a cup of coffee. Oh, she knew people who would say pouring a cup of strong, black coffee and imbibing the caffeine wouldn't do anything good for your nerves, but Emery had always found just the opposite. A good cup of coffee and closing her eyes for a moment allowed her to clear her thoughts and do a reset of her emotions.

*Now what?* She knew her movements were being monitored here at work, and if some of the rumors she'd heard were true, they were most likely following her outside the complex. She smiled to herself—that had to be one of the most boring jobs she could think of. But if NLGP was as nefarious as she thought, it wouldn't hurt for her to figure out a way to scan her flat to see if there were any electronic bugs.

She ran a scan on her cell phone. She had an app that would tell her if there were any tracking devices on it—either to give away where she was or to intercept her phone calls, browsing record, or phone numbers she used. The scan showed she was clean, and she made a mental note to run a scan each morning and night and anytime she had to leave her phone somewhere.

Feeling confident that her cell phone was not being monitored, she located and downloaded an app that would allow her to use her cell phone to check her SUV and flat for any kind of electronic bugs. She was fairly sure there wasn't an inch of the NLGP complex that wasn't monitored, but she

figured scanning it would alert them that she was on to their game. The longer she could play dumb, the safer she and Mason would be.

She really needed to talk to Mason. For one thing, she needed his calming presence. For another, she wasn't quite sure what her next move should be. Until she could figure that out, she would do some real work on her genetic therapies, work on figuring out how and when to deliver the cave lion DNA to Mason, and try to figure out a way she could get them out of here sooner rather than later.

Emery called the security desk and asked for Terry. When he answered she said, "Terry, it's Dr. Smoak. There was a hiccup in my security clearance this morning. Could you see if it's been restored to allow me to see Dr. Payne?"

"Sure, Dr. Smoak, let me check that for you." There was a pause. "Yes ma'am. All taken care of."

The end of the day was approaching far more quickly than she had expected it to. She was certain if Kam wasn't onto them, she would be soon. The time of dithering about the ethics of turning Mason was past. She needed to get the process started, and fast. She could fake experiments and therapies, leaving NLGP with nothing that would work, but that would serve to cover Mason's transition from a snow leopard-shifter to a cave lion-shifter.

Rummaging through the supplies in her office, she prepared a saline solution containing a concentrated form of her saliva and drew it into the syringe. By the time she was ready, it was close to six. She pocketed the loaded syringe in her lab coat and left her office, closing and locking the door behind her, and then made her way back to Mason's room.

"Evening, Dr. Smoak," said the orderly who had denied her entrance earlier in the day. "Sorry about the mix-up. Apparently, we got bad intel. It's been cleared up."

*Intel? An orderly who talked about intel? Yeah, he was no more a simple orderly than she was a goat-shifter. He didn't carry himself like an orderly, either. If she had to guess, based*

on the books, movies, and television shows she liked to watch, he was ex-military and probably now worked as a mercenary.

“Dr. Payne?” she asked, approaching Mason’s bed.

There was no response. Mason wasn’t moving. She might have been worried except for the fact that she could see his chest rising and falling, and all the monitors indicated that he still lived.

She touched his arm. “Mason?” she whispered.

Nothing. It was now or never. Slipping the syringe out of her pocket, Emery removed the cap and injected the solution containing her DNA that would forcibly overwrite Mason’s DNA with her own. She watched the monitors, and she thought she could detect a slight strengthening in all of them. Ensuring that her movements could not be detected, Emery replaced the cap and slipped the used syringe back in her pocket.

Reaching down the link, she could feel he was peaceful and resting. It was a sedated sleep, but he wasn’t unconscious. Deciding at this point rest was probably what he needed most, she checked the IV and nutrition bags and all of the monitoring equipment. She made a great show of doing so.

She left him, closing the door quietly behind her. “There is no chart in there. Can you see that any daily notes are sent to me? And I’d like to wean him off the liquid nutrition and start him on some real food. I believe it could help in his healing. Considering he hasn’t been eating for a while, we’ll have to go slow, but I’d really like to make that happen.”

“I can pass your requests...”

“Not requests,” Emery corrected him, “medical orders. I was told by Dr. Perkins that I was in charge of Dr. Payne’s recovery. If that is not everyone’s understanding, then I will need to meet with Dr. Perkins and convene a meeting of the treatment team. Either I’m in charge and responsible, or I’m not, in which case my being down here is a waste of my time and talent.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will pass your concerns along.”

“Thank you,” she looked at his name badge. “Kurt. I appreciate your assistance.”

“No hard feelings from before?” he asked.

She smiled and forced her body to relax. “None. You were just following orders, right?”

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Have a good evening. I’ll most likely see you in the morning.”

Emery turned her back, dismissing anything more he might like to say, and headed for the elevators. Terrified that somehow he or whoever was watching might be able to detect what she had done, she walked down the hall, her footsteps echoing along the empty space.

It wasn’t until she had arrived at ground level that she felt some of the tension she’d had since she’d been denied access to Mason start to dissipate. Surreptitiously, she used her phone to scan her SUV, finding a single GPS tracking device located in the passenger side rear wheel. It could remain there for now. It couldn’t hurt her and by leaving it alone, she might keep them from realizing that she knew they were monitoring her movements outside of work.

She got into her car, grateful that the device could also tell her if someone had planted explosives in her vehicle. Starting up her SUV, she pulled out of the parking lot and waved at the guards at the gate as she headed back into Reykjavik. She spotted a small, nondescript sedan in her rear-view mirror. It seemed to be keeping space with her, always staying a single car behind. She waited until the last minute to take the exit that was before her normal one and watched to see the sedan scrambling to keep up with her, leaving a trail of honking horns in his wake.

To give herself a reason for doing that, she headed to a small fish and chips joint located in the most nondescript building she’d ever seen. There was only a small sign in the window that gave any indication it was a pub. It was a local joint, not a place tourists regularly visited. She went inside, sat

at the far end of the counter, and waited. Sure enough, two goons entered and realized they'd exposed themselves. As they scanned the bar, they caught sight of her, but she ignored them, covertly taking their pictures with her phone's camera. Let them think their little ruse had worked. She would just add their pictures to the data she was gathering.

Emery sat at the back of the bar, ate an order of fish and chips, drank two beers and watched one of the Icelandic soccer teams playing somebody or other. Emery had been shocked by how little hockey was broadcast in Reykjavik. She loved hockey, but as she learned more of the nuances of soccer, she could watch it in a pinch, and it often provided a kind of white noise when she was working at home.

Finally, she paid her tab, resisting the temptation to pay theirs and let them know she was on to them. Climbing back up in her SUV, she made her way through the city streets, as opposed to using the highway, until she arrived home. She parked her vehicle in her secure and covered spot, popped into the bakery to grab an éclair, and then trotted up the steps to her apartment.

Once again she checked for the small piece of matchbook she'd left wedged into a different piece of the door jamb and quickly ran her explosives app before unlocking the door and heading inside. Walking all through her flat, she scanned for electronic bugs and made a thorough check of the flat.

Feeling as though she was as secure as she could be given the circumstances, she locked all of the locks, flipped on the gas fireplace and then grabbed one of the flash drives she'd hidden in the toilet paper holder, scanned for viruses and malware with an external scanner, and then began to review it. It consisted of nothing more than a seemingly random mess of notes, graphs, random numbers and files that seemed to have no discernible context. She password protected the flash drive and returned it to its hiding place.

Emery retrieved the second flash drive from its hiding place behind the outlet cover just inside her closet door. She repeated her procedure of scanning for viruses and malware before she ever plugged it into her computer. It was nothing

but images, and not the kind from someone's vacation. They were violent, horrific, and made her sick to her stomach. She stumbled into the powder room and deposited the contents of her stomach into the toilet. It took a lot for an image to affect her that profoundly, but the evidence of NLGP's experimentation on humans—or perhaps shifters in their human form—were frightening and disgusting.

Other pictures showed animals that she was fairly sure were shifters. Some of the pictures showed what looked like extra parts that had been grafted together, or perhaps they were mutant shifters someone had tried to clone some kind of hybrid. Even as revolting as they were, Emery tamped down her emotions and forced herself to carefully examine each one. It seemed each time she told herself that one picture was the worst, she'd find another to take its place.

She went back to her bath, washed her face and mouth with cold water and then retrieved the first flash drive. She plugged it into her laptop, doing a split screen to compare the two files. Little by little, she began to make some sense of the numerical data and notes on the first flash drive with the pictures on the second.

Emery retrieved the handwritten notes from behind the framed photograph and laid them out on her desk, trying to correlate what was scribbled down with what she could see on either side of her computer screen. The paper notes seemed to be more of a field journal, as if someone was chronicling in a scientific method form the various experiments from start to finish. It was all there: the hypotheses, methods, procedures, notes, results, and conclusions.

As she was going back through the images on her computer, she noticed a small mark on one of the photos. Zooming in, she saw it: the photo had been marked 'EnGen'—the failed project in Seattle that everyone whispered about. Everything was falling into place.

Emery retrieved the final flash drive from its hiding place, scanned it, and plugged it in. It was a video—a detailed video shot over several months. Sitting in a dark basement or dungeon there was an enormous dragon—a fucking dragon—

who was chained and being tortured. Humans with knives carved chunks out of its skin and threw water on it. Emery tried to recall what she'd heard about dragon-shifters. They were rare but supposedly still existed, and their kryptonite was salt water. As it remained in its dragon form, the restraints must have been iron, keeping it from shifting.

As terrifying as the video was, it was the matter-of-fact voiceover which confirmed Emery's first assumptions—use of iron restraints and salt water—as well as detailing what the torturers were trying to do and their failure to achieve the desired results. The voice belonged to none other than Kam Perkins. There was no doubt now that Kam was a part of whatever evil NLGP was perpetrating.



## CHAPTER 12



### MASON

The bonding link was becoming stronger. Even in his sedated sleep the day before, he had been aware that Emery had injected him with something after Perkins had. While what Perkins had used had weakened him and made him dizzy and nauseous, whatever Emery had given him had not only counteracted whatever it was that Perkins had dosed him with but seemed to be accelerating his healing. It was as if he could feel everything that had been broken or shredded putting itself back together.

He'd spent most of the day before somewhere between comatose and a deep, sedated sleep, but now, as night was beginning to give way to dawn, his sleep was becoming more natural. He felt he had more control—both in his waking and sleeping states. His mind and body were both coming back online, and he could feel his old strength and power surging through his system.

Mason needed to reach out to Emery along the link. He needed to know she was all right, and she needed to know that any concerns she might have over what she'd used had been unfounded. The link when they were close to each other flowed freely; he needed to see if he was strong enough to communicate with her.

He'd been drawn to her the night before in his dreams. They'd both been mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted, and he had joined her in bed, spooning her back to his front and holding her close. The sleep and the medication

Emery had given him had done his body, mind, and spirit a world of good.

Reaching down the link, he began to wake her soul-self. While his inclination was to wake all of her to the dream state so he could lose himself in their lovemaking, he knew what was more important was communicating with her.

*“Mason?” she asked, confused.*

*“You’re still asleep. I needed to find a way to communicate with you. Perkins dosed me with something but whatever you gave me seems to have counteracted it and I think it’s making me stronger.”*

*She looked relieved. “Thank god for that. Mason, did your brother know what they were doing?”*

*“Not for a long time. When he figured it out, he took as much of the data as he had access to and got out.”*

*“Where is he now?”*

*“The last time I saw Carson and his mate, they were headed for a rendezvous with the Resistance.”*

*“So someone knows what’s going on?” she asked.*

*He nodded. “Not only knows but is gathering forces to rally against them. The worst problem is that it isn’t just NLGP. They are part of a much larger group known as the Shadow League.”*

*Emery snorted. “There’s no such thing.”*

*“I wish that were true. But we can discuss all of this when we’re safe. What did you find?”*

*“It’s horrific. Documentation, notes, pictures, videos—all of which show they are experimenting on humans and shifters in ways that are beyond your worst nightmare. They tortured a dragon...”*

*“I know. For what it’s worth, Warrick—that’s the dragon you saw—is safe. They tried dosing him with all kinds of things to get him to breed and when that failed, they started taking samples to use. I don’t know what for...”*

*“I can guess. They’re trying to get viable clones, which could explain their interest in my work.”*

*“Not just any clones, but some kind of super soldier, loyal only to them, with no mind of its own. I think we ought to focus on getting out of here. I may well be next on their parts list for their experiments.”*

*“It would explain why they wanted you healed up. That kind of thing could kill someone in a weakened state. Anything I leave will be tainted. It’ll look good until someone either tries to replicate it to verify my findings or tries to use it without doing so.”*

*“You do understand why I’ve been able to visit you in your dreams and how we can now communicate without being in the same room, don’t you?”*

*“Only fated mates and twins can communicate. As Carson has the distinction of being your twin, that makes me your fated mate.” She laughed. “I can’t tell you how glad I was to figure out you and Carson were twins. It was so disappointing to meet Carson and feel nothing.”*

*“I can imagine. I hope you like cats; Carson and I are snow leopards.”*

*Emery laughed again. It was the sound of summer sunshine combined with fairy dust. “I’m a cave lion.”*

*Her body posture indicated she was tense and waiting for a bad response on his part.*

*“Emery,” he purred. “I can’t imagine anything cooler.”*

*“I’m so glad you feel that way. I was afraid it might turn you off.”*

*“Why? Because your shifted self is stronger than mine? Oh, hell no; bring it on. Besides, if we’re going to be together, we need to be the same species, and I very much doubt snow leopard DNA would trump cave lion. Do you know Deke Campbell? The guy they call the Finder?” She nodded. “He’s a good friend. I served with him, and he’s the guy heading up the Resistance. He’s going to be glad to have you as one of us... Wait, you are okay with joining the Resistance—I don’t*

*mean the fighting but helping with research? My guess is you'll be working with Carson."*

*Her body relaxed completely. "I know Campbell by reputation. Cave lions tend to be loners for the most part, which might account for our dwindling numbers."*

*"We'll see what we can do about increasing them," he leered, making her blush.*

*"If the Resistance is wanting to bring NLGP down, I'm all in. I can't even imagine what horrors exist that we haven't seen. And unless someone has a physical science or medical background, I don't think you really understand the depth of their depravity."*

*Mason was surprised at the depth of her feelings and supposed that alone must prove her point. When she shuddered, he drew her onto his lap, holding her close. Nuzzling her neck, she raised her head to look at him as his cock throbbed beneath her, indicating it thought the discussion portion of the visit ought to be over.*

*Smiling, she began to kiss her way down his throat and torso, sliding down the bed until her mouth was poised over the broad head of his cock. Opening her mouth, she sucked him in as she swirled her tongue around him. Mason groaned, fisting her hair and tugging her head back.*

*"We don't have time. They'll be coming for me. Hopefully, whatever they dosed me with won't undo the good your injection did."*

*She grinned. "I feel pretty confident that my therapy will protect you—I injected you with a heavy dose of my own DNA. I should probably tell you that you are becoming a cave lion. I know we should have discussed it..."*

*He cut off her mea culpa with a deep kiss. "These are extraordinary circumstances. We had neither the time nor the ability. You did what you thought was best to save me, and given the difference in how I feel, I'm inclined to say you made the right decision. Be advised, however, I reserve the right to mark you with a claiming bite when we get somewhere safe."*

*Emery grinned. “Duly noted. Now where was I? Oh yes, I remember...”*

*“You were stopping because we don’t have the time...”*

*“For us to make love for hours and hours? No. But I would prefer they don’t find you in a fully aroused state. Let me take care of that.”*

*She waited until he nodded. As she closed her mouth over him again, he couldn’t help the groan that escaped him. Plunging his hands into her tangled blonde mane, he began to thrust into her mouth, watching as his cock disappeared inside, seeking that soft place at the back of her throat. When he withdrew, she hollowed her cheeks, trying not to lose him.*

*Over and over, he satisfied his need to use her, allowing her to roll her tongue over his skin as he pulled back only to burrow back in. As Emery used her mouth to provide him with exquisite sensations, he felt his balls draw up as he sank into the depths of her mouth, spilling his cum down her throat. She looked up at him, her grin every bit as cocky as the one Lewis Carroll wrote about Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.*

*Destiny had gifted him with a fated mate who would never truly submit. Their pairing would be an intricate and subtle fight for who held the upper hand between them. She might think it would be a fair fight, but she was wrong. He would be the dominant partner, but he’d ensure she never felt as if she didn’t have his complete respect and love.*

*Love? He tested the word in his mind. Yep, what he was feeling surpassed pure lust or need. He was in love with his fated mate. His resolve to bring down the NLGP and defeat the Shadow League strengthened. Nothing and no one would keep him from his mate and their shared destiny.*

*From somewhere outside the dreamscape, he heard the door to his room being unlocked.*

*“I love you. Be careful.”*

*“You’re the one who needs to be careful. If it comes to it, leave me and get out. Get to the Harbor Light. The owner’s a friend. Call the Sheriff’s Office in Mystic River, Alaska. Tell*

*them who you are and that you need an immediate extraction. They'll get you to safety."*

*"I'm not leaving you," she said.*

*"You must. If you care for me at all, don't ask me to die with your death on my conscience. Promise me, Emery."*

*"Mason..."*

*"Promise me."*

*"Harbor Light and call the Sheriff in Mystic River, Alaska."*

*"You are my beautiful, courageous fated mate and I love you."*

*"I love you too," she said her voice filled with anguish.*

He had to return to himself before he could truly reassure her, but he left her feeling more confident about them and their future. The Shadow League had no idea of the strength of those coming against them. They might have some concerns about the men as they represented a vast and powerful group of apex predators and others, but Mason believed it would be the women that surprised them. He would bet serious money that they discounted, if not disregarded entirely, the strength and power of the women who had chosen to join the Resistance. Poor dumb bastards. Mason almost felt sorry for them. Almost.

Mason could feel his spirit sinking back into his physical self and could feel the DNA with which Emery had injected him was working its magic to heal and turn him. Yeah, this was going to be fun, and being so much bigger and more powerful than Carson was going to be a hoot.

As he became more aware of his surroundings, Mason tried to open his eyes just the tiniest bit to see what was going on.

"Shit. He's starting to come to," said one of the two orderlies who'd been attending him.

"Remember, we aren't supposed to give him a full dose of sedatives. Dr. Perkins wants him a little more responsive."

“What do you think she’s doing to him?”

“I know better than to ask, and she doesn’t tell.”

Most likely, Mason thought, she was trying some kind of gene therapy to weaken him. Before she tried to make him into some kind of mindless killer, she’d want to know she could control him.

As they came closer, Mason opened his eyes and growled. Both men jumped back.

“What the fuck is he? The way his eyes are glowing isn’t normal.”

“I don’t know if it’s normal or not, but it sure as hell isn’t human.”

“Good thing the IV line isn’t within reach. I’m not sure those restraints are enough to hold him.”

“Maybe not,” said the second man, reaching behind his back and pulling out a gun. “You go ahead and inject that shit into his IV. If he makes a move, I’ll put him down. I don’t care what Dr. Perkins wants.”

The man with the gun got a shocked look on his face as a feminine hand from behind shoved a syringe in one of the veins of his neck and depressed the plunger, dispensing whatever had been in it. The man who was about to dose Mason with whatever he’d been planning to use whirled around as his companion crumpled to the ground.

“Perhaps you care more about following my orders than your friend,” said Perkins in a low, breathy voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” the man said, both his voice and hands trembling. He quickly injected two different solutions into the IV line.

Mason felt them as they entered his bloodstream—both he had felt before: a sedative and the liquid mixture from the day before. Both affected him far less than they had in the past. Emery’s assumption that her cave lion DNA would dominate both was proving to be correct. He could feel his body fighting

off the effects of what had been dispensed. Whatever it was, his cave lion-enhanced DNA was proving to be a deterrent.

“Out,” Perkins snarled at the orderly. “And take this,” she said kicking the dead man with her toe, “with you.” The orderly did as he was told. She peered at Mason. “Hmm. You seem better than you did before. Dr. Smoak left me a note that she wanted you switched to solid food and your sedative reduced. She also said she’d given you a small dose of her gene therapy. I think she may be right. My superiors will be pleased.”

She was braver than the two orderlies or knew the restraints would hold. She trailed her fingers down his chest and abdomen, coming to rest on his groin.

“I’m hopeful we can get you under control.” She gave his cock a gentle squeeze. “I rather think it might be very pleasurable to have you service me.” Perkins gave an evil laugh. “But then, they might have you too busy breeding slaves.”

“Never,” he managed to say hoarsely.

“Never say never, Carson. I think any future I have planned for you would be far more pleasurable and probably last a lot longer than they have planned. Dear, sweet, naïve Emery will be down to see you later today. Do try and be a good boy. I’d hate to have to hurt her. I think her research and theories could prove most valuable to the League.”

Perkins spun on her stiletto and left him alone. Emery needed to find them a way out. It seemed to him that some kind of countdown had begun, and they needed to be gone before it hit zero.



## CHAPTER 13



### EMERY

Emery woke with a renewed sense of purpose. Not only had she felt his strength and comfort all night, but they'd been able to communicate outside of what they said when they made love. And he'd told her he loved her and had understood why she had initiated his transition from snow leopard to cave lion. He even appeared to be looking forward to it.

There was a part of her that had been relieved that he believed they had what they needed to take back to the Resistance. Now it was on her to find a means of escape. Emery was well aware that saying it and doing it were two different things. Doing so with NLGP watching her closely was going to be difficult at best, but she was up to the challenge, and she was damned if the Shadow League would be successful.

*The Shadow League.* She had never believed they were real. She knew that some parents had used them as boogeymen to keep their children in line.

She grabbed a quick shower, got dressed for work, and headed to the NLGP campus. She left early enough to drive around the perimeter and was surprised to find that there were only three sides to the property accessible by land vehicles. The fourth side was water—the southern shore of Faxaflói Bay to be precise. That gave them two possible escape methods—land or sea. But getting Mason out of that bed and away from NLGP was only part of the problem. She would need to be able to rendezvous with someone who could get them to

safety. Or maybe not. Maybe Mason knew how to do that kind of thing. She had theories based on the books and movies she enjoyed, but this would be her first real life adventure.

Once in her office, she began doing mindless work so she could appear busy doing one thing while actually planning something else. She was creating notes and documentation for one of her experiments that would sound good, but if anyone tried to replicate what she was doing, the false path would send them down a meandering trail to nowhere.

There was a knock on her door, and Terry popped his head in. “Hey, Doc.” He’d never quite become comfortable with using her first name so had finally settled on ‘Doc.’

“What’s up, Terry?”

“Not much. We don’t see you around upstairs much anymore.”

“They keep me pretty busy down here. Is the team still together?”

“Far as I know. Why?”

“Kam told me there was some discussion about breaking them up. I guess they either decided not to or were going to wait. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, really. I thought I’d bum a cup of coffee.”

“You’re always welcome. I got a new blend called Army of Dark Chocolate. It’s a Brazilian Arabica dark roast with just a hint of dark chocolate. It’s divine.”

“That does sound good.”

“Help yourself. And I now have my very own fridge so there’s real cream.”

“Oooh, moving up in the world since they put you downstairs.” He walked over to the door to the atrium. “Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I actually ventured out there the other day. I wanted to stretch my legs. It seemed easier to do it there than go

outside. Besides, it was a lot warmer than it is this time of year in Iceland.”

Deciding she could use a break as well, she waited until Terry got his cup of coffee and made one of her own, sitting back in her desk chair. She and Terry enjoyed their coffee as they talked of inconsequential things. She observed his body posture over the rim of her cup. He was no Mason, but he wasn't bad. He looked strong and as though he knew how to use his body. She'd never been good at detecting other shifters unless they were really obvious about it, but now regarding Terry, she did begin to wonder.

Could he help? Would he be willing to? Would she be willing to ask him to? It wasn't only a question of him being loyal; NLGP had a dark side, and she had little doubt as to how they dealt with those they considered traitors. She doubted that he was just a cog in the great machine that was NLGP, but she was beginning to think he knew and saw far more than he let on. From the beginning, he had urged her to come to him if she needed help. The problem was how to determine whether he was another drone, oblivious as to what was really going on, or if he knew and had been warning her all along.

“I'd better get back at it before they notice I'm gone.”

“Thanks for coming by, Terry. Don't be a stranger and thank you for all you've done for me.”

“Happy to help, Doc. Like I said, you come to me if you need anything—anything at all.”

“I may need to take you up on that.”

“Problem?”

“Nothing I can't handle, but I'm afraid I may have gotten myself on Kam's bad side.”

“She doesn't have anything but bad sides,” chuckled Terry. “Sorry, Doc. I probably shouldn't have said that.”

“No harm; no foul.”

“Not until the end of the day and someone reports what I’ve said.”

“You don’t sound too worried.”

“I’m not. We security guys look out for each other. Sometimes parts of the video are eroded, and you can’t see or hear anything and sometimes things get substituted—you know snip this out, dub that in. Or occasionally the whole system can just have a glitch. We’ve learned to deal with it.”

“Are you guys that tight?”

“We’re more friendly than friends, but we have a commonality that binds us—with the exception of you, everybody else in this place treats us like we don’t exist. So, we do what we can to help each other out—covering for a guy who has to leave early for his shift, erasing mistakes from some of the video footage, that kind of thing. Fact is, you’re the only one here whoever drops off goodies or invites us to have coffee with you. A lot of the teams have gone together and bought coffee makers, but with the exception of your old team, we are *persona non grata*.”

“That’s a rotten way to treat people.”

Terry shrugged. “It is the way it is, but we do look out for each other. I meant what I said, you come to me if you need help.”

“I may take you up on that—probably someday soon.”

His gaze sharpened and for the first time, she knew Terry was some kind of shifter. There were times when feeling strong emotions that a shifter’s eyes took on an ethereal glow. There were others when they had a hard handle on their feelings that the glow was limited to a very fine line around the pupil. The line around Terry’s pupil flashed, but not before she’d seen it.

“I wondered if that might not be the case. Don’t you worry. Those two goons they have stationed outside Dr. Payne’s room aren’t medical orderlies, but I suspect you knew that.”

She grinned. “I figured.”

“What time are you leaving tonight? The parking lot is getting icy, and I noticed you didn’t wear shoes that would be good on that. I’d hate to see you take a tumble.”

“Me, too. I was thinking maybe around six-thirty. I’m a little behind on my schedule.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll be waiting for you in the lobby. I’ll make sure you get out safely.”

“Thanks, Terry. I appreciate it.”

Terry gave a brief nod of his head and headed back. Had he just told her what she thought he had: that he was a shifter, that he would help, and that he had a way of covering their tracks as far as surveillance was concerned? If she was right, and she was pretty damn sure she was, the ability to get herself and Mason to safety had just become a whole lot more doable.

She buzzed down to Mason’s room, mostly just to put in an appearance. She examined the newly posted medical chart at the end of the bed, adjusted the IV so his sedation was less and looked at his vitals. Everything indicated that his transition was progressing nicely and smoothly. For the rest of the afternoon, she ran dummy experiments while she began searching both internal and external systems for the complex’s blueprints. She began to make note of the differences between the internal, password-protected files and the plans they had filed with the City of Reykjavik. Whoever had set up their passwords should be taken out and shot. The password was, predictably, ‘password.’

She paid particular attention to all the known exits. There was no external exit from the atrium except at the top, which seemed odd. There was, however, what looked to be a long tunnel from a separate space next to a room that housed the mechanical systems of NLGP. From what she could tell, the tunnel looked to branch off into three separate main tunnels, leading to three different exits—one to the loading dock off the back of the building, one that seemed to open close to the company’s private dock, and the last one that ran all the way into the city. There was one entrance into the tunnel system from the building and three exits to different locations. All

four were marked with a large X indicating it was defunct and no longer in use. Maybe that was true, but it didn't mean it didn't exist anymore.

Another knock and Kam stuck her head in. Emery couldn't help but hear the theme song for Cruella De Vil playing in her head. But poor ole Cruella had nothing on Kam Perkins. Cruella just wanted puppy skin coats. Kam wanted men and shifters' souls.

"Just wanted to pop in and let you know I thought about what happened yesterday. I think I probably overreacted and hope you can forgive me."

The evil comic book villain from the day before was gone, replaced by the kind, benevolent boss. Emery now knew she wasn't the latter and wasn't afraid of the former. Either she knew something was up or she figured whatever it was she wanted from Emery she couldn't get without her assistance.

"I'm doing great here in my office. It's nice to have my own little mini lab, so to speak, but I may need time on the mainframe and in one of the larger labs."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Just let me know when you need it, and I'll set it up."

"Would you like to see some of my interim projections?"

"I'm sure they're fascinating dear, but I'd hate to take you away from your work. Just put it in your daily report."

Kam turned to leave.

"I saw Dr. Payne earlier. He seems to be improving."

"Yes. He's healing nicely, but the powers that be..."

"Isn't that you?" Emery teased.

"Don't I wish," snorted Kam. She took a breath. "I hate having to tell you, but I don't want any secrets between us. I feel just terrible about how I treated you yesterday and hope you won't let that come between us. So, in that vein, I think you should know, the big bosses have decided to prosecute Dr. Payne for corporate espionage and will also be bringing a civil

suit against him to try and recover some of the damage he's done."

Emery clamped down hard on her emotions. She could not betray her true feelings. "I am sorry to hear that. I liked Dr. Payne, but I certainly understand their position."

"Oh, thank god," said Kam. "I was so worried you wouldn't."

"No, I get it. If they let him skate, anyone else might figure it was a risk worth taking, and it would set a bad precedent. I might like Dr. Payne personally as he was always supportive of my work, but I certainly don't respect someone who steals information that isn't rightfully his. It always amazes me how many brilliant people decide to do that, despite their NDAs and contracts that say all work performed on behalf of the company or using their equipment is considered work product and is owned wholly by the company."

"Precisely. Well, I've taken up enough of your time. I am glad to hear you think Dr. Payne is getting better."

Emery waited until the door clicked closed and then went into her private washroom to throw up. As she rinsed her mouth afterwards, she looked at herself in the mirror. It would seem that their timeclock was a lot closer to zero than she'd thought. She needed to get herself and Mason out, and she needed to do it sooner rather than later.

## CHAPTER 14



### MASON

Mason was fairly sure he'd thrown up in his mouth after Perkins' visit. God, she was like something he might see peeking out at him from underneath a rock. There was little that rattled Mason. After everything he'd seen as a special ops operative and here at NLGP, nothing much surprised him anymore. But Kam Perkins had a kind of malevolent spirit he'd only seen in the deadliest of vipers, and he could easily imagine her slithering along the ground on her belly.

He knew they were monitoring him electronically, and so Mason began testing the strength of his restraints one-by-one. Emery had managed to loosen them but only enough to make them more bearable and not loose enough for him to escape. Each of the cuffs holding him in place were covered in padded leather but given the way they seemed to burn ever so slightly, he had to believe, like the collar around his neck, they were infused with iron. He had to give NLGP credit—they knew how to ensure a shifter couldn't use his best weapon—his shifted self.

But if he could get out of the restraints, he could remove the collar and shift, but then what? No, he needed to wait for Emery. She was working on a way out. She was far too brilliant to be stumped by the goons that ran NLGP. He tugged at the restraints and growled.

He could feel her malevolence before she entered the room. Kam Perkins was, in his opinion, evil personified. She knew exactly what she was doing and did it anyway, believing



her kind was superior and therefore the ends justified the means.

A soft laugh came from the doorway. “You didn’t really think we wouldn’t take into account how to keep you from shifting, did you, Dr. Payne?”

“You’d be amazed at how stupid I believe you and your cronies to be, and I suspect in due time, I will be proved right.”

“Not only are there iron linings in the restraints but most of the newer parts of the complex have iron rebar throughout as a safety precaution. Surely you can’t believe that we wouldn’t take precautions to ensure we know who and where shifters can shift. We wouldn’t want to lose the upper hand, now, would we?”

“How would you know which of your employees are shifters? We’re pretty good at hiding in plain sight.”

“Yes, but we have scanners built into some of our observation equipment that can tell a shifter from a human—maybe not which kind of shifter, but I’m not sure it matters.”

“Think not? I have to tell you, I’d far rather face a cute ragdoll kitten-shifter than say a snow leopard-shifter.”

“Touché. But the iron within the structure does greatly inhibit the ability to shift in most cases.”

She was right. It was only the true apex predators that could shift in such a case. He was pretty damn sure a snow leopard qualified, and he was absolutely certain a cave lion did. However, Emery had introduced her DNA into his system, it had been fast and effective. Not only could he feel the effects surging through his system, but now in his mind’s eye, the snow leopard was gone, replaced by an enormous cave lion. As much as Mason could and did embrace the necessity to become a cave lion-shifter, there was a small part of him that would always miss the snow leopard he had been. The cave lion was now what would separate him from being an ‘identical twin’ to his brother Carson. He prayed that his twin could accept and even embrace the change in him.

“We did a lot of experiments to figure out what would work and what wouldn’t. But then, you know all about our experiments, don’t you, Dr. Payne?”

In that moment he would have given a great deal of money to have access to a recording device, but that was not an option so he tried to focus on the words she said, committing them to memory the best he could.

“Since you believe you know far more than any of the other teams, why don’t you enlighten me?”

“We’re trying to right the wrongs of the past. For far too long shifters have been relegated to some kind of half-life, living in the shadow of humans. It’s unnatural. Shifters—even the lowliest among us—are far superior to our purebred human or animal counterparts...”

“I read an interesting article a couple of months back that said when humans invariably destroy their world, it will be the insects that take over—most likely bees. Makes sense when you think about it.”

“You’re a fool if you really believe that. Our kind will not allow that to happen. It’s only one of the reasons we’re going to rise up and take back what once was ours.”

“How exactly do you plan to do that?”

“We’re working on cutting edge technologies. We’re trying to build better soldiers, better servants. We’ll keep humans around to be used for breeders if we need them, and the beasts will take their place in the food chain. We have almost perfected the technology for cloning a kind of obedient super soldier...”

“I understand the EnGen project working with dragon DNA was a complete and utter failure. Didn’t your boss run that project? What happened to Oscar?”

“He learned the price of failure and then added his uniqueness to our database. I was asked to take his place.”

“In other words,” said Mason, realizing he would probably never forget this conversation, “you killed him and then sorted him into parts you could use in some of your other crazy ideas.

Grafting extra limbs onto a human or a shifter is never going to work. If you'd studied history, you'd already know that."

"What do you know? Things the generation of scientists before us thought were impossible are very possible. We can learn from the past, but we don't have to be bound by it. We can make our soldiers better, faster, stronger..."

"Wasn't that the intro to *The Six Million Dollar Man*?"

Perkins slapped him across the face. "Don't you mock me. Need I remind you, Dr. Payne, that you're the one in restraints, not me. I really hope you survive the experiments. Dr. Smoak is worried that some of her therapies will result in a loss of free will amongst the subjects. I only hope if it does that your cognition is still good enough that you understand what is being done to you."

"You're a scientist, Perkins, or at least you used to be," said Mason. "And you seem to have a higher-than-average IQ. You have to know that what you're planning is not going to work. The science just doesn't support it. Even if it did, and given that shifters are inherently stronger and better able to adapt physically, we are woefully outnumbered. If history has taught us nothing else, it should be when mankind is threatened, for the most part, they band together against a common enemy. Shifters have never been able to pull that off—not in sufficient enough numbers or lengths of time. Hell, we have species that are still locked in the Dark Ages warring against one another."

"You're wrong," she said, pounding her fists on the end of the bed. "We will emerge victorious and usher in a new age. Our Master is older than all of us..."

Mason shook his head as well as he could and clicked his tongue. "Have you learned nothing about dealing with dragons? Do you really believe a dragon-shifter as old and as rich as Apophis or Abraham or whatever he's calling himself is doing this out of the goodness of his heart or to restore shifters to the top of the food chain? Are the lot of you that delusional? He'll use you until he has what he needs, and then

he and his dragon buddies will turn on the lot of you and turn you into crispy critters—literally.”

“You’re wrong. Apophis was one of those who ruled in the Age of Dragons...”

“And got banished to a cave off the coast of England for more than a thousand years. All it took to put him in suspended animation was a little old wizard with a magic spell waving a wand. And this is the guy you people have put your faith in?” Mason snorted. “You haven’t spent much time around dragons. They’re not what you’d call benevolent. Oh, and by the way, the dragon you tried to turn into your experiment in Seattle? He really wants a shot at payback. He and his brothers of the Phantom Fire are looking to take this place and the Shadow League apart and roast your tasty bits as a snack.”

“You’re wrong, but even if you were right, the League will have its own dragons. Dragons who are loyal and answer only to us.”

Mason laughed. He couldn’t help it. The woman was a raving lunatic. “So, you’re all about shifter solidarity and yet you’re planning how to double cross Apophis. If I wasn’t worried about the harm you would cause to humans, shifters and beasts alike, it would almost be fun to sit back and watch you idiots have at it. The problem is, I worry you’d leave the world and all of its civilizations in ruins.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” she vowed. “Our time has come, and we will be victorious.”

“You’re delusional. You’ve bought the company spiel hook, line, and sinker. I’d applaud you or whoever sold you this load of bullshit, but you’ve ensured I can’t do that, which is probably a good idea since if I was free of these restraints, I’d probably snap your neck.”

She shoved up from the end of the bed, leaning down so that her face was mere inches from his. “What did you do with the data, Dr. Payne?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Kam?”

“I’m going to make you my slave, Dr. Payne. You wait and see.”

“So much for shifter solidarity. So, tell me Kam, why are you telling me all of this?”

She laughed. “You’re smart enough to know the answer.”

Unfortunately, she was right. She’d given him a lot of information, which combined with the data Carson had already smuggled out and the information Emery had put together should give the Resistance a real leg up on what was going on. The only reason she’d have indulged his curiosity to this point was if she fully expected him never to leave Reykjavik.

She didn’t say anything else. She just let the horror of what they planned and what was about to happen to him sink in. She snapped her fingers and the two goons from outside came in with a gurney.

Mason struggled against the restraints, but he could do nothing to stop Perkins from injecting a strong sedative into his system.

“Prepare him. See that he’s secured and taken to Lower Level Three. Put him in a separate cell where he can hear the others. Let’s see how he handles knowing what is going to come. I don’t think he’s going to tell us what we want to know.” She stroked his torso possessively and cupped his groin. “He will serve us in other ways.”

The last thing his conscious mind was able to comprehend was being strapped to the gurney and wheeled out of his room, its wonky wheel squealing and trying to have its way. How the hell were they going to take over the world when they couldn’t even operate a functional gurney?

In the dim recesses of his mind, as the darkness closed in, his cave lion roared.

## CHAPTER 15



### EMERY

Emery had never given up wearing a watch even though there were plenty of other ways to tell time including her cell phone, her laptop, and the clock on the wall. But still, it was her vintage Rolex she'd given herself as a graduation present. For her the watch was a symbol of stability and that she had achieved the first milestone in her career. Glancing down, she could see she had fifteen minutes until the appointed time.

Earlier in the day, she'd toured the atrium and the rest of Lower Level Three again as it had become part of her daily routine. As far as she could tell, there was no entrance from the atrium to the tunnel system. That had led to her taking an extended tour of the level on which her office/lab was located. Diagonally across from her office was a small office at what appeared to be a dead end. Inside was a man sitting all alone at a desk. Emery had walked past, trying the door to the office, trying to sneak as much of a look as she could through the small window in the door without being obvious.

For the first time, she noticed an alcove just past the office where instead of a door there was a discreet metal latch set into the wall itself. Afraid to pull on it to see if it would open, lest she give her presence away, she took the time to inspect it to see if it could, in fact, be a handle. It hadn't appeared to be locked or blocked—just closed off and nondescript. It would be risky, for sure, to bring Mason down here, but she felt time running out like the sands in an hourglass. There was no alternative viable escape. This was their best bet.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

She wasn't sure why she considered it to be an event for which secret agents or special forces operatives might synchronize their watches, but she did. It was almost as if she could feel each tick of the secondhand as it moved around the watch face, even though it actually glided as opposed to ticking.

She watched as the seconds moved inexorably toward the seminal time.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

She saved the files on her laptop and began to shut it down, moved and ensured her microscope had been turned off and put away for the evening. She made a last-minute pit stop to her washroom before moving to the wall of windows overlooking the atrium.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

She was having trouble feeling Mason on the other end of the link. Even when he slept, she could usually feel him. It was only when they'd sedated him into an almost comatose state that the link seemed to weaken.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

She glanced up at the clock on the wall. She should have enough time to rendezvous with Terry. Surely, he meant to help them, but what would she do if his intent was to betray them?

She walked to the door leading from her office to the hallway and paused. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and opened the door. She stepped into the hallway, noting the absence of anyone else and made her way to the elevator, her heels clicking in rhythm to the persistent march of time.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

As she headed to the rendezvous point, she passed Terry along the way. He didn't pause or even look her in the eye; he just kept whistling. It took her a minute to recognize the tune. She smiled. She and Terry had once discussed over coffee

their mutual admiration of the band Journey, especially when their lead singer had been Steve Perry. Terry was whistling Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'*. It had been one of her personal theme songs since the first time she'd heard it. As it always did, it resonated within her, and she took both peace and strength from it.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

Terry gave her a pleasant little nod—the same kind she imagined he'd give to anyone at NLGP—but he managed to catch her eye and glanced at the cameras that lined the ceilings at precise intervals. Surreptitiously, she observed them and saw that the red indicator lights were blinking. He flashed two fingers and then a zero. Twenty. Terry was telling her she had twenty minutes before the cameras came back online.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

Twenty minutes—not a lot of time. She'd need to move fast and quietly. Twenty minutes to get to Mason and get him out of this hell hole. She turned, shoving down her desire to run back to the elevators that would take her to the lower level. She knew the cameras weren't recording, but if she encountered someone or someone saw her, she didn't want to bring attention to herself.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

Each door she passed was an opportunity for someone to open it and catch her in the act. But in the act of what? How would they tell that she was planning to snatch someone from their lab and make a bid for freedom? The answer was, there was no way. But in this instance, reality and fear had little to do with one another.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

It wasn't that Emery knew at best their odds were fifty/fifty of pulling this off, but as bad as those odds were, if they stayed, the odds were one hundred percent that they would die... or worse.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*



She reached the elevator and realized it, too, was blinking red, which meant there would be no record of her using her security access to get where she needed to go. She entered the elevator car and pushed the button for Lower Level Three. The elevator was also voice activated, but she'd never felt comfortable using that. Kam had explained that was the reason they'd left the buttons. She called Emery's preference for using the buttons 'quaint.' Kam was a bitch.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

The elevator started to move and even though her actual destination was the first of the subterranean levels, she pushed the button for Lower Level Three where her office was located. It was a precaution in case somehow someone could tell where she was going. The ride seemed interminable.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

Once the doors opened, she raced to the end of the hall where the stairwell was located, opened the doors, and took the stairs two at a time. Reaching the landing outside Lower Level One, she cracked open the door, straining to listen. She wasn't sure, but it sounded as if a door was opening. What she was sure of was the sound of that gurney with the wonky wheel. She peeked out and her heart sank. Mason was strapped to the table and was being wheeled into the elevator.

She could feel the seconds and minutes ticking away. She needed to move. Faster! Faster!

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

"Lower Level Three," said one of the orderlies as the door closed.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

*Shit!* What the hell was she going to do? The window of opportunity was closing. Twenty minutes; she glanced at her watch and saw half of them gone. It truly was now or never. As she leaned out to confirm what she'd heard, her lab coat swung forward and quietly clanked against the door. She thanked whatever powers ruled the universe that no one had heard.

*Tick! Tick! Tick!*

She could feel him down the link. He was struggling against the sedation, clawing his way back to consciousness without alerting the two men wheeling the gurney towards what she suspected was a one-way trip to hell.



### ***Mason***

Mason had never felt so helpless in his life—and it wasn't a feeling he liked. He could feel Emery as soon as they reached the lowest level. She was close. He'd tried to block her from some of his emotions. She didn't need to know the level of danger he was in. He had to shield her as much as possible.

He didn't want to lose her. He would fight with everything he had, but if it came down to it, he needed to know she would survive. She would live on. His brother, his mate, and their friends would take care of her and see that she was happy.

The medications they'd given him swirled in his veins, leaving a burning sensation in their wake. It was important to note that it wasn't as bad as it had been before. Apparently, his cave lion didn't like being sedated.

They rolled him into a darkened room. The lights were on a sensor and came on automatically as they entered. He forced himself to lie still and portray a deeper level of sedation than he actually felt.

They slapped him awake as they none-too-gently removed the IVs and the feeding tube. He winced as the latter was removed. The two goons removed him from the gurney, half-carrying, half-dragging him to an iron wall, shackling his arms and legs so he was all but suspended and made to stand straight.

“Bet that makes that old hospital bed feel downright comfy, now, doesn't it?” cackled one of the goons as he handed the key to Kam Perkins.

Perkins walked to a pegboard behind a bank of computer desks with monitors and several laptops and hung the key among several others—so close and yet so far away. He was quite sure part of the torture she wanted to inflict was being able to see the literal key to his escape. Perkins might suspect that there was something between him and Emery, but she had no way of knowing the depth of Emery’s feelings, her courage, or the strength of her heart.

Perkins returned and patted his chest. “Don’t fret, lover, I’ll be back shortly. We just want to make sure the sedation has worn off completely. I feel my subjects reveal more in my testing if they can feel everything.”

Mason growled, and Perkins laughed—the sound like nails raking down a chalkboard. She spun on her Louboutins and left, her goons trailing behind her. In what seemed like an instant, Emery slipped into the room. Relief and anxiety flooded his system in equal measure.

“You need to leave. It’s too dangerous.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you. Did they leave a key?”

“No. They took it with them,” he lied. “You need to get out. You need to get that information to the Resistance.”

“Don’t be a pain in the ass. I’m not leaving without you.” The whole time she was talking, she was searching for the key. She spotted it on the pegboard and glanced back over her shoulder. “Liar.”

“Emery, listen to me.”

“I will. Just as soon as you have something worth listening to.”

*God, she is stubborn and brave and intelligent and beautiful, and I love her more than anything else in my life. She may deserve better than the man I was in my past, but I will spend the rest of my life becoming worthy of her.*

She snatched the key from the pegboard and returned to him, quickly inserting the key in the manacles around his wrists and ankles and unlocking them. When he reached for

the collar, she stayed his hand. She handed him a pair of sweats, which he pulled on. With what little strength he had, he dragged her into his arms and held on. It was the first time they had actual physical contact, and he could feel his cave lion reach out to hers.

“Now go. I’ll hold them off,” he said gently, pushing her away.

Emery rolled her eyes and glanced at her watch. “I don’t have time to argue with you. There’s an escape tunnel at the end of the hall. We have four minutes to get there and through that door before all the security systems come back online.” Grabbing his hand, she pulled him toward the door.

“You won’t leave me, will you?”

She stopped, turned, and looked at him. “Would you leave me?”

He nodded. “Right. Let’s go.”

Emery attached a leash to the collar around his neck. “If anyone looks up, all they’ll see is a scientist taking a test subject to another lab. There’s a tunnel at the far end of the hall that leads to a spot outside the complex, a dock on the harbor, and a place in an alley in town.”

Picking up a couple of tablets, she slipped one into her lab coat pocket and held the other in her right hand, grasping the leash in her left.

“Don’t get too used to this,” he teased.

She grinned, and he could feel her relief. Cracking open the door, she stuck her head out and then led him, walking swiftly and with purpose, toward the end of the hall, ducking under a small window in the door at the end of the hall.

“There’s nothing here,” he said as they ducked into the alcove.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” she said with a grin, grasping a lever built into the wall—a lever he hadn’t even noticed.

She twisted it, sliding a panel within the wall. Cold, damp, but fresh air assailed his nostrils. As Emery slipped inside,

they could hear shouting. Mason poked his head out.

“Find him! Find him now!” shouted Perkins. “Half of you take the stairwell; the other half head to the tunnel. Somehow that little bitch accessed the blueprints. There!” Perkins was pointing at him.

Emery grabbed the front of his sweatshirt and jerked him inside, sliding the panel shut, locking it from the inside. “We’ve got to go now.” She grabbed his hand and started down the tunnel, glancing at her watch. “Three-two-one.”

With the audible click of the lever mechanism latching shut and dim lights within the walls turned on; she grinned at him. He reached up and sprang the locking mechanism on the collar, opening it and tossing it to the ground. Taking her hand in his, he sprinted down the tunnel, Emery hot on his heels.

## CHAPTER 16



### EMERY

Emery had never felt more alive, jubilant, or terrified in her life. She ran hand-in-hand with Mason, trying to keep up with him. Her DNA seemed to have done him a world of good. She could feel his strength returning as they ran along the passageway.

“We should shift. We could make better time and cave lions are formidable opponents,” she said as they ran.

“Can’t. There’s iron rebar throughout the building.”

“But we aren’t in the building...”

She could feel him start to slow down. Before they stopped, a bullet whizzed by them grazing Mason’s arm.

“This way,” he said, pulling her down an offshoot of the tunnel she didn’t remember being on the map.

“I don’t know where this goes. I don’t think it was on the map.”

“Probably not. What you saw on the blueprints was probably the tunnel as they cut through the ground. They’ve probably expanded the tunnel system over the years.”

“We’re running blind,” she said, panic creeping into her voice.

“It’s all right, Emery,” he purred, sending soothing emotions down the link. “We’re together, and we’re going to get through this, but we’ve got to keep moving.”

Emery ran alongside him, trusting him to guide them as she tried to get her bearings to try and figure the best way out. The last thing she wanted to do was end up on the dock. It would be far too easy for them to be trapped there.

Mason wove them in and out of tunnels but seemed to be instinctively moving towards town.

“Do you know where we are?” she asked.

“Not really, but I’m trying to see if I can’t project my cave lion either ahead of us or better yet above ground to give us some sense of direction.”

He kept them moving, changing directions, never staying in any one tunnel too long and veering away from any sound of pursuit.

“Call him back,” she said urgently.

Mason was flushed, and his temperature was starting to rise—and not just in conjunction with the exertion he was expending running what amounted to a marathon after having spent weeks at the tender mercy of NLGP. Emery could tell trying to project himself was taking a heavy toll on him and was glad to feel his shifted-self reuniting with him.

Mason skidded to a halt, shook himself and then grinned. “This way,” he said, jerking her in a totally different direction that she felt would be doubling back.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

They ran faster than she thought possible through the dimly lit darkness. It felt as if they had run forever, and that they might never be able to stop. She squelched the desperation that was threatening to rise up and strangle her.

“Easy, Em. Just a little bit longer. We’re almost there.”

Something had changed for Mason; she could feel it. There was a confidence in the turns he took, and little-by-little any evidence of someone catching up to them faded away into nothing. The tunnel got smaller, but they kept running, Mason never seeming to take a wrong step as he made a sharp turn to

the left and they ran up an incline. The ground leveled off and they came to a dead end.

“Now what?” she asked, trying desperately to keep any hint of accusation out of her voice.

“Think, Emery,” he said, trying to catch his breath. “You looked at those plans. Any idea how we get out of the tunnel and into the alley?”

Her own heartbeat began to steady and the blood pounding through her system started to settle. As it did, she could hear the sounds of Reykjavik’s old town overhead. She closed her eyes, trying to envision the exit. Without opening them she turned away and reached for a simple pull-down lever that had been hidden in the stonework, turning to grin at him as she pulled it down, and overhead a piece of cobblestoned street slid back just enough to be able to slip a hand through.

Emery wanted to stop and take a moment to listen to try and see if there was danger. Mason grabbed the piece of alleyway and slid it back.

“Mason, wait. We don’t know if it’s safe.”

He hauled himself out and then leaned back in to lift her out of the tunnel before sliding the panel into place, hearing it latch shut.

“But it is.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I didn’t; but he did,” said Mason, pointing to the almost translucent image of a snow leopard standing just ahead. “He came for us. He must have sensed he had one more job to do.” Mason walked toward the great cat whose image was slowly fading. “I owe our lives to you, old friend. You have done far more than anyone could ever have asked. Go find a place by the fire. We will remember you always.”

Mason stretched out his hand and the last thing Emery saw of the creature was an almost invisible head rubbing against his master’s hand. She could hear it purring softly as it faded away into nothing.



Emery's eyes filled with tears. "I robbed him of his life."

Mason pulled her into his embrace. "He was dying with me. You did what you had to do to save me... and so did he. We will not dishonor his memory by regretting anything that had to be done."

She nodded, leaning her cheek into the hand that the snow leopard had last touched. Mason wiped away her tears with his thumb.

Looking to the end of the alley and recognizing where they were, she said, "I know where we are. My flat over the bakery isn't far."

"Lose the lab coat, and we'll make our way over there. You walk on the inside of the sidewalk and make sure I'm between you and the street."

Linking their hands together, they headed out of the alley, grateful for the streetlamps that helped to give the old town part of its charm, but more importantly gifted them with light. She could see Rolf's up ahead. It was dark, as it had closed for the day. She started to pick up her speed. Mason held her back, subtly shaking his head and leading her down a side street.

"But the bakery..." she started.

He stopped, pulling her into a covered doorway, pressing her against the door, and kissing her as two different couples walked past.

"Look inside the coffee shop and across the street at the little café. There are two pairs of men—one in each. One is watching the side of the bakery where I assume there are stairs up to your flat and the other one of each of the pairs is watching the sidewalk in front. We ducked in here before they saw us. The flat's not safe, and even if it was, going there would endanger the bakery's owners and its patrons."

"Then where do we go?" she asked, her heart sinking. All that evidence secreted in her flat and they wouldn't be able to get it to the people who needed it most.

He chuckled. "Harbor Light. We'll send out an SOS and find a place to hole up until the Resistance can get us out of

here.”

“What if they can’t?”

He grinned. “You don’t know Colby Reynolds, but more than that, you don’t know Deke Campbell or Hayden North. Trust me when I tell you, they will come.”

“But all the evidence is up in the flat...”

“And you can tell them where it’s hidden. At some point they’ll probably put together an op to retrieve it, but for now, we’ll give them all we saw, all we remember, and what’s on the tablets. They’re turned off, right?”

“Yes...”

“We won’t turn them on. NLGP might be able to wipe them remotely. We’ll give them to Colby’s tech people and let them deal with it. What about your personal laptop and tablet?”

She grinned, brightening. “My personal laptop and tablet are back in my loft. They’ll never figure out either of their passwords, but once we get with Colby’s people, I’ll give the passwords to them so they can download the laptop and then wipe it. I made hidden, password protected copies of everything I took from NLGP. We haven’t lost a thing.”

“Bright, brave, beautiful, and sexy. Jackpot.”

“I’m afraid all they’re going to find on my tablet is my prurient reading interests.”

“How prurient?” he leered.

“Very,” she teased. She sobered. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s just a scratch.”

Reaching up to feel his forehead and then his cheeks with the back of her hand. “Maybe, but you’re feverish and your color’s not good. We need to get you inside and off your feet so I can take a look at that scratch.”

“If I agree, will you wear a slutty nurse uniform?”

She didn't want to laugh. She really didn't, but she did, anyway. He was incredibly sexy, quite charming and all together irresistible.

As a noisy, happy crowd strolled by, Mason pulled her into the middle of them, and they passed by the NLGP goons who had been sent to stake out her place. They made their way to the Harbor Light, ensuring they hadn't picked up a tail.

## CHAPTER 17



### MASON

Mason had never been so glad to enter a pub surrounded by people and the sounds of those having good cheer and camaraderie. Eddie, the owner of the Harbor Light and the one who had first alerted the Resistance to the dangers of NLGP, caught his eye. Subtly shaking his head, Mason led Emery to the back of the pub, where the lights were dimmer and there were no customers.

“Thank god you both got out,” said Eddie, whispering and taking Emery by the elbow to steer them to the back where it was more private. “When I saw them move in and stake out the bakery, I was worried.”

Mason emitted a long, low growl. It was hard to say who was more shocked: Emery, Eddie or Mason himself.

“Apologies,” said Mason. “Apparently my cave lion is a little on the prehistoric side where our fated mate is concerned.”

Eddie chuckled. “I had no idea. My apologies as well. Let’s get you guys secure.”

He led them through a narrow hall and down a small, steep staircase in what was obviously chilled storage. Moving to the back wall, Eddie pressed a concealed button, and one of the coolers dropped back and slid behind the other. Both of the coolers involved gave the illusion of being much deeper. Eddie led them inside, pressed another button and the cooler slid back into place.

The room was surprisingly warm and had three walls made of rounded stone. It was an enormous room with an attached bath, small kitchen and fireplace. Eddie went to the fireplace and flipped a switch, turning on a gas fire.

“It keeps the place warm and cozy,” said Eddie. “The fireplace and the cooktop all join up with the kitchen’s venting system and are expelled with them. No one is going to be able to detect you’re down here. Cell coverage can be a little tricky, but I can get you one that’ll work and will trace back to no one.”

In front of the fire was a leather chesterfield couch, flanked by two richly upholstered wingback chairs. On the opposite side of the room was a large bed complete with what appeared to be a handmade quilt and then what he assumed was a goose-down duvet. There were no windows, but a well-designed lighting plan kept the gloom away. There was also a large writing desk and what looked to be an impressive array of electronics.

“Likewise, the system is hard wired into the pub’s system, and we have free wi-fi for folks so no one will notice if you need to use it.”

“It’s lovely Eddie. Thank you,” said Emery.

Eddie turned to Mason. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess you are Carson’s twin brother.”

Mason nodded. “I am. You know my brother?”

“Not as well as I would have liked. We were trying to figure out a way to make contact and bring him into the fold so-to-speak, but he bolted before we could do that. The scuttlebutt was that he got out, but then he was found.”

“Carson is safe and sound and working with the Resistance.” Mason extended his hand. “I’m Mason Payne, and I believe you’re acquainted with my mate.”

“Only in passing, but once I saw the stakeout teams, I figured she was the quarry. Terry speaks very highly of you, Emery, and sends his regards as does Steve Perry.”

Emery laughed and then explained to Mason, “Terry is a security guard at NLGP. From the beginning he let me know he could be of help. When he managed to take the security system offline, he let me know by whistling *Don't Stop Believin'* by Journey and signaled that I had twenty minutes. I think I aged five years for each of those minutes.”

“Nah. You don't look a day over ninety-five,” quipped Eddie. He looked at the blood on the sleeve of Mason's sweatshirt. There's a first-aid kit in the bathroom. If you like, I can call a doctor who's friendly to our cause.”

“It's not much more than a scratch,” Mason assured him.

“I'll let you know if we need a doctor,” said Emery, ignoring him.

“I'll let Colby know you're here and safe, but you should check in with him come morning. If anything goes wrong, I'll sound the alarm. When I leave, close and lock the entrance door behind me. The alarm will trigger a lockdown. Go behind the coolers. There's a small trap door. Go down into the tunnel beneath it. It runs about five miles but will bring you up outside of town in one of the old church cemeteries. Someone will be there to meet you. I'll have him whistle *Don't Stop Believin'*.”

Emery and Mason both grinned. “We can't thank you enough.”

“Think nothing of it. You're safe here. I'll let you know what's what in the morning. I stocked some basic supplies. Terry insisted I get you a pod coffeemaker.”

Emery laughed out loud. It was good to hear her laugh.

“If you need anything, press the middle button. It'll send a signal to me. I'll get to you as soon as I can.”

“Thank you again, Eddie. I am in your debt,” said Mason.

“We both are,” amended Emery.

Eddie headed back to the exit into the cellar and pulled the door behind him. Mason followed and locked it into place.

“As bolt holes go, this one is on the luxurious side,” Mason remarked.

“It is. Why don’t you look to see what we’ve got to eat. I’m starved but I want to get that wound looked at,” she said as she walked toward the bath.

“That’s not true. You just want to get my shirt off,” he called.

“You aren’t wrong,” she called back.

Mason chuckled and headed to the fridge. Opening it, he smiled wide. Inside was one of his favorite things from the bar menu—shepherd’s pie. “How do you feel about shepherd’s pie?”

“Love it,” she said, walking out with the first aid kit. “Set the temp for the oven and stick it in. By the time I have you cleaned up, it should be ready. We can curl up on the couch to eat.”

“I’d rather curl up in bed,” he said, allowing the rush of lust and arousal he was feeling to flow down the link.

“First-aid and food first. Then we can have sex.”

“Just what every super spy-shifter wants to hear: first-aid, food and fucking. The perfect ending to a less than perfect op.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Emery purred. “We got the information; we found each other; we thwarted the bad guys and it looks like we got away with it.”

“I like how you think, Doc,” he chuckled.

Mason turned on the oven and put the shepherd’s pie in to heat. Emery patted one of the bar stools and Mason sat down allowing her to draw the sweatshirt over his head. She reached for the first-aid kit and he stopped her.

“No way. If I have to go bare-chested, so do you.” Emery groaned and rolled her eyes. Mason sat back. “I’m waiting.”

She shook her head and began to do as he asked, removing her blouse and her bra so that she was standing clad in clothes

only covering her lower half.

“And to think I thought my visions of you were not going to prove to be accurate.” She started to step back, and he fisted her blonde hair. “They so lacked detail and pale in comparison to the real thing.” He drew her back to stand between his knees. “Any chance I can get you naked before we start?”

“I thought you wanted a slutty nurse uniform.”

He grinned. “I’m flexible; I can improvise.”

Laughing, she removed the rest of her clothes and stood before him in the way nature had intended her. She was nothing short of glorious. His cock throbbed against his fly. Her hand reached for the waistband of his jeans. He took it in his and raised it to his lips, bestowing a kiss on her fingers.

“It would be best if they stay on until we move to bed. I can’t speak to my ability to resist you if my cock is set free.”

“Only because I think you’ll be easier to handle while I get that wound tended, which is more than just a scratch, and get you fed,” she laughed and proceeded to clean his wound as all the while he palmed and cupped her breasts, gently tugging and playing with her nipples that seemed to draw themselves into the tightest peaks. “This is so not fair.”

“I’ll make you a deal: when we get back to Alaska and I know we are absolutely secure, you can tie me to the bed and have your way with me.”

“Ooh, now there’s something to look forward to.”

Mason laughed. Once she had declared him fit to move forward to the feeding stage, the shepherd’s pie was ready, and they heaped out some on one large plate. They moved to the couch where he pulled her into his lap, and she proceeded to see them both fed. It felt good just to hold her and breathe in her scent.

When they were finished, Mason began to kiss her as he stood with her in his arms and carried her to the bed. Once there, he pulled back the covers and laid her on the sheets and then crawled up onto the bed, positioning himself between her thighs with his mouth poised over her sex. He kissed her



swollen labia and nuzzled her clit, allowing his tongue to slip out and swirl all around it before giving it just the barest edge of his teeth. Emery gasped and her body arched up.

He could smell her arousal. She was ripe and ready for him; a succulent fruit that he planned to devour until he drove her into a frenzy. Then he would mount her and claim her. If he'd been a more prudent man, he would have waited until they were at Windsong, but neither he nor any cave lion he'd ever known had ever been accused of being prudent or patient.

Mason began to trace the line from her clit to her slit as she moaned and writhed. Good. She was as hungry for him as he was for her. He settled his mouth over the opening of her core and began to penetrate her with his tongue, rolling it up to spear her pussy before flattening it out to let it coat his tongue as he supped her honey. She tasted of wildflowers with just a hint of vanilla. He continued to feast as her hips began to undulate and she stiffened, crying out his name, her body shaking before it relaxed and she fell into his hands.

Mason purred to her as he moved off the bed, stripping out of his jeans. Lying beside her, he pulled her beneath him flipping her onto her belly before rolling between her thighs, grasping her hips and moving so that the broad head of his cock was poised at her opening. He tightened his hold, ensuring she would stay where he wanted her and then possessed her completely with a single hard thrust, joining them together. Emery cried out. Something in the way she called his name released something primal in him that had never been there before. He was dominant and possessive; his body called to hers, demanding that it respond in kind and it did.

Emery dug her hands into the bed clothes, twisting them so that she could anchor herself as he began to pound into her with a hard, steady rhythm. Again and again, he hammered her pussy, growling and groaning as he did so. The sounds he made were primal and feral and Emery seemed to respond in the same primitive manner, alternating between snarling and moaning. She tried to move with him, but he held her still.

This wasn't making love or even fucking, this was a dominant male claiming his mate.

She arched her back and yowled as her pussy spasmed along his cock as a powerful orgasm swept over her. Mason reared back enjoying the way her sheath clamped down on his shaft, wanting him to fill her with his seed. With each stroke, Mason drew back until only the very tip of his cock remained within her, only to drive back in deeper and more powerfully.

There was something about the way she cried out the second time that unleashed something raw and primeval. Her cries inflamed his lust, and he pounded her pussy with relentless intent. He could feel her body begin to tighten in anticipation of another climax. He wrapped one arm around her waist and used the other hand to brush away her hair, baring the nape of her neck. Mason roared with a primitive fury that made her tremble. He felt his fangs elongate and he grasped the nape of her neck, biting down with the power of his skull-crushing jaws. She tried to sink away from him, but he held her in place. Emery buried her face in the pillow, biting down to keep from screaming in surrendered pleasure and pain as he inflicted a claiming bite that was deep and would leave a permanent scar.

He held her tight—between the savage bite and his painful grip, she couldn't get away. This time as he pushed forward, he could feel the raised nubs all along his cock rising, scraping her inner walls. She moaned in abject pleasure, and he tightened his hold. As he drew back, the nubs lengthened and became stiffer, plowing furrows in her tender flesh as he thrust back in, replacing the pain with the sensual tickling of the nubs. Each time he dragged himself back, the nubs became barbs and Emery yowled into the pillow as his spikes drove her to the edge of ecstasy and beyond.

Mason finally released her neck, his hand replacing his teeth. He pressed down, forcing her upper body into the mattress so he could fuck her harder. His measured stroking gave way to frenzied thrusting as he pounded into her. Emery came again with devastating intensity. He leaned forward,

nipping at her ear and rumbling a sound which was part growl, part purr and all male cave lion.

He fucked her with a primitive zeal and fury he'd never known before. Instead of fighting or resisting his possession, Emery softened and responded to him, her pussy trembling and quivering as he stroked her over and over. Mason's feral claiming seemed to have lit a wildfire in her that he knew would keep them warm for the rest of their days.

At last, he drove deep, grinding his pelvis against her ass, forcing one last orgasm so that as he dragged himself back, the barbs dug in, anchoring her to him as he flooded her with his cum. He continued to empty himself inside her until at last he was done. Wrapping his arms around her, he tipped them onto their sides.

Mason had never felt like this before—neither physically nor emotionally. He was replete and sated in a way he had never been. If she had given him the strength of her cave lion, he had given her his peace and protection. Fused into one being, he purred soothingly to her until her breathing became deep and even and he knew she was asleep.

There was no way to know what was to come, but for now they were locked together in the aftermath of their coital bliss. And for now, that would have to be enough. Whatever the new day would bring, they would face it together.

## CHAPTER 18



### EMERY

Dawn broke, although the only way she knew that was by the smell of bacon wafting through the air and glancing at her Rolex that she vaguely remembered Mason removing from her wrist and placing on the nightstand beside her.

“That smells good,” she murmured as she rose up, letting the covers puddle into her lap, her naked chest with its stiffened nipples on full display. Before she could say something incredibly stupid, a movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention and she spied a beautiful curvaceous redhead.

She snatched the bedclothes, covering up her upper torso. “You might have warned me,” she hissed.

“Oh, don’t mind me. He threatened poor Eddie and I both with death if we disturbed you.”

Emery focused her eyes and realized her watch didn’t say six-forty, it said eight-thirty. “I can’t believe I slept that late.”

Dressed only in his jeans, his way too sexy body being displayed far more than she liked in front of another female, Mason brought her a plate with bacon, eggs and home fries. “Eat.”

She glanced up at him and the disarming way he smiled at her put everything into perspective. Emery didn’t know who the redhead was, but she held absolutely no interest for Mason. He purred silently down the link, soothing and reminding her that any lust he had was for her and her alone.

The redhead shook her tousled mane. "I'm Brie by the way. Mason gave me the IP address and password for your laptop. That sucker was a bitch to enter even when I had it written down." At some point during the night, Emery had written it on the bottom of Mason's foot, 'just in case.' "Our techs have downloaded all the data, wiped it clean and sent a localized electromagnetic pulse confined to your flat to dismantle anything else that may have been there." She glanced at her cell phone. "We're running late. I'd appreciate it if you could get dressed. I'd like us out of here as quickly as possible. We've got a plane waiting at an abandoned, private airfield. We'll fly under the radar to Halifax. From there, the accommodations will be a lot nicer. Colby Reynolds is sending his most comfortable plane complete with bedroom, conference room and chef. By the time you touch down at Windsong, you'll be well rested and fed. Although the guy upstairs does make a mean burger."

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Emery.

"I'm afraid not. Putting Colby and I in the same vicinity has a habit of going sideways; besides, you're not the only people I need to get on their way to safety. Get a move on." She stood up and headed for the exit but stopped and looked back. "Oh, and Mason, your brother wanted to let you know he's glad you're alive but plans to punch you in the nose for not using the link to let him know."

Mason chuckled. "He might find fighting with me to be even more difficult than he did in the past."

"Yeah," Brie said with a smile. "Cave lion versus snow leopard? My money is on the cave lion. Oh, and Deke Campbell laughed his ass off when he found out she turned you."

"I didn't bite him; I injected a solution containing my DNA into him."

Brie laughed. "I'm sure you did, but you have to know, no one will ever believe that. And if I know Campbell and North, they are going to give Mason there all kinds of shit over it."

Emery ate her food quickly and was dressed and ready to go in record time. Brie backed up an old Range Rover to the pub's loading dock, and hid them under blankets, tarps and smelly fish packed in ice. Emery doubted even the most sensitive nose would be able to detect their scent. They drove for more than an hour. Emery knew she should be afraid and uncomfortable, but she wasn't. She was snuggled up next to Mason, her back to his front, and that was all that mattered. Every so often he'd nuzzle the back of her neck or kiss one of the puncture marks she knew was there.

Once at the airport, they were spirited onto what looked like an old cargo plane, which proved to be far more sophisticated. Looks really could deceive. It wasn't the most comfortable, but the plane rolled down the runway and lifted off in an effortless, but short climb. They flew what seemed to be a haphazard course with Emery thinking several times the pilot was going to run into something. Harrowing as it was, she guessed they were well under the radar.

When they turned and headed southwest, Emery finally felt as if she could breathe. They landed at an airport outside of Halifax, just as the sun was going down. They moved from the cargo plane to the sumptuous corporate jet.

The captain stood at the top of the stairway, shaking their hands and introducing them to the chef before admonishing everyone to take their seats and buckle up. The plane and its passengers were made ready and the jet raced down the runway, lifting off with a smooth trajectory into the night sky.

"Now that we are airborne, I can offer you a steak or wild caught Alaskan salmon," said the chef.

"If you like fish at all," said Mason, "take the salmon."

She grinned at her mate, and then turned to the chef. "Salmon it is."

"If I might suggest adding the rosemary parmesan potatoes and the garlic green beans," offered the chef.

Mason nodded his head, and Emery said, "Make it two."

It didn't take long for the little man in the chef's coat to return bearing two beautiful plates of food. When he'd left them alone and they'd each had a chance to eat, Mason said, "Beats a bag of stale roasted peanuts."

Emery laughed. "It does indeed, and you were right, this salmon is divine."

After they'd eaten and thanked the chef, the pilot and the flight attendant, they retreated to the bedroom and were surprised to find a king-size bed with a soft, but firm mattress. Mason had been the perfect gentleman from the time they left the Harbor Light until now and Emery was beginning to wonder if he was regretting what she'd done to him.

"I'm not sure if I should apologize," she started.

"For what?" he asked, seeming to be genuinely surprised.

"For turning you without your consent..."

Mason fisted her hair and hauled her into his embrace. Feeling her conflicting emotions flowing down the bonding link to him, he chuckled. "You have nothing to apologize for. You did nothing wrong, but just so we're clear..."

He wasted no time stripping her naked, bending her over, placing her hands on the footboard and then stepping behind her, kicking her feet apart and taking his place before unfastening his jeans. She glanced back over her shoulder to see him push them down over his strong haunches, freeing his long, thick, hard cock. Stepping closer, he angled his cock and placed it against the opening of her sex. Grasping her hips, he breached her, impaling her on his staff.

Emery cried out as a climax, swift and sure, washed over her with a force and passion that took her breath away. She'd never come before with no foreplay and just from the act of penetration, but she had a feeling that while it might have been the first time, it wouldn't be the last.

Mason groaned. "I have been wanting to do this since before you woke up. God, when I sink into you, it's like coming home. There is nothing and nobody that means more

to me than you. You are my savior and my fated mate and no cave lion before or since will know what it is to call you that.”

He tightened his grip on her hips and began to thrust in and out with a ferocity and fervor that startled and enthralled her. He tightened his hold, and the thrusting gave way to pounding as his cock grazed her inner walls, forcing them to accept and surrender to his dominance. Over and over he hammered her pussy as another orgasm crashed around her, devastating her with its strength. His rough fucking was frenzied with a need that was primal in its fury.

Emery tried to rise, but Mason grasped the nape of her neck and pressed down, pinning her in place. She struggled, feeling as though she had to do so, but it accomplished nothing. There was no escaping his mesmerizing hold or control. She felt her body ascending to new heights as he pleased her, purring at her and making everything right in the world. Her system was suffused with peace as she came and he gave a final brutal thrust, holding himself deep inside as he emptied himself into her.

When he was done, Mason picked her up, deposited her on the side of the bed closest to the wall, removed his clothes and crawled in beside her.

“Any questions?” he asked.

“No,” she laughed. “I guess that about covers it.”

“Good. Let’s get some sleep before I ravage you again. I have to tell you, this cave lion thing has got a lot going for it.”

The flight took almost twenty-four hours to get from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Windsong on Kodiak Island, Alaska, including the break for the pilot to catch some sleep and to take on fuel and supplies. They landed in the cold, gray dawn at Windsong, Colby Reynolds’ magnificent estate outside of Mystic River.

“Welcome,” said the lynx-shifter, standing in the driving compartment of an open sleigh. “We can take you down to the house in one of the SUVs, but I thought I’d offer you a more romantic option.”



“Can we take the sleigh?” Emery asked, looking up at Mason.

“If it pleases you,” he rumbled.

“Excellent,” said Colby. Once Mason had helped her into the sleigh, Reynolds passed them a warm blanket to spread over their laps and clucked to the team of two horses. “Welcome home. Mason, your brother is most anxious to see you. He even left his beloved lab down in Otter Cove to wait for you here.”

“He and Amelia are fine?” Mason asked.

“Once they knew you were alive and that we had you out of that hellhole, they quit worrying so much.”

“Does my brother know?”

“That your mate turned you and you are now a cave lion? Yes, and he couldn’t care less. Deke, however, is delighted and is anxious to speak with Emery as he feels there may be a familial connection. He has also indicated he thinks two cave lions versus a hellhound might be entertaining.”

Mason laughed. “Deke would. I worried he would never settle down, but his Annie seems to suit him almost as well as my Emery does me.”

“You know what they say about rogues: when they meet the one woman with whom they share a destiny, they make the best mates. I understand you met mine.”

“Who?” asked Emery.

“Brie,” supplied Mason. “Problem is Brie doesn’t agree with him.”

“Oh, she does,” explained Colby. “She’s just being difficult and seems to think there’s some sort of conflict of interest what with her being the head of the Shadow Sisters.”

“Well isn’t there?” asked Emery. “The stories I’ve heard are that the Shadow Sisters help female shifters forced to live lives they didn’t choose for themselves.”

“That is one of the things on which they focus. But they have also become an integral part of the Resistance, and if Brie would agree to take her place at my side, she could accomplish so much more.”

Emery settled next to Mason as Colby drove them from the airstrip down to the welcoming mansion on the sea cliff. They were welcomed by many from Colby’s cloader.

“Mason! Emery!” called Carson as he ran down the stairs.

The brothers embraced. “I understand you’ve met my fated mate.”

Carson burst out laughing. “When Colby told me, all of the weird stuff that I couldn’t seem to resolve between Emery and I suddenly became crystal clear. That must have been so confusing and annoying for you. Let me say as dense as you thought I was, big brother here is even more so.”

“Let’s get you two into the house and get you fed,” said Colby. “I understand we have a group of scientists stranded in Reykjavik we need to go rescue.”

“Not to mention a lab to blow up,” said Mason.

Mason tucked Emery’s hand through his arm. “Colby said something about feeding us.”

“I did indeed,” said their host, ushering them into the massive and ornate dining room.

Over the next several hours they ate, withdrew to Colby’s study and devised a bold and daring plan to rescue those at NLGP who needed rescuing and destroy the complex as well as its hideous experiments and computer data.

The first domino in bringing down the Shadow League was about to fall.

## CHAPTER 19



MASON

*N*orthern Lights Genome Project  
*Reykjavik, Iceland*  
*Three Days Later*

It shouldn't have surprised him that Colby had a small submarine, but it had. He'd never thought of himself as claustrophobic, but it had taken everything he had possessed to climb down the ladder into the bowels of an iron tube in Kulusuk, Greenland. Hearing the hatch being secured and feeling the sub start to pull away from the dock out into the Denmark Strait had caused him to pause. But hearing the sub's commander give the order to dive, feeling the nose of the sub begin to angle down and the realization that they were headed under the water had almost unnerved him.

Deke placed his hand on Mason's shoulder. "They'll be fine, as will those we're going after. You? I'm not so sure about that. I can't believe you've never been on a sub."

"Never needed to be, and frankly never wanted to be."

"You'll get used to it. About the sixth or seventh time, you quit feeling like you're going to puke at any minute. And after the twelfth or thirteenth, you don't much think about it unless you hear the damn thing groaning from the strain of the water pressure threatening to rip it apart and send you to the bottom of the ocean."

"Not helping," said Mason.

“Not trying to,” chuckled Deke. “Seriously, I can’t stand these damn things, but it’s the best way we have to sneak into NLGP’s complex. There’s an entrance into the tunnel system close to the dock. If we time it right, the sub will be able to put us out on the dock and Brie will be waiting to take us in. She and Eddie will focus on getting people out while we check for stragglers, fight with the bad guys and plant the explosives.”

“Shouldn’t we be a little concerned about someone in Reykjavik noticing the explosion or that there’s no longer a large complex there?”

“That’s the beauty of it. NLGP and its personnel, for the most part, have never been a real part of the city. Very few employees lived in Reykjavik. Most lived in company-provided housing on the property.”

“But what about the complex itself? Surely someone’s going to notice that it’s been replaced by a big black scorch mark.”

“There won’t be a ‘big black scorch mark.’ When somebody flies over or if they catch sight of it from some other vantage point, they’ll still see the building. They’re going to implode the building—in other words, the explosives will destroy the interior, but leave the walls standing. Oh, at some point, I’m sure it’ll start to tumble in on itself, but that’ll be years from now.”

“What’s to stop the League from coming back and re-building?” asked Mason, who probably should have been there for the whole debrief but was more concerned with ensuring Emery was cared for.

“When the dust has settled, Brie and Eddie will come back in with a team to put monitors in place. If someone comes back, for any reason, we’ll know and will disabuse them of the notion that re-establishing something there is a good idea.”

Mason shook his head. “Planning and executing an op when I didn’t have a mate was a whole lot easier.”

Deke chuckled and clapped him on the back. “Tell me about it. I know everyone thinks their mate is the worst kind to

leave behind, but female cave lions are the worst.”

That statement and the obvious love Deke had for his Annie made him laugh and started to loosen the twist in his gut. “Yeah. Emery was none too pleased with being left behind.”

“If all she was fell into the ‘none too pleased’ category, count yourself lucky. Annie was fit to be tied, which I had to threaten to do. By the way, that only works if they know you’ll do it, but be warned, turning them loose can be painful.”

Mason laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The rest of the trip to Iceland was relatively smooth sailing, except for every time the submarine groaned, he could hear Deke’s comment about being ripped apart and plummeting to the bottom of the ocean. And each and every time he looked at Deke, the cave lion was grinning. There were times he really hated Deke.



“Shoot her,” Mason said to Deke as they spotted Kam Perkins at the end of the hallway. Mason would have done it himself if he hadn’t been in the midst of swapping out the magazine in his gun.

“She’s unarmed,” growled Deke.

“I don’t care. Kill her.”

When Deke hesitated and by the time Mason slammed the clip with fresh bullets back into his gun and brought it to bear on the woman who had helped to perpetrate so much horror on so many others, she’d had a chance to flee. *Damn it!* He’d had the evil bitch in sight just as he’d run out of ammunition. He might have missed that opportunity, but Mason had vowed that he would not leave Iceland until he knew for certain that Perkins had taken her last breath.

With no time to regret what had happened, Mason followed Deke down the tunnel, the adrenaline making his heart thump and his senses hyper-alert. With the exception of

missing the opportunity to kill Perkins, the op had gone smoothly. The sub had docked in the dead of the night, allowing the small strike team to land and make their way to the tunnel leading them into the complex. The sub had pulled away from the dock and then silently submerged beneath the waves until there was nothing left to indicate the still waters of the NLGP harbor had ever been breached.

“Deke, good to see you,” Brie said to them as they made their way inside. “Let me bring you up to date. Colby’s had people in place here at NLGP for years. We sent them to get NLGP’s people that live here on the property to safety. The plan is to leave monitors in place, but to leave the building standing. Eddie’s been working through those who lived off campus to move them out. All that we’ve got left in the building are those on the security team, which Terry ensured were all loyal to the Resistance...”

“How did you do that in such a short amount of time?” asked Mason.

Brie grinned, the bright white of her feral smile showing in the darkness. “Wasn’t hard. We showed copies of some of the info Emery managed to smuggle out to the guys on the security team. That brought them on board *tout suite*, and they persuaded the other employees that what we were doing was the right thing. I don’t know if you know, but Emery was very popular with the entire security team. Something about fresh coffee and pastries.”

Mason chuckled and said to Deke, who looked perplexed, “Emery had a Keurig she kept in her office. She welcomed anyone, especially the security team, to feel free to use it. And on Monday mornings, she brought in pastries from the best bakery in town.”

Deke shook his head. “You never know what’s going to make an op go more smoothly than you’d hoped.”

Brie nodded. “With Terry’s help we were able to pretty much get anyone worth saving out. I want to make a final sweep just to make sure. Terry is going to bring down a couple

of guys to go with each of your smaller teams. That way you'll know who the bad guys are."

"Didn't you arrange for them to wear black cowboy hats?" quipped Mason. "I find it so much easier when they do that."

"Nah," rejoined Brie. "Cowboy hats look so out-of-place in Reykjavik."

"If you two are done," said Deke in a low tone, "can we get this party started?"

The cave lion was not known for his sense of humor.

They'd done almost everything they'd come to do—those employees not actively involved in the atrocities perpetrated by NLGP had been moved to safety and were being given back their lives. The team had only encountered minimal resistance to their invasion. The rest of the team were now planting explosive devices in specific spots to ensure that everything within the walls of the NLGP complex—including their information systems as well as any and all evidence of what had been done there—would be destroyed.

It had been the first domino to fall in the final destruction of NLGP. There would be more battles to follow, but it was a damn fine start.

In the space of a moment, Kam Perkins and the two remaining men still loyal to her had time to turn and flee and they did so.

Deke put his hand on Mason's shoulder. "They've got nowhere to run. Brie has been combing and mapping these tunnels for weeks. Where they're heading no longer has an exit. Don't worry, we'll get her."

"I want her dead," said Mason, quietly. "Emery made me promise to see that she paid for what she's done—not so much for what she did to me, but for what she did to so many others. Colby told me what they'd done was so far beyond his worst nightmares. How could he let Brie stay here?"

"You don't know Brie, do you? Trust me, it isn't a question of what Colby will allow, it's more what he can keep Brie from doing. Did you know she's the leader of the Shadow

Sisters? The females in her line have served as alphas of the wayward band of females since their inception thousands of years ago. Legend has it that they were inspired by the dragon queens during the Age of Dragons and the creation of the Phantom Fire.”

“And you would know that. You were there pulling their chariots, weren’t you?” teased Mason.

“Asshole,” replied Deke as he tapped the comm unit in his ear. “We’re in pursuit of Perkins and the last of her goons.”

“Abort,” came Colby’s harsh command from Alaska over the comm system. “There is no escape for them down that passageway. The explosives are planted and are on timing pieces. Deke, get your people out of there.” Colby’s voice betrayed his tension and exhaustion. “I repeat. Abort. All Resistance personnel retreat to the rendezvous point. Eddie and Brie’s team report their part of Operation Killjoy has been accomplished with no loss of life on our part and only minimal injuries.”

Mason felt some satisfaction in knowing that so far loss of life had been confined just to the members of the Shadow League and those to whom they gave orders and from whom they extracted allegiance. Mason struggled with the idea of not finishing Perkins off himself. He had to admit he would have liked seeing the life drain from her eyes as she crumpled to the ground knowing he was the one who had taken it from her.

As if he could hear Mason’s thoughts, Colby continued. “We have cameras in place to ensure we see the final end to NLGP. You’ll be able to see her die.”

He turned with Deke and began to run back to the rendezvous point. “It’s like he knows what I’m thinking,” said Mason.

“That’s because I do,” cackled Colby over the comm system. “Now, get a move on.”

They could hear intermittent gunfire as they ran. Apparently, Colby’s assertion that it was all over but the shouting was correct in that the sound of shooting merely



sprinkled the air and didn't fill the tunnels as it had when the battle had been at its zenith. As they rounded the last corner that would lead them back out into the soft gray light of dawn, explosions—or more precisely implosions—began to sound and the earth shook beneath their feet.

“Deke? Mason? You guys are the last ones in. Move it,” growled Colby from the other side of the globe.

“Coming, Mother,” quipped Deke as a whoosh of released energy seemed to drive them from the NLGP complex and escape tunnels.

It was as if a giant hand gave them a hard shove to propel them through the last few feet of the tunnel and then out into the waiting arms of the rest of the team who gathered them up and got them to safety. Turning back, they could hear the muffled explosions, could see the mouth of the tunnel belching smoke and debris, could feel the ground beneath them shuddering in response. And then there was silence—sweet, blessed silence as NLGP's reign of terror was ended with a bang and then a whimper.

## CHAPTER 20



EMERY

### *W*indsong Manor *Mystic River, Alaska*

“Why haven’t we heard from them?” Emery demanded as she paced back and forth in Colby’s office, wringing her hands. How the hell was Carson sitting so calmly with Amelia on the loveseat in the same room? Didn’t they know the kind of danger Mason was in?

“The op is running smoothly,” assured Colby in a calm and measured tone. “There isn’t one member of that team that doesn’t have extensive black ops training and experience. There isn’t one of them that doesn’t know more ways to kill you than you know how to die. They’re making good time. In fact, they are ahead of schedule.”

“Is that a good thing?” fretted Emery. “Shouldn’t the goal be to be on schedule, not in front of or behind it?”

Emery didn’t like knowing Mason was halfway across the world where she couldn’t be with him. At the risk of not wanting to be overly dramatic, she tried to keep herself from thinking that if he went down, she wanted to be at his side. This realm no longer held purpose for her if he wasn’t in it.

Colby paused, laying his finger against the earpiece. “No. In this case, ahead of schedule means we’ve gotten the innocents out of the line of fire, the bad guys are either dead or

about to be dead, and our people are pulling out so they aren't trapped, or worse, when we blow the place."

"If they weren't, wouldn't you just delay igniting the explosive devices?" she asked.

"They're on timers," explained Carson.

Emery swung around to face Carson. "Timers? Timers that are running? Timers that are set to go off even if our people aren't safe?" She turned back to Colby. "Tell me he got that part wrong."

"You told me you wanted the unvarnished truth. First, I don't know that I'm capable of telling anyone the unvarnished truth, including myself. And second, you can either have the truth or you can have me tell you they won't blow until everyone is clear." He held up his hand. "It has to be that way to ensure we destroy that complex. The charges are rigged to blow in a specific order which will cause a cascade of failures in the infrastructure."

Inside her cave lion roared. "If he doesn't make it," she threatened quietly, "neither will you."

"You have a sweet face for someone so bloodthirsty," said Carson.

"I'm a cave lion. It's part of the DNA; deal with it," she snapped at him.

Colby turned the monitor so they could see what was happening in Reykjavik. It showed the exit out of the tunnel system onto a rocky shore. Emery was certain it was the one that was in the cliffs surrounding NLGP's private harbor and dock. She saw Deke and Mason stumbling out of the opening, only to be gathered up by those already there, just before the tunnel opening belched what looked to be fire and brimstone—well, maybe not fire, but she was sure brimstone was involved.

She didn't breathe a sigh of relief until the smoke and dust had cleared and she could see both Deke and Mason standing with the unit. Quickly, Emery counted the members of the team. If the number was right, she didn't have to worry about

who was missing. The number was right—six men had gone in; six men had returned and were pulling a small Zodiac from its hiding place and into the water. They would use it to rendezvous back with the submarine, which would return them to Kulusuk where Colby's plane would be waiting to bring them home safe and sound.

Emery collapsed into one of the chairs at Colby's desk. "Thank God. Please tell me it gets easier to be the one doing the waiting."

"Again, you leave me with telling you the truth or telling you what you want to hear."

She looked up. "Have I mentioned I hate you?"

He looked down at his watch. "Not in the last twenty minutes or so."

In spite of herself, she laughed. The lynx-shifter was hard not to like or trust. It amazed her that so many people had failed to see the man that had lain behind the façade.

Colby tapped the comm unit. "Will do, but don't get all mushy," he said with a smile. He looked directly at Emery. "Someone wants to talk to you."

She looked up and saw Mason's handsome face on the monitor. It had black smudges of substances she was sure she didn't want to know about as well as general dirt. He looked exhausted but happy with the outcome.

"I'm okay, babe. So is everyone else. I have something I want you to see. I haven't watched it yet, but Deke has and assured me we'd both want to witness it. This took place only a few minutes ago."

"Oh I like that," said Carson. "We've been together since before we were born and she's the one you're worried about."

"That's right, baby brother, you are a snow leopard; I am a cave lion. Therefore, your kind is beneath me and no longer warrants my concern."

Carson groaned and rolled his eyes. "Is that going to be your new excuse for everything?"

“Yes; I think so. It seems to be a good general excuse I can adapt to any situation.”

Carson turned serious. “I’m glad you and your team made it out alive.”

“Me too, baby brother, me too.”

Mason’s image faded and was replaced by one that showed the dark, dim interior of one of the tunnels. Perkins and two of her goons had entered what looked like a hub for intersections of the tunnels. They were all sealed shut—rock and debris had fallen in and were wedged inside each of the exits to safety.

On the audio, Emery could hear a deep thudding coming from the same tunnel they must have used to reach the hub.

*“I don’t want to die. Find a way out,” said Kam Perkins, whose voice was tinged with fear.*

*“There is no way,” said one of the goons, who seemed to have given up the notion of surviving the Resistance assault on the NLGP compound.*

*“There has to be,” said Kam, her voice now edged with fear and panic.*

*“There isn’t. The exits are sealed. They are imploding and the thudding you hear is the collapse of the tunnel leading in here. We only have moments before we die. I suggest you make whatever peace you can with whatever demon spat you out of hell. None of us is making it out alive.”*

*“I can’t die. They promised me I would become one of them—turned into an apex predator.”*

*The thudding got louder. Emery noticed the other goon was already lying on the floor, twitching in his death throes. The one who’d been speaking to Kam bit down on something and foam started to come out of the corner of his mouth as his knees buckled and he landed on them.*

*Kam rushed to him, prying open his jaws. “What did you take? What’s happening?”*

*“Suicide pill. I’ll be gone before this whole thing collapses in on you. If you’re lucky it will kill you instantly, if not, you’ll*

*be buried alive and die a slow, torturous death.”*

*“No!” Kam howled. “I don’t want to die! They didn’t give me anything like that pill.”*

*The goon looked up at her; the veil of civility left his eyes as he smiled. “Sucks to be you.”*

*Kam screeched as he keeled over, and the thudding sound became a sound of thunder as smoke and debris began to be expelled into the small cavern into which they’d run—pieces of it making random strikes on Kam’s body as she tried to protect herself from them.*

*“No! I don’t want to die!”*

*Over and over, she wailed. The walls of the last remaining cavity of NLGP’s tunnel system began to crumble and the ceiling began to lose its structure and cohesion. The last anyone ever saw of Dr. Kam Perkins was her screaming and raising her arms over her head in a futile act of trying to avoid her end. She was not successful.*

“Does it make me a bad person to think she got no more than she deserved?” asked Emery to no one in particular.

“She got what she deserved,” said Mason before holding up the Keurig from her office. “One of the guys snagged it. He thought you might like it back.”

Kam laughed. “No. But if you could see that it got to Terry, I’d be appreciative.”

“Really?” he leered. “Just how appreciative might that be?”

“Appreciative enough to be waiting for you in that slutty nurse costume you seem so interested in.”

“And we’re done here,” said Colby, turning the monitor back. “You and your buddies get your asses back here. We’ll have a party waiting.”

“That’s fine,” said Mason from Reykjavik. “Do me a favor.”

“If it’s within my power.”

“Make sure she has a dress, there’s a preacher waiting and I have a really big selection of diamond rings to choose from.”

Emery gasped and Colby laughed. “Will do. See you soon.”

“Doesn’t he think he ought to check with me about that?” asked Emery, recovering.

“No,” said Carson with a grin. “To quote him, he’s a cave lion, deal with it.”

And she did and they lived happily ever after—not without a few hiccups and a lot of battles, but in the end, they were together and that was all that mattered.

## EPILOGUE



*C*ullen

*Kenai Gentlemen's Club*

*Kenai, Alaska*

Cullen Manchester, the reigning Alpha of the Ghost Moon Pack, was indulging an itch he'd needed scratching for far too long. But being alpha meant being careful about who you had scratch that itch, and the she-wolves in his pack were—as far as he was concerned—off limits. The city of Kodiak was closer to Otter Cove and the Aleutian Range than Kenai, but he liked the vibe of Kenai better. Besides, Kodiak didn't have a gentlemen's club where he could indulge his more prurient interests. True, he couldn't bite any of the females who serviced him or drive his knot up into them, but for the most part the girls who worked in the club were accommodating.

He raised a bottle of Alaskan Smoked Porter to his lips and drank deeply. The dark, robust body and prominent smoky flavor of the limited-edition beer was a particular favorite of his. It was produced in limited annual vintages and the club kept enough on hand to accommodate its members. Some likened it to fine wine as it aged in each bottle. Cullen liked it for its pitch-black color. There were those who said it matched the color of his heart.

Maybe it did.



But after piloting a long flight in his Cirrus SF50 Vision Jet, what he needed more than anything was a cold beer, a good cigar, and the release only a female with a talented mouth or tight pussy could provide. As he wanted to sip his brew and enjoy his limited-edition cigar, he'd opted for a blowjob instead of good fuck. The beer he could get back at his home nestled in the Aleutian Range, but neither the cigar nor the female was. He had to come to the club to indulge in those two.

Cullen had longish blonde hair and pale golden eyes. He was an investment analyst by trade—one of the most sought after and highly paid—but no one would even guess it if they passed him on the street. He rarely left his home, Ghost Moon Manor, and never ventured to the Lower 48. He didn't own a business suit and could most often be found in button-fly jeans and boots with a hoodie, sweater or flannel shirt. He had a mustache and goatee, with a kind of permanent five o'clock stubble.

For Cullen the best distraction from the burden of being alpha and ensuring his pack did not get drawn into the Resistance was to kick back, settle his tall, muscular frame into one of the club chairs in front of the fire, and let a submissive woman enjoy herself taking care of his needs. It was a mutual exchange, but not for money. He got the release he needed, and she found pleasure and satisfaction in servicing him.

She was pretty enough and licked his cock in long swipes, swirling her tongue around the broad head of his staff before enveloping it with her mouth. Cullen groaned. She was good and he placed his hand on the back of her head.

“Deeper,” he rumbled, liking how he could scent an uptick in her arousal.

Taking a deep breath, she sucked his hard length down. Cullen didn't know who'd taught her to suck cock, but she had obviously applied herself to learning, and whoever it was had done a damn fine job. He closed his eyes and let her go to town on him, running her tongue down the sensitive underside of his cock. He fisted her hair, deepening the connection

between them and directing her to give him the rhythm and pace he desired. She moaned, sending the vibrations all along his length, and he could feel his cock swelling.

As the pressure for release began to increase, he stilled her head, watching his cock as it disappeared in and out of her mouth as he used it for his pleasure. He pressed deep, working his way down to the soft, velvety place at the back of her throat. As he did, she swallowed and he began pouring his cum into her belly. Heaven, or as damn close as he was likely to get.

When he finished, he leaned back, enjoying the sensation as she licked him clean before placing his cock back in his jeans and buttoning them up.

“That was lovely,” he said.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it; I know I did,” she said, a blush staining her cheeks.

That was the thing about human females: so many of them didn’t indulge their deeply sensual nature and need for someone to give them direction to follow their inclination to submit and serve a dominant male. And while no one would guess he worked in international finance, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Cullen was an alpha male.



## ***Salem***

***Federal Bureau of Investigation***

***Seattle, Washington***

Salem Hubbard sat outside the office of her FBI supervisor, waiting for the ax to fall. He’d warned her time and time again about liaising and sharing information with the local cops. Salem thought the whole ‘turf war’ and posturing between feds and locals was stupid and unproductive. Besides, it wasn’t like she’d given Dani Morris classified information. Dani was

a childhood friend and they'd stayed in touch over the years. When Dani had called looking for background info on a suspect, Salem had given it to her.

Word around the office was her boss was looking to get rid of her. He didn't like female agents in general and Salem in particular. She couldn't blame him. Salem refused to play his bullshit games or put up with his chauvinistic attitude. She wasn't worried. Dani had already talked with her boss at Seattle PD and there was a job waiting for Salem if she needed it.

"Hubbard!" her supervisor shouted through the door, making his secretary wince. "Get your ass in here."

Slowly, Salem stood, shaking her head and letting her body come back online after sitting for more than an hour waiting. "I see he's in a cheerful mood," she said as she walked by the secretary and opened the door to his office.

"You've really done it this time," the short, paunchy, balding bureaucrat said to her. He didn't look sorry at all. In fact, he looked almost gleeful. Looking at the man he'd become, she wondered if he'd ever been a field agent.

"I'm sure I have—at least as far as you and your cronies are concerned. But I did what I thought was best..."

"Without going through the proper channels and getting permission."

"And if I'd asked you?"

"I would have considered your request and given you my answer."

Salem snorted. "You wouldn't have read past who had made the request before you wadded it into a ball and tried to lob it into your trash can. Dani was investigating a string of murders and needed some unclassified—let me say that again, unclassified—information. It's not like she's a reporter or just some person off the street. She's a decorated detective."

"Well, your buddy and the Seattle PD have lost their insider with the Bureau." His grin grew broader, and she could almost imagine him rubbing his hands together with glee.

“Effective immediately, you’re being transferred to the Anchorage office.”

“Anchorage? As in Alaska?”

“Yep. Pack your long johns and parka. The Bureau will help you with your move. You are relieved of your duties in this office immediately.”

Salem could never have imagined a transfer as the outcome of this confrontation. Termination? Yes. Alaska? Oh, hell to the no.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



*I* hope you enjoyed reading Feral Mate (Otter Cove Shifters)! The next book in the series is Mystic Mate.

## BONUS SCENE



*I* have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Mason and Emery as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

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## ABOUT DELTA JAMES

**Other books by Delta James:** <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my Patreon supporters.

I couldn't do this without you!

Lori

Carol Chase

D F

Ellen

Tamara Crooks

Suzy Sawkins

Linda Kniffen-Wager

Karen Somerville