

TRACY
COOPER-POSEY



KISS *Across* THE
UNIVERSE



Kiss Across The Universe

BOOK 11 • KISS ACROSS TIME



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Cooper-Posey is the author of the popular Scandalous Scions historical romance series, among others. She writes romantic suspense, historical, paranormal and science fiction romance. She has published over 150 titles since 1999, been nominated for five CAPAs including Favourite Author, and won the Emma Darcy Award.

She turned to indie publishing in 2011. Her indie titles have been nominated four times for Book Of The Year. Tracy won the award in 2012, and a SFR Galaxy Award in 2016 for “Most Intriguing Philosophical/Social Science Questions in Galaxybuilding” She has been a national magazine editor and for a decade she taught romance writing at MacEwan University.

She is addicted to Irish Breakfast tea and chocolate, sometimes taken together. In her spare time she enjoys history, Sherlock Holmes, science fiction and ignoring her treadmill. An Australian Canadian, she lives in Edmonton, Canada with her husband, a former professional wrestler, where she moved in 1996 after meeting him on-line.

ABOUT *KISS ACROSS THE*
UNIVERSE

A new, dark and ruthless enemy emerges to vex the time travelers...

Alannah's family has always lurched from crisis to crisis, every time their secret life as time travelers and vampires clashes with the normal, human world. But Alannah has managed to stay unnoticed, living her uneventful and very human life to the hilt. Trouble doesn't visit her for she has no extraordinary time traveling talents the way her siblings do. She is utterly average.

Kit McDonald thinks otherwise. He has been drawn to Alannah from the moment he met her, but the woman seems to barely recognize him. Given her unusual and highly interesting family, he can understand that. He's just a park warden, with a checkered history and a remote and disinterested family of his own.

But when Alannah is confronted by a deadly, ruthless new enemy, it is Kit who steps in to help. As neither a time traveler, nor a vampire, his help is unique and oddly effective and the two find themselves on the run in the Canadian wilderness,

with only each other for company....

This book is part of the Kiss Across Time paranormal time travel series:

- 1.0: Kiss Across Time*
- 2.0: Kiss Across Swords*
- 2.5: Time Kissed Moments**
- 3.0: Kiss Across Chains*
- 3.5: Kiss Across Time Box One*
- 4.0: Kiss Across Deserts*
- 5.0: Kiss Across Kingdoms*
- 5.1: Time And Tyra Again**
- 6.0: Kiss Across Seas*
- 6.5: Kiss Across Time Box Two*
- 7.0: Kiss Across Worlds*
- 7.1: Time And Remembrance**
- 8.0: Kiss Across Tomorrow*
- 8.1: More Time Kissed Moments**
- 9.0: Kiss Across Blades*
- 10.0: Kiss Across Chaos*
- 11.0: Kiss Across the Universe*
- 11.1: Even More Time Kissed Moments**
- 12.0: Kiss Across Forever*

The characters and events in this series are interconnected from book to book. Reading the books in order is strongly encouraged.

*[*Short stories and novellas featuring the characters and situations in the Kiss Across Time series].*

A Vampire Time Travel Romance Novel

PRAISE FOR THE
KISS ACROSS TIME SERIES

Cooper-Posey's writing is always brilliant.

There's something fascinating and cerebral about a Kiss Across Time story that's more than your usual fantasy-time-travel-story.

Creative and Amazing!

I really love how original Tracy manages to be in a genre where everything seems to have been written.

I loved reading this rich, complex and interesting tapestry of interwoven lives and loves.

GOLD! More compulsive reading for the Kiss Across Time series!

Cooper-Posey is a master storyteller, but how she manages to create these elaborate interconnected storylines that flesh out character development is incredible.

I haven't read a book in this series that I don't like.

This a series that is not one that you get tired of reading as Tracy keeps everything fresh and new.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this terrifically exciting book!

It pulls you into itself from page one and doesn't let you go until you've read the last word.

DEDICATION

During much of the time I spent writing this book, I was also undergoing chemotherapy that left me feeling sub-human. The nursing staff and medical team at the Cross Cancer Institute kept me going with their empathy, humour, and endless patience. To them, I dedicate this book, with my heartfelt thanks.



KISS ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

BOOK 11 • KISS ACROSS TIME

By

TRACY COOPER-POSEY



Stories Rule Press

CHAPTER ONE



ALANNAH HADN'T REALIZED HOW NOISY a Hollywood party could get, not until now, when she needed peace and quiet.

“What did you say?” Alannah repeated into her phone, bringing her other hand up to cover her other ear. She moved around to the other side of the pool cabana, and tucked herself up against the siding to eliminate some of the volume, but it didn't seem to do any good. The splash of people doing cannonballs into the pool, most of them either fully clothed or completely naked, along with their raucous laughter and shouting, was drowning out her mother's voice.

“Say that again, Mom.” Alannah spoke forcefully into the phone. If Alannah couldn't hear her mother, it was a good bet

that her mother couldn't hear Alannah over the noise, either.

Taylor spoke just as loudly. "I said, we're celebrating Thanksgiving next Sunday. Turkey and all the fixings. You should come. We haven't seen you for weeks and weeks."

A shriek accompanied her mother's pronouncement, making Alannah start. Then a loud splash, followed by clapping and laughter. Someone had just gone swimming who hadn't wanted to.

"*Thanksgiving*, Mom?" Alannah repeated, bewildered. "It's barely October!"

"That's when Canadians have Thanksgiving," Taylor replied smoothly. "The second Monday in October. But most people have their dinners on the Sunday."

Alannah shook her head. "I'll be there for *our* Thanksgiving." It was way too early in the year to be thinking about shopping and Christmas gifts, which was what Thanksgiving always triggered for her.

For a moment, her mother didn't respond.

"Mom?" Alannah nudged, wondering if she'd missed her mother's response, as the noise from around the corner of the cabana seemed to be getting louder.

"We won't be doing Thanksgiving in November," Taylor said.

Alannah wasn't certain, but she thought there was a note of apology in her mother's voice.

"*Not* doing Thanksgiving? Mom...!"

"We don't live in the United States," Taylor said. "We live in Canada. And Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving in October."

"But you're American!"

“I was,” Taylor agreed. “And we kept our identities when we moved here, but that’s not always going to be the case, Alannah. Soon or later, we’ll have to move onto the next life, and that will mean becoming whatever nationality and race the new identities give us. And if that new identity dictates Thanksgiving in April, then that’s when we’ll celebrate Thanksgiving.”

Alannah squeezed the phone, her heart thudding. Words eluded her.

Not that she was surprised. This facet of her parents’ existence had been discussed many times, behind carefully closed doors. She had been aware of the differences between her family and normal people all her life.

But this was the first time those differences had impacted her in a way that marked an ugly fact: Sooner or later, her parents would move onto a life that didn’t include her.

It was already happening. Thanksgiving in October instead of November wasn’t earth shattering, but it was *different*. It was an unsettling change. It upset traditions and customs she hadn’t realized she liked as much as she did, until now.

“So, you’ll come next Sunday, Alannah?” her mother added, her voice light, as if Alannah’s agreement was already in the bag.

Which it was. How could she say no? If she couldn’t have the Thanksgiving she wanted, she’d take the one offered. Besides, there were always orphans and loners in Hollywood, who either got together for their own Thanksgiving in November, or were invited to others’. She might yet have her Turkey Thursday. Only it wouldn’t be the same....

Alannah choked off that unpleasant thought. “I’ll be there,” she told her mother woodenly.

“What was that? The noise...!”

“I’ll come for Thanksgiving on Sunday,” Alannah said, raising her voice.

“Good. Great. Bring a pie, ‘lannah. Love you!”

“Bye,” Alannah got out. Then her mother was gone. She put her phone back in the pocket of the light jacket she was wearing. It was October, after all. In Canada, they probably had snow already, while it was sixty degrees here. But after years of living in L.A., Alannah found even sixty degrees cold. No wonder the swimmers in the pool kept moving about. They were staying warm.

She moved out around the cabana and the noise leapt in volume. Most of the lounges were occupied, many of them with two people. A dozen or more people were moving about the edge of the big lagoon-like pool clutching blankets around their shoulders.

Whose idea had it been to jump into the water in the first place and had started the lemming-like migration into the water? Whoever it was, they must surely have been drunk or high. Or both.

Alannah skirted around the loungers, her heart still working way too hard. A tight mass was sitting in her chest.

Then she remembered that she had abruptly left an unofficial meeting happening in the upstairs relaxation area of the big house. She didn’t know whose house this was. She had just been told to turn up to this address by her boss, Dale Alyard. Dale ran Luxe Productions and might even have an interest in the company. Alannah didn’t know because he wasn’t the sort of boss to share anything significant. But he didn’t mind her carting his dirty laundry to the cleaners.

Alannah realized she had come to a halt where the path moved up a set of brick steps to a patio beside the wide wall of glass doors into the house. The doors all stood open, light blazed from the rooms beyond. The inside of the house was as

busy as the area around the pool and she would have to squeeze through and around groups to get to the stairs up to the area where her meeting was taking place.

She made herself trudge up the steps. Whatever was eating the back of her brain about Thanksgiving she would have to deal with later. She pulled the sleeves of her jacket down, and brushed at the back of it in case it had picked up any dirt from the wall of the cabana.

She moved into the house and wondered if even more people had squeezed in here since she had moved outside to take her call. The noise of dozens—perhaps hundreds—of conversations was almost deafening. She winced at the sound and began working her way through the room to the foyer beyond, where the stairs were located. The room was a large one with a vaulted ceiling and faux medieval beams “supporting” it. Ceiling fans, incongruous against the olde worlde décor, were trying to move the air around but there were too many people and too much smoke—no one was giving up their prime networking opportunities to poison the air outside.

Alannah’s eyes began to water. She hadn’t noticed the smoke levels before moving outside and breathing fresh air. More than a little of the smoke was from marijuana, too. Staying sober in here would be impossible. She would have to escape as soon as she could. Not that she minded being either drunk or stoned, but tonight she was working.

Finally, she made it to the front foyer, a cavernous rounded area where the stairs swept grandly in a sinuous curve up to the second and then the third floor.

Dale Alyard stood next to the newel post of the stairs. He gripped his big whisky glass, which rested on the flat top of the post, seeping condensation onto the curled banister end.

“Dale!” Alannah said, surprised. “Did the meeting end?”

He glared at her. His eyes were red-rimmed and the whites were pink, showing he was even more sensitive to the smoke levels than she. “He left,” he said flatly.

“Who? Adán?” Her surprised gave way to shock. “He *left*? What happened? I was only gone a few minutes!”

Dale’s scowl deepened. “And what the fuck were you thinking, leaving like that?” he demanded. “You left, then Caballero left. Thirty seconds, and he was gone like a breeze. I didn’t even *talk* to him about the film.” He sucked back a good inch of the two inches of dark whisky in the glass and hissed in reaction to the liquor. “Do you know how long I’ve been trying to talk to him?”

Weeks. Alannah didn’t voice the thought aloud, because Dale would get pissed. *More* pissed. She had thought all along that Dale’s plan to sign Adán Caballero to star in his little suspense movie was way too ambitious. Caballero was an action star and at the very top of the A-List, now he had two Oscars on his mantle shelf.

“You fucking abandoned me, right when it was critical,” Dale added, his voice rising.

“Adán Caballero left because of me? Because *I* left?” Alannah was beyond shocked, now. She was just an assistant. Stars didn’t talk to assistants. They barely nodded at them.

“He said it was the smoke, that he was training for the next Smoky Silva movie and didn’t want toxins in his lungs,” Dale shot back.

That actually sounded pretty reasonable to Alannah. But she kept her face immobile, for Dale wasn’t in a reasonable mood.

“But he really left because you signaled that you couldn’t give a fuck about him by walking out as soon as he got there,” Dale snarled.

“I took a *call!*” Alannah protested. “You both heard my phone ringing.”

Dale’s expression grew thunderous. “What fucking call could be more important than Adán Caballero standing *right in front of you?*”

It was my mother calling. Alannah held her teeth together, though. Telling him she valued her family over talking to someone like Adán Caballero would be the equivalent of putting a flame to tinder.

“Yeah, thought so,” Dale said, even though she hadn’t spoken. “You know what? You’re fired.”

Alannah’s jaw dropped. “What? For taking a phone call? You’re kidding me.”

“You’re *fucking fired!*” Dale shouted, his face turning red. “Get out of my fucking face, you moronic bitch!”

Alannah couldn’t help but look around to see who had heard Dale shouting, her cheeks burning. No one was standing about the foyer, but several people were passing through for there was a visitor bathroom tucked under the stairs. Even more people stood right next to the elegant arches leading into the big vaulted room.

Lots of heads had turned at the shouting, but no one looked particularly shocked and they all turned back to their own conversations.

Alannah’s middle was shaking. Soon it would reach out to her extremities. She felt cold, except for her face. *Shock*, her mind clinically catalogued.

Dale was busy ignoring her and draining the rest of his whisky. The creases around his mouth were white, while the rest of his face was flushed a deep, angry red.

She couldn't argue him out of firing her. Not now. She couldn't predict what his reaction would be. Not when he was this upset. He could possibly become violent. And again, her glance took in the whitish-grey flesh around his mouth.

So Alannah turned and headed back to the vaulted room. She would find a dark corner outside where no one could observe her, then jump back to her apartment in Brentwood. Screw behaving like a proper human, tonight. She wanted to be out of this noise, and somewhere where she could think.

Her trembling increased as she pushed and side stepped through the big room, making her want to hurry.

A hand caught at her elbow, anchoring her.

“Hey, ‘lannah, honey, you look sick. Bad joint?”

Alannah looked over her shoulder at the gorgeous blonde. Danya...Prince? *Prinsen*. Danya was some sort of assistant in a different production company, which made them colleagues of a sort, Alannah supposed. She often saw Danya at events and gatherings. Danya was always networking and making useful connections.

“You're working?” Alannah asked Danya. Her voice came out strained and wobbly.

“Sorta. You know how it is.” Danya shrugged and smiled at the handsome man who she had clearly been talking to before hooking Alannah's elbow as she went by. The man gave both of them a perfunctory smile of his own.

Danya looked back at Alannah. “You okay?”

Alannah could feel the trembling trying to take over her body. “I just got fired,” she confessed, her voice even more strained.

“Oh. ‘kay. Gotcha,” Danya said. “Well, have a good night!” She turned back to the actor.

Alannah stared at Danya for a moment, astonishment tangling with upset.

Then she got it. People got fired all the time in Hollywood. They were rejected, fell out of favor, were no longer the golden adored. They were the nominated, not the winners. They were the scapegoats, not the achievers. What was one more firing, among all that rejection?

Alannah turned and headed for the big wall of glass doors, her head down, thinking hard.

Yeah, so people got fired all the time, only this time it was *she* who had been fired, and for no reason except that she valued her family. Which was grossly unfair. Normal people valued their family, didn't they?

When possibly the most luminous A-lister in Hollywood deigned to speak to you? Is that really the time to cut out and take a call from your mom? The voice in her head was cool, assessing.

Maybe she really didn't have what it took to succeed in Hollywood. It was a cut-throat town. She'd known that going in. But she hadn't really understood just how fickle Tinsel Town was. How much maneuvering and manipulation it took to get a deal done.

The Dale Alyards of the world would have ignored *all* calls, especially those from their family.

So what did that make Alannah? Stupid? Or too normal?

Alannah moved around the brickwork to the west side of the house. There was nothing to see on that side of the house but the dark silhouettes of Beverley Hills and the night sky beyond. No one would be on that side of the house. If they wanted a view, they would be on the deck attached to the east side of the house, which overlooked the bright lights of L.A.

When had she started to question whether she fit in here? True, she'd lost her job. But this was her fifth job since she'd moved to L.A. With her building connections she could find another job tomorrow. A few calls, a bit of waiting, and something would emerge. She could casually drop the fact that she had been chatting with Adán Caballero last night, and the calls would be returned, she knew it.

Only...did she want to?

Alannah looked around for observers, for anyone who might see what she did next.

There was no one in sight, but she caught a whiff of hashish. Someone was having their own private party nearby. They were carefully tucked out of sight.

Alannah took a last look around, gathered herself up and jumped. When her small living room coalesced around her, her relief was vast, for there was no need to pretend to be a normal human anymore tonight.

CHAPTER TWO



Canmore, Alberta, Canada.

KIT REALIZED HIS MISTAKE AS soon as he drove over the metal bridge and up the short, sharp slope to the wide cliff where the big log house sat overlooking the town of Canmore and the valley it lay in.

There were not a dozen cars parked around the house to give warning. Nevertheless, when he switched off the engine of his truck, Kit could hear the buzz of a house with a lot of people in it. There were open windows on both levels, despite the six inches of snow on the ground, and through them drifted the sound of conversations, people moving about the house, and more.

He remained behind the wheel, peered through the windscreen and weighed up his options, his fingers tapping a riff on the wheel.

Clearly, Veris Gerhardsson and his family were celebrating Thanksgiving today. Kit knew he should turn the truck around and head back home again. Only, the salmon wrapped in burlap in the back of the truck really should be either cooked or frozen in the next few hours.

Then any choice he had in the matter was taken away, for Veris himself stepped off the verandah, shrugging into a thick coat as he moved across the snow toward Kit's truck. He smiled as he drew closer.

Reluctantly, Kit wound down his window. "I didn't realize you were doing Thanksgiving. Americans, and all. I have some salmon for Taylor."

"We're Canadian residents, now. It only seems right to switch the dates around." Veris leaned a hand on the dark green hood of the truck, leaning casually so he was bent enough to see Kit through the window, for Kit's truck wasn't a jacked-up monster. "Aren't you celebrating? Thanksgiving has First Nations roots."

"My family generally gather on Monday," Kit said. "But I'm working tomorrow. This weekend is prime silly season."

Veris grinned, his very blue eyes dancing. "I presume that means prime tourist season and won't ask what the silliness might be. I can guess well enough." He paused. "We'll have nearly thirty about the table, Kit. One more is nothing. If you're not doing Thanksgiving with your family, join mine."

"Thirty?" Kit was startled. "Where are all the cars?"

"Nearly half of the thirty are kids," Veris said. "And everyone got here via the airport. We picked them up. Americans, and all." His smile increased.

“Right,” Kit said, feeling stupid. “Thanks for the invitation, but I really can’t elbow in—”

Veris shook his head and reached for the door handle. “You brought food to share. What could be more traditional? Come on. It’s time you met the extended family.”

Kit tried to protest, but Veris didn’t listen. The door was opened for him, and Veris almost, but didn’t quite reach for Kit’s arm to pull him from the seat. While Kit climbed to the ground, Veris moved to the back of the truck to check the salmon and praise its size and color.

In gentle steps, none of them forceful, Veris got Kit over to the verandah and opened the door. “Taylor will want to thank you for the salmon at the very least,” Veris added.

Then the cooking smells reached Kit in a warm wafting breeze through the open door. Turkey, pies or some sort of fruit pastry, bubbling and sweet, potatoes *and* yams, and a rich stuffing smelling strongly of sage.

Kit found himself walking through the door without further encouragement, sniffing. It had been a very long time since he’d eaten a home-made turkey dinner and his mouth watered at the same time his belly rumbled empty.

Veris laughed. “Your stomach is telling me you’re staying.”

Kit grimaced. “Man, I just don’t want to intrude. I’m not family—”

But Veris was shaking his head again. “Thing is, only the kids are related by blood in this house. Everyone else is found family. We tend to stick to those people we like.” His gaze met Kit’s and remained steady.

“I see.” Kit managed to not cut his gaze away from Veris’—a challenge because Veris was a physically intimidating man. That was on top of keeping Kit mentally on his toes at all times. The man was a professor of medicine and

an MD, among a couple other degrees that he'd referred to over the four years Kit had got to know Veris, Brody, Taylor and their kids. Veris' mind was sharp and always flexing.

Somewhere in the back of Kit's brain, pleasure stirred.
Found family....

Taylor, Veris' wife, moved through the front room of the house, pulling a long cardigan in around her in reaction to the open front door. "Kit! You're staying for dinner, of course." It wasn't a question.

Kit laughed. So did Veris.

"Yes, he's staying now," Veris added.

Which was true. Kit gave up any idea of protesting or apologizing. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "I brought you another salmon."

Taylor looked pleased. "Fresh salmon! How wonderful. I never really got to appreciate good salmon until we moved here. The ones you pull out of the river are delicious in a way the store bought fish just can't seem to pull off." She put her hand under Kit's arm, drawing him further into the room.

Veris shut the door behind him.

Kit had been in this front room many times in the past, but today it didn't look the way it normally did.

Two of the armchairs had been pulled together so they were facing each other. In them were two teenage girls, both very pretty, with the promise of heart-stopping beauty only a few years into their futures. One had very large dark eyes and coffee-colored skin. The other had alabaster white skin and very blue eyes. They both had computers on their knees and were typing furiously on the keyboards, only occasionally looking up at each other.

“The dark haired one is Liberty,” Taylor said. “The other is Aimée. They’re both computer nerds.”

“Historians,” both girls said together, without looking up from their screens.

“Hello,” Aimée added, still not looking around.

“Umm...hello,” Kit said.

The other girl, Liberty, glanced at him, then looked again. “You’re the park ranger, aren’t you?”

“Warden. Yes.”

She nodded and went back to her computer.

Veris patted his shoulder. “They’re both already remotely studying at university. And neither of them are mine.”

“You don’t have to say it as though you resent it,” Taylor chided Veris. “Marit is brilliant in her own way.”

Kit had heard Marit’s name before. “Marit is here today, too?” he asked, for he was aware that there was tension between Marit and Veris.

Veris nodded.

“And this is Edgard,” Taylor said, waving toward a boy sitting on the floor on the other side of the room, wearing headphones. He was watching a TV monitor, which showed the hockey pre-game show. He wore an Oilers jersey, which was rare in this town, which mostly followed the Calgary Flames.

Next to him was a smaller girl, reading a large hardcover book that looked like it might be about gardening. She looked up at Veris, Taylor and Kit and smiled, then went back to her book.

“Edgard...that’s French, isn’t it?” Kit asked, for the boy was oblivious to their presence.

“Indeed. Edgard is as French as you can get, if you’re talking antecedents, but he’s grown up westernized,” Veris said. “His father despairs over it every few months or so. The girl next to him is his younger sister, Micheline. They’re both siblings of Aimée.”

Kit drew in a slow breath, sorting out the relationships.

“Don’t worry, no one expects you to remember all this,” Taylor told him. “There are fifteen children in the house, and eleven of them are under eighteen.”

“A big family...” Kit murmured. He could feel something relax in his middle. He had spent many hours in big houses holding multi-generational families, with kids running wild between adults who just smiled indulgently. But the last time had been years ago.

Taylor drew Kit forward toward the inner door of the room. Kit had never been beyond the doorway. “At the top of the stairs there’s another sitting room. The two younger ones, Jason and Adrijana, are up there, playing. They’re Aimée, Edgard and Micheline’s siblings, too. You can meet them later. Come through. Some of the adults are in here.”

Kit followed Taylor through the door into a large hall with stairs running up to the next floor. Beneath the stairs were several doors. One he suspected would be a half-bathroom. The others were probably closets of some kind.

Pegs on the walls on either side held a large collection of coats, hats and scarves, while boots all lined up neatly underneath the long benches beneath. The boots all sat on high lipped trays, which collected snow melt. Despite the length of the hall, the boots were all crowded in tightly. Kit could fully believe that there were thirty people in the house.

At the other end of the hall, a solid plank door with iron fittings said where the back entrance was. The runner between

the benches showed darker spots where snow had been tramped in. It was a touch of the ordinary and reassuring.

“Here, let me take your coat,” Veris said.

Kit stripped off his coat and scarf and handed them to Veris, who hung them on a peg that held a small child’s coat already.

All around him, Kit could hear conversations and the movements of people. Murmurs drifted from upstairs, both childish and adult tones. More talk came from either side of the hall, through wide arches.

The cooking smells came from the left, and that was the direction Taylor moved in.

The arch led into a dining room that took up most of the width of the house. To the right, as he moved through the archway, Kit saw the kitchen—a big room with an island bench and copper pots overhead. But that was all the detail he could spot, for there were a number of people working busily at every counter and space, peeling and chopping or stirring. One of them was the red-headed Marit, whom Kit had met briefly, before.

Taylor moved into the dining room. Kit sized it up instantly. A long refectory style table had been pushed against one of the walls, and a cloth laid upon it. It was a huge table, but still not large enough to seat thirty people in one sitting. Clearly, it was to be a buffet style meal, for trays of cutlery and towers of plates had already been set up at one end, and a commercial-sized set of chafing dishes was beside them, already steaming gently, even though the serving dishes sitting inside the warmer were empty.

The rest of the room was filled with folding card tables covered in white tablecloths, and folding chairs. Normal dining chairs were distributed between them. Two of the tables

had shortened legs and low chairs, clearly there for the smaller children.

A woman with dark curly hair was setting the short tables with stubby child-sized cutlery. She glanced up at them, then straightened and pressed her hands to her back.

“You should be taking it easy,” Taylor chided the woman, heading in her general direction.

The woman rolled her eyes and laughed. “The hoard finally fell asleep...all at the same time. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to be useful.”

Taylor lifted her hand toward the woman. “Kit, this is Jesse, our daughter-in-law. Jesse, this is Kit McDonald.”

“The park warden,” Jesse said, holding out her hand. “Nice to finally meet you, Kit.”

Kit shook her hand, and felt the power in her grip. There was also something about the way she stood.... “Ex military?” he guessed.

“Takes one to know one,” Jesse replied lightly. “That was a while ago now. US Army Rangers.”

Kit hesitated. “Canadian Army. Princess Patricia’s Light Infantry,” he declared. It was close enough to the truth, and the full truth he would never reveal. “I can’t believe you’re old enough to have a daughter-in-law, Taylor. You both look the same age.”

Both women laughed. Veris shook his head. “Careful, Kit. Conversations about the age of a woman never end well. Not even in this house.”

Kit smiled. “I’ll stop while I’m still in one piece, then.”

“Is Aran around, Jesse?” Veris asked. “We should group everyone together as we introduce Kit, to make it easier for him.”

“He was in the kitchen, trying to horn in on the gravy-making,” Jesse said. “You know how he likes it thick and stodgy. Marit probably kicked him out, though.”

Distantly, from upstairs, a baby’s wail could be heard. Everyone cocked their heads. Then, barely a second later, a second cry.

“They’re awake already,” Jesse said with a sigh. “I should find Aran. They’ll all need changing...”

“I can help, if you need it,” Kit said.

Everyone looked at him, their eyes wide. But their expressions were still polite.

Veris raised a brow. “You can change diapers?”

“It’s been a few years, but yeah,” Kit admitted. “Big family...lots of cousins.” Then he made himself shut up. He liked Veris and his family, what he’d met of them so far, but he wasn’t going to admit to anyone that caring for babies had been his way of decompressing when he’d come home from missions and tours of duty. It was the complete polar opposite to hunting down terror operatives. A sunny, toothless smile from an innocent baby would ground him, and remind him of why he was doing what he was doing. And there had always been at least one infant in the house, whenever he’d gone home for a visit.

The duo of baby cries was taken up by a third voice. Then a fourth.

Kit glanced up at the ceiling, startled.

“Twins, then triplets,” Jesse confirmed, with a grimace. “Well, if you’re offering, I’m not going to say no, Kit McDonald. I simply don’t have enough hands to deal with five of them at once, and we left their nanny back home.” She beckoned with her finger and headed for the archway.

Kit could see that Taylor was hiding a laugh. Veris grinned openly. He shrugged and followed Jesse toward the stairs. He was mildly pleased. As he'd passed the kitchen door, he'd not spotted Alannah among the people working in the kitchen, which meant she was upstairs somewhere. And now he had a legitimate excuse to go up there himself.

CHAPTER THREE



JUST AS ALANNAH WAS READY to jump to Canada, she got a text from *Far*.

Non-family in the house. Jump to the woodpile.

There was a load of assumptions in that simple text which she understood without further explanation. She didn't know who the non-family person or people were yet, but "non-family" was code. It meant whoever it was wasn't privy to the fact that her family was made up of vampires and time-travelers, among a few humans.

More than one adult in the family was not actually related to anyone, including some of their kids, and would be

technically “non-family”, except they were family in all the ways that counted.

Alannah had known Alexander, Raphael and Sydney since she was very small, and Neven, Remi and London for a decade. All of them were honorary aunts and uncles and their kids were Alannah’s cousins, yet none of them shared a drop of blood in common with Alannah.

The directive to jump to the woodpile was also another form of shorthand. It meant “pretend you arrived here by normal human means”. That meant the fiction of a plane flight from L.A. to Calgary, which was the nearest international airport, then a bus from Calgary to Canmore and a Canmore taxi to the house, where she would knock on the front door like she’d just arrived.

She would need luggage.

Alannah packed a light backpack, one small enough to qualify as cabin baggage, with a couple of changes of clothes and other essentials, even though she planned on coming back to her apartment tonight. It was always possible that the guest was sleeping over, which meant she would have to, too, in order to keep up the pretense that she had flown to Canada via commercial airlights. The backpack might not be wasted.

It also meant leaving the blueberry pie behind, as normal travelers couldn’t bring any fruit or fruit products across the Canadian border.

She made the preparations and adjustments with very little thought, for she had been making these compromises all her life. Neither did she waste much time speculating over who the non-family visitor was. Her parents attracted interesting people like magnets drew iron filings to them. It could be anyone, and she would find out soon enough.

At least there would be some decent non-time-travelling conversation at the dinner table.

Her preparations finished once again, Alannah closed up her apartment and looked around one last time. Then she dug out her heavy winter snow coat, which she hadn't used in L.A. even once. She shrugged into it, then slung the backpack over her shoulders.

She jumped quickly, before she grew too warm inside the coat.

The woodpile under the denuded trees out the front of the house was even larger than the last time she had seen it. *Far* and *Athar* and perhaps even Taylor, too, had been adding to the stumps and logs over the summer. A tarpaulin kept most of the pile dry and clear of snow. One corner of the tarp had been pulled back to give access to the timber beneath.

The already split wood lived under a lean-to on the side of the house facing the mountain. Alannah would most likely end up carting wood into the house at least once while she was here because she felt the cold more than anyone else except Marit. Marit lived in Western Australia, which had virtually the same climate as California. They both liked to stoke the stove in the front room and huddle by it.

Alannah moved up onto the verandah, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. "Hello? *Far*? Mom? *Athar*? I'm here!"

The younger kids were in the front room. Edgard had the hockey on—big surprise, there—while Micheline read her precious gardening books beside him. Aimee and Liberty were battling each other with some obscure coding thing that only they thought was fun.

Alannah waved at them, but they barely looked around. That was okay, though. She would catch up with them later.

"Alannah?" her mother called from the dining room. Alannah headed in that direction, and met Taylor in the back hall.

“There you are,” Taylor said, hugging her. “I think you’re the last to arrive.”

“It sounds like,” Alannah said in agreement, for the din of conversations could be heard in all directions. “Do they need more help in the kitchen?”

“You can always ask,” Taylor said complacently. “I’m finishing up the buffet table. How’s L.A.?”

“Warmer than here,” Alannah said, pulling off the backpack and then the heavy coat. “I’ll put this in my old room...unless someone is using it?”

“Not tonight,” Taylor said. “I’ll head back. You know the way.” She patted Alannah’s cheek, then headed back toward the dining room.

Lately, Alannah had found any motherly gesture coming from Taylor a bit startling and now she realized why. Taylor seemed too young. She didn’t look old enough to be Alannah’s mother, that was for sure.

Alannah watched Taylor walking away, in skinny jeans and a striped top that hugged her curves, her hair—utterly without grey—pulled up into a casual ponytail at the back of her head. She realized that Taylor might even look younger than her, now. After all, she had stopped aging when Alannah was a small child.

It was another disturbing sign that her parents’ lives were separating from hers in ways that most people wouldn’t understand.

Alannah trudged up the stairs. She could hear that the smaller children were in the reading nook, safely behind stair barricades, where dozens of soft toys would be spread upon the carpet and the sectional sofas with their overstuffed cushions would give them something to bounce off or climb upon.

At the top of the stairs, where she would have turned right, then right again to continue down the passage to her room, Alannah paused to look to her left and check the children.

Her jaw sagged, as her brain seemed to pick up and twist on its stalk, imparting a dizzy sense of unreality.

Kit McDonald sat on the thick carpet, his knees crossed, a stuffie in one hand. Maggie, one of the twins, stood next to his knee, a bright parrot-shaped stuffie in hand. She was trying to reach for the blue jay stuffie Kit held, but her arms weren't long enough.

Christian, one of the triplets, was also standing. He was behind Kit, and hanging onto Kit's shoulder as his precarious balance shifted and his knees threatened to give out. As Alannah watched, Kit reached around behind him with his spare hand and steadied Christian. At least, she thought it was Christian. The triplets were still completely identical and hard to tell apart, while the twins, Maggie and India, were already three years old and starting to show separate personalities and clothing preferences.

Denis and Raphael, the other two triplets, were over by the corner sofa, both on their hands and knees and batting at fleece balls, making them roll along the front edge of the sofa. One of them was stuck in the corner.

Sitting in the corner of the sofa, playing a game on a Game Boy, was Jason. Jason was London, Neven and Remi's son, and as dark-haired as Neven, with the same olive skin. Alannah thought he was around nine years old by now. Why he wasn't in the front room with his siblings was a mystery.

A jumbo coloring book sat next to him, and a tin of crayons.

Then Adrijana stood up from behind the sofa, which explained why Jason was here. She moved around to the front of the sofa, stepping carefully around the triplets, and climbed

up onto it and settled next to Jason. She clutched a bunch of crayons in one hand, which she carefully returned to the tin beside Jason. Then she picked up the drawing pad and balanced it on her knees.

But it was the unexpected sight of Kit McDonald up here, apparently left alone and in charge of six children that, as far as Alannah knew, he'd never met until now, that left her a little breathless.

Kit wore faded jeans and a plain white teeshirt. It was the most casual outfit Alannah had ever seen him wear. Every other time he'd visited the house when she had been here, he had been in his warden uniform.

"You've lost one," Alannah said and felt her jaw drop even further. It was unusual for her to speak directly to Kit. He was her parents' friend.

Kit looked around, his eyes narrowed. "I have?"

"Mmm. India is missing."

"India is here," Jesse said, from behind Alannah.

Alannah turned. Jesse was moving down the passage, which was open on this side and protected by the same posts and banister railing as the stairs. Jesse held India's hand, as the three year old walked with small steps along the carpet. "Hi, Alannah. You just get here?"

"About five minutes ago," Alannah replied.

"Bathroom emergency," Jesse explained. "Thanks, Kit." She picked India up and carried her the last few feet of the passage.

Alannah moved out of the way as Jesse lifted India over the gate that closed off the reading nook from the stairs and the passage and then stepped over the gate herself.

Kit McDonald got to his feet with great care, keeping his forearm under Christian's frantic grip.

Christian wobbled, then sat with a plopping motion and grinned up at Kit, showing several small teeth. Kit ruffled his hair, then handed the second stuffie to Maggie. Maggie dropped the parrot and grabbed the blue jay, looking pleased. "Birdie."

"Yes, birdie," Kit told her. He straightened. "No problems at all," he told Jesse.

Jesse put India on her feet and groaned as she lowered herself to the carpet. "If I let them go wild until dinner, they'll eat well, then sleep like the dead."

Kit didn't head for the gate. He considered Jesse. "Would you like me to stay?"

Jesse shook her head, with a smile. "I got this. They're contained, here, so I don't have to keep counting heads. Thanks, Kit. Really." She glanced at Alannah. "He helped me change diapers. Can you believe it?"

"No," Alannah said flatly, glancing at Kit. Did he have much younger siblings? A child of his own...?

He didn't look at her. He was watching one of the triplets try to haul themselves to their feet using the sofa.

"And the diapers stayed on, afterwards, too," Jesse added, with a wider smile. Her eyes danced.

Kit moved carefully over to the gate and stepped over it easily. Alannah hadn't noticed how long his legs were, before. The jeans seemed to emphasize them, unlike the brown uniform trousers she was used to seeing.

As she was standing on the other side of the small landing, he ended up standing in front of her and she registered exactly

how tall he was. She was tall. Tall enough that many men were shorter than her. But not Kit.

His black eyed gaze met hers.

Alannah shifted the backpack on her shoulder, and her coat. “I’m dropping this off in my room.”

He nodded, moved over to the stairs and descended them.

Alannah blinked and glanced at Jesse.

Jesse didn’t pretend she hadn’t been watching. She shrugged.

Alannah moved down the passage to her old room, thrust the door open and nearly tossed her coat and pack onto the bed. The room was generously proportioned for a secondary bedroom, for the house had been designed by her parents from the ground up. The bed wasn’t a narrow child’s bed, either. It was a three-quarter width bed, long enough that she could stretch out and not have her feet hang over the end.

She had appreciated that as she had grown taller.

Alannah glanced at her image in the dresser mirror, an automatic check, pulled her sweater into place, then turned and hurried downstairs. She waved at Jesse as she passed.

Jesse didn’t see it. She was busy with the kids.

Alannah slowed her pace when she saw that Kit McDonald was standing at the foot of the stairs. She wondered if he was waiting for her, for he was looking toward the kitchen, which made her uncertain. In all the times he had ever visited this house when she had been here, he’d never waited to speak to her before.

She moved down to the bottom step and Kit looked at her. His features didn’t shift from the stoical non-expression that was all she had ever seen on him.

Even standing on a step, her head only came up to close to even with his.

“Do you have children?” The question popped out of her without consideration.

Kit’s lips thinned a little. His black eyes considered her for a long moment. “Does it matter?”

Alannah thought that was a fair question, considering how rude hers had been. “Most fathers can’t help but boast about their perfect children. As you’re not pulling out photos to show me, I’m going to guess you’re not one.”

He didn’t quite shrug, but she saw his shoulders shift. “You’re not going to answer my question, then.”

“You didn’t answer mine,” she pointed out.

He didn’t respond to that. His glance shifted toward the kitchen once more.

“Someone stuck you with kitchen chores,” she guessed.

He shook his head. “I thought I should help out.”

“Like you did with Jesse’s kids?”

“You’d rather I sit in a corner with a glass in my hand and watch everyone else rush around?” He didn’t sound affronted. Instead, he raised a single thick brow.

Alannah didn’t know what to say, and she *always* knew what to say. It was why CEOs of production companies wanted her to work for them. She always said the right thing to the right people.

But Kit McDonald had left her speechless, which was flat out ridiculous. It wasn’t as though he had insulted her. She’d been insulted by the best and knew a dozen ways to respond that didn’t strip away her pride, or piss off the star who’d insulted her.

Kit's question was innocuous, yet she stood there casting about for something to say in response and couldn't think of a damn thing. Instead, her gaze was caught by the raised brow. She realized she was studying his face, something she'd not really done before. Kit was her parents' friend and she'd only ever been polite to him. She couldn't remember talking to him directly before, except for the most superficial exchanges.

She was aware of time ticking on, while she didn't-quite-gawp at him and failed to respond. He would think her rude, or worse, an obnoxious daughter.

But he took a half-step toward the bottom of the step she stood upon. Then he did something utterly unexpected.

He pressed the tip of one long finger between her brows. "There has been a crease there since you arrived." His voice reverberated, low and musical. "It is still there now."

His fingertip was warm and surprisingly soft. From the sleeve of his jacket, his scent rose. It wasn't cologne or one of the obnoxious deodorants that men seemed to think were desirable. It was just nice, clean, male scent.

Alannah's heart picked up speed. She grew aware of it beating in her chest, at the same time her gut seemed to fill with warmth.

She couldn't take a step back. Only up the stairs. But before she could do that, he dropped his hand. He studied her with complete calm. His eyes were utterly black, but completely unlike Brody's or Aran's...or hers, she supposed.

"What happened to put that there?" he asked. "Something bad happened. You have the sort of strength to shrug off anything trivial."

She stared at him, astonished. This time she wasn't speechless. This time, she couldn't pick from among the dozens of questions that occurred to her. She didn't doubt him

—the touch of his fingertip had drawn her attention to the taut muscles drawing her brows closer together, forming the furrow. She tried to let them relax, but they were tight with tension.

He'd noticed the furrow. A tiny detail, that he'd spotted the moment he'd seen her. And she had thought he was occupied with the babies and the toddlers.

Why are you watching me so closely? That was one of the questions she wanted to ask, but couldn't, because she wasn't sure he *was* watching her closely. Only, he'd noticed the furrow. Her mother had not.

Why do you think it's any of your business? That was another question she couldn't ask. It was too confrontational. She'd given up being confrontational and direct, years ago.

Why did you touch me? The whisper sighed through her. Her heart was still thudding heavily, too.

Why are you suddenly talking about real stuff, and not the weather or the salmon you just caught? For that had been the sum total of topics he'd ever spoken to her about.

Who are you? That question hovered on the tip of her tongue because she suddenly felt as though she didn't know Kit at all. And she had thought she had him pegged. A homegrown Canadian. A boony who would never leave the mountains.

How do you know so much about me? That question was louder than all the rest, because his question had touched upon the hard knot in her chest and belly. And she could feel herself unravelling, all the control she had been using all week flying out the window.

Alannah didn't make the decision to sit down. She just found herself perched upon one of the steps. She gripped her hands together tightly, as the scared little wail built in her. She

kept her gaze upon her white knuckles, because she couldn't look at him while she said it. She shouldn't be saying it at all, but it emerged from her like a hot geyser, under high pressure because it had been building in her all week.

"I was fired last weekend." Her voice was strained. "I figured I would find another job in a day or two. But it's been a week, and no one is returning my calls."

Silence.

Alannah kept her gaze on her hands, appalled at her lack of discretion. If she was going to tell anyone at all about this, it would have been Aran. Or her parents. But probably Aran, who understood so much without her having to explain.

What was she doing spilling her guts to a friend of the family she'd never had a decent conversation with before? "Sorry. It's a downer subject." This time, her voice was even more strained as she forced a peppy tone into it. "Forget I spoke."

She saw his feet shift. Heavy work boots, with super grip soles, good for walking in snow.

"Are people not returning your calls because you're tainted? Or are you not persisting enough to catch them?" Kit asked. His tone was neutral, lacking any judgement.

Alannah lifted her chin, surprised into looking at him because his questions were...direct. They spoke of insight and awareness, which was not something she'd expected a Canadian park warden to have about one of the most exclusive industries in the United States.

And his questions hit a raw nerve. She gripped her hands harder. "I think..." she said slowly, "...that I probably haven't been trying as hard as I could to get hold of people." It was the first time she had admitted it even to herself.

"Is Hollywood losing its charm for you?" Kit asked softly.

She realized she was looking into his eyes again. He had rested his hand on the end of the banister and his boots were a mere inch from the bottom step. He'd drawn closer.

"I didn't think you knew that was where I lived," Alannah replied.

"Your parents talk about you a lot," Kit said.

"And you listened."

"One does, when others are talking." He shook his head. It was a tiny movement. "You're trying to redirect me. That tells me I got close."

She squeezed her hands together once more and felt her bones and tendons flex painfully. "Perhaps," she prevaricated. "I'll have to think about it."

Kit straightened and moved away from the step. "Not something to decide quickly," he said, his tone one of agreement. "It's a pivot point."

She grimaced. "As in, my whole life could change, depending on what I decide? No pressure. Thanks."

And he smiled.

It was a startling expression, for she wasn't sure she had ever seen him smile before. There was wry self-awareness in the expression, but that wasn't the startling thing. It was the way his features shifted and changed. Light seemed to fill him. Good cheer, too. Even his eyes seemed to lighten. His smile revealed very white, even teeth, and drew attention to the sharp line of his jaw, which was shadowed by dark stubble.

Hollywood would love those high cheekbones. The errant thought flickered through her mind and was gone, while she recovered from the dazzling flash of a smile.

Something metallic and heavy crashed in the kitchen, and cries of dismay rose, making both of them jump.

It's not just me who forgot where we were, Alannah thought. There was a dollop of satisfaction in that idea.

“Well,” Kit said, taking another step back. “I’d better go and help out. Earn my supper.”

“We don’t expect guests to earn their way,” Alannah said as she got to her feet.

“I wasn’t invited. I’m not a guest.”

“Then what are you?”

He frowned a little. “I was pulled inside.”

“*Far,*” Alannah guessed. She added, “Veris wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Kit glanced at her, his eyes narrowing. “Lucky guess?”

She shook her head. “My family likes having people they like at the table.”

“That’s what Veris said.” Kit’s frown cleared. “Then it’s not just me.”

Alannah gave a little laugh. “Hell no. They do it all the time. One of their friends dropped in, once, and ended up staying for nearly a year.” She carefully didn’t add that Neven’s “drop in” was into Alexander’s, Rafe’s and Sydney’s pool in Spain, and that he’d stayed for so long because this timeline wasn’t his own. He couldn’t go back to his own timeline because it had been destroyed.

Discretion, Discretion. Not spilling the wrong details was so automatic that she barely thought about it.

But her quick denial seemed to reassure Kit, for his suspicious air evaporated. He looked toward the kitchen door once more, from where a babble of both male and female voices issued, talking over the top of each other, all of them giving directions on how to clean up the mess. “I will feel better if I help out.”

“Then you’d better go and help out,” Alannah said.

He nodded and strode toward the archway into the dining room, and the entrance to the kitchen on the other side.

Alannah waited until he was safely in the kitchen, then moved into the dining room. She would help with the tables and settings, as she was the least cooking-oriented member of the family. She burned water. Literally. She had let a saucepan boil dry once, and warped the copper-bottomed saucepan to the point where it was useless.

You help out in the kitchen every year, anyway, a snide voice whispered in her mind.

The inconvenient truth annoyed her. *This year, I will help out here,* she told herself firmly and forced the snide voice into silence by counting places and toting up who was in the house and if there were enough place settings, and keeping herself busy enough that the voice couldn’t intrude any more.

CHAPTER FOUR



ARAN SURPRISED ALANNAH A FEW minutes later, when he moved into the dining room, wiping his hands on a kitchen towel, wearing a broad grin.

He surprised her because for the first time, Alannah noticed just how *old* he seemed. She wasn't yet thirty, while her twin looked like he was in his forties.

“You've been hanging around in history too much, brother,” she murmured in his ear as he hugged her. She kept her voice very low, even though there was no one else in the dining room right then.

“Which is how one makes money,” Aran murmured back. He let her go and stepped back, examining her. “You look

fabulous as usual.”

She grinned. “I’m barely adequate compared to most people in Hollywood.” It was an old riposte.

“While Washington makes ugly a selling point,” Aran replied, completing the habitual sequence.

“You haven’t been near Washington for four years,” she pointed out.

Aran’s smile grew broader and warmer. “You try having five kids inside two years, and see if you can keep up a demanding career.”

Alannah froze, riding out her dismay. That was what she had done a week ago. She had put her family first and got fired for it. “I see what you mean,” she told Aran, but her voice came out flat and indifferent.

His smile faded. “Has something happened?” he asked, his voice even lower. “You look...pinched, somehow.”

She fought to smooth out her betraying brow. “I’m fine,” she said shortly. She would not ruin Aran’s Thanksgiving with bad news. “I saw one of the triplets trying to stand up, a few minutes ago.”

Aran sighed, even though fatherly pride made him glow in a way that Alannah always found disconcerting. He’d become so domesticated, since he and Jesse had married.

But he was still clearly using time to his financial gain.

Aran pushed a hand through his thick black hair. “The twins are already walking, the triplets are working on it. Jesse is terrified that one or all of them will be jumpers and will suddenly disappear on us.”

“Welcome to my world,” Taylor said from the archway. She came over to them and rested her hand on Aran’s shoulder for a moment. “I lived with that fear for *years*. And you two

nearly made it a living nightmare. Do you remember that jump back to the fifth century? Panormos? You took your cellphones with you and took photos, and you dressed in bed sheets.”

Alannah glanced at Aran, who wasn't smiling. Their teenaged adventure had been a standing joke in the family for years but now he had kids of his own, he'd lost his sense of humor over the incident.

“We were dead lucky,” Alannah said truthfully. “But we didn't figure out how to jump until we were teenagers. Marit was jumping before she was five, but she's a polytemporal. Maybe Aran's kids will be older before they figure out jumping, too.”

“Please, universe, hear that wish,” Aran muttered. “Older means time to train them, so they have at least a miniscule chance of making it home again.”

Taylor gripped their arms gently and shook them. “Stop it, both of you. This family is stuffed full of jumpers and people who can see the timescape, or shout across it.”

Jesse was the one who could send out broadcasts across the timescape, so that *everyone* could hear her. She didn't do it often, because it left a lot of people with massive headaches. But it was a useful gift, one that had pleased Jesse enormously. “I'm not a jumper, but I can at least do *something* with the timescape,” she'd explained to Alannah shortly after her wedding. That had been the same day she and Aran had announced she was pregnant, and Jesse had been just as frank about that. “A baby surprised the shit out of both of us,” she had admitted in her usual directly honest way. “I don't think either of us had given it a thought until the double line showed up.”

The reminder of the talents and expertise in the family made Aran's shoulders relax. He nodded. “You're right.

Someone would be able to find our kids, no matter where they ended up.”

Alannah smiled at him. Aran was her twin, but he felt more like an older brother, these days. “By the way,” she added, glancing at Taylor. “Where *is* Marit? I thought she would be in the kitchen, directing everyone, but I haven’t heard her voice yet.”

Taylor’s face shadowed. “She went to lie down a little while ago. Migraine. A severe one.”

“*Far* could give her something, couldn’t he? Or Alex? He always brings a kit along,” Aran said. A furrow formed between his brows and Alannah knew that it was the same as hers.

“Veris did give her something,” Taylor said. “Sixty minutes ago. It didn’t help.”

“Did she and *Far* have another fight?” Alannah asked.

“Alannah...” Aran chided.

Taylor glanced at her, and her eyes narrowed. “I suppose that’s a fair question, but in this case, no they didn’t. She arrived here this morning with a headache and it’s got worse all day.”

“*Far* must be out of his mind by now, if he couldn’t fix it,” Alannah murmured.

Taylor’s smile was small, but there. “He consulted with Alex, and gave her the dihydroergotamine. Then he consulted with...” She pressed her lips together, as if she was holding back laughter. “David,” she finished.

Aran let out a breathy chuckle.

“He *is* desperate,” Alannah concluded. She blew out her breath. “Does that mean David will be at the table today?”

“Tables,” Aran amended.

“He’s probably here already,” Taylor replied. Her smile took on a wicked edge. “As Veris has disappeared.”

CHAPTER FIVE



MARIT KNEW SOMEONE WAS IN the bedroom with her, but she didn't have the courage to open her eyes. It hurt too much. "Who's there?" Her voice came out croaky and weak. The stuff Veris had given her was making her loopy and pathetic, but it wasn't halting the headache.

"David," came the reply, in David's silky baritone.

She sighed. "I'm not in the mood to talk to you."

"Fine. I will talk. You listen."

She heard the creak of wood and cracked open one eye by the merest sliver. The room was almost completely dark, for Taylor had drawn the light-blocking drapes. "They're

efficient,” Taylor had explained. “In mid-summer the sun doesn’t set until close to midnight.”

Not that her parents slept anymore. But Marit was grateful for the darkness. She could just make out David’s silhouette. The wide shoulders. He had sat upon the bench under the window and was leaning forward, his arms upon his knees.

“I think I know what is happening to you.” His voice was low in volume, but she had no trouble hearing him. His words seemed to hang in the air, lingering, even though they were trivial words. Yet they were not trivial to her.

“Listening,” she whispered.

He didn’t speak for long moments. So long that she thought he had not heard her and was abiding by her silence and keeping his own. She was on the verge of repeating her response, when he did speak.

“When I was near your age...perhaps a bit earlier...I don’t remember exactly, because then, people didn’t care as much about the age of a man, only the age he appeared to be. Was he tall enough and strong enough to hold a sword? Was she old enough to bear children and therefore be wed?” He paused. “They were different times.”

I know. Marit had spent days in Jerusalem at the turn of the first century. She’d learned to wear baggy clothes and keep her face veiled and her hair well hidden, not because a man insisted upon it, but because it shielded her from curious gazes. A young, lone woman was simply asking for trouble, back then.

“I will assume that I was the age you are now when I first started seeing the alternative worlds. Not just across the timescape, but even when I was awake and aware in my own time. I could see and *feel* every possible alternative to the moment I was living through, and the consequences.”

Marit wanted to laugh, but was afraid to. She didn't know what it would do to her head. "I've been seeing other timelines for years," she told him dismissively.

Silence.

Then, "Ah." His tone was...was he *pleased*? "Of course, I was estimating your age on *this* timeline, but you spend time in the past, too." Another thick pause. "How long have you been seeing your other selves?"

Marit kept her eyes closed, even though his question made her jump a little. It had been Easter when she had first felt/saw one of her other selves in her mind, moving through a moment not dissimilar to her own. There had been enough differences in the situations – different clothes, different responses she'd given, different reactions from people around her – that Marit had known she wasn't merely replaying the moment she was experiencing in her mind.

She remembered it was Easter because nearly all of Australia went into a four day shut-down over the Easter weekend, and most people headed out of the city to find a bit of shade in the bush, set up a campfire, sit around it and drink.

Marit had been sitting beside a fire made of gum tree branches, the aromatic eucalyptus resin making the smoke somewhat more tolerable. She had been caught up in the other-memory of her alternative self to the point where the friend beside her had nudged her arm to get her attention.

Marit had blinked and pulled herself together. She could recall the conversational exchanges that had taken place over the campfire. They were in her memory, which meant she had heard them. That also meant she hadn't been on the timescape and mentally cut off from this world, while her body slumped.

She had managed to find something to say that hadn't made everyone look at her strangely and the moment had passed.

There had been many such moments since then. More and more of them. She had learned to deal with them in a way that didn't draw unwanted attention from anyone near her, but it was draining. Sometimes the, well, *visions*...sometimes they came so thick and fast that it was all she could do to pull away from whatever she was doing and sit down, while they played out in her mind.

"Marit?" David prompted softly.

"I've been seeing them for a while," she admitted.

"They make you lose focus on what is happening around you."

"Sometimes," she admitted, although she hated that David, of all people, was the one who was easing this out of her.

"You need to live your own life first, not theirs."

"I know that," she rasped. Really, her head was pounding. "Can you...can we discuss this later?"

"You don't want to get rid of the headache?" His tone was light. He knew damn well she wanted that.

"You've got something that will get rid of it? Because my father and Alex between them couldn't budge it, and they know nostrums from the fifth century to now." She paused, her breath coming fast, because it hurt to talk.

"Chemicals," he said dismissively. "Your mind is more powerful than that."

"Is this what it means to be a polytemporal?" she grouched. "Because I'm not impressed so far."

"You should be." Harshness touched his voice. "Time is laid at your feet. You see the entire universe, *all* universes. You can *shape* your world by choosing among possibilities that only you can see. What Sydney has fought to achieve with

her cataloguing and experiments, you can do from the bed you are lying on, right now.”

Marit groaned. “Not if it hurts like this.”

“You’re not used to it,” David replied. “You don’t know how to manage what you see. Your brain is exhausted from trying to process all of it.”

“There’s a way to switch it off?” She eased open one eye, as hope touched her.

He shook his head. In the dark, she could only see the outline of his head move. “You’re a polytemporal. There is no switching it off. But there is way to ignore all but your own timeline, until *you* are ready to listen in to the others.”

“Oh.” She closed her eye. “Ignoring it isn’t going to make it stop. If this headache is from trying to process it all, ignoring it won’t stop the headache, either.”

“You’d be surprised,” David said, his tone a touch warmer.

She pressed her thumb against her temple, as her head seemed to throb and beat, as if her brain had swollen and was pushing against her skull, demanding more room. “What’s this way, then?” she whispered.

“Meditation,” David said.

“Med...” She wanted to sit up and glare at him. She wanted to laugh derisively.

“Of a special kind,” David said. “I will teach it to you. Your mind, Marit, is stronger than you know. I will show you how to use that strength, so you can channel the input, shunt it aside. You’ll reach a point where it will be automatic, and you won’t know you’re doing it. Life will go back to normal for you, after that.”

“Thinking of nothing will just open me up to a flood!” she protested.

“Meditation isn’t thinking of nothing. Meditation is a tool to refine your focus.” She heard a soft thudding and realized he was drumming his foot upon the floor. “You must trust me in this. It will work. It works for me.”

There was a tightness about his voice that told her he was controlling his anger.

As that was the tone he generally used with her, especially in the last few years, Marit could feel herself relax. This was normal. This was nothing to worry about. He hadn’t hurried to the bedroom to tend to her with a gentle voice and warm concern because she was falling apart. That warmth had been the mask. This was the normal David.

She let out a slow breath, because sighing might hurt. “Can you teach me enough to make this headache go away in the next ten minutes?”

Another small silence. “It depends upon how disciplined you are.”

She read what he *hadn’t* said as easily as if he had spoken it. He didn’t think she had that discipline. “I haven’t been around for twenty-three centuries like you but I can manage this,” she shot back.

“Twenty-four and a half,” he replied.

“Someone that old shouldn’t get pissed so easily,” she tossed back. “You haven’t learned patience in all that time?”

“I was the son of Alexander the Great. I wasn’t required to have patience.” His tone was testy.

“The first and illegitimate son, the one your father tried to kill,” she said sweetly. She pushed her hand against the sheet. “Should I sit up?”

“You can do this right where you are.” He spoke in a monotone, which told her she’d got to him. “And I don’t know

that it was my father who tried to kill me. It could have been his generals, who wanted the empire for themselves.”

You couldn't see alternative worlds and figure that out?

The question hovered in her mind, but she didn't ask it because the answer was obvious. It had taken Marit years to reach this point where she could see other worlds in her waking moments, without accessing the timescape. It would have taken him just as long...maybe longer. And he had been a small child when his mother, Roxana, had arranged for trusted servants to take him far away—out of reach of Alexander. His mother had remained behind to marry Alexander and bear him a legitimate heir...who had been murdered at thirteen, to clear the way for his enemies to inherit the Macedonian throne.

But that was all David had ever said about his childhood and the long millennia since then.

Often, she forgot his deep history. He was an intensely irritating man, quick to judge, to find her wanting, and that plummy accent of his and the resonant baritone powered his insults and made them sting.

Marit let her hand relax. “Okay, old man. Tell me what to do.”

He made a sound, deep in the back of his throat. She'd irritated him. Oh, dear, what a shame.

She hid her smile. Then a thought occurred to her and she opened both eyes. It hurt, but she wanted to see him—as much of his face as she could in this low light. “Will meditating stop me seeing my other selves die?”

David straightened with a snap. “*What?*”

CHAPTER SIX



TAYLOR DECIDED THAT MAKING EVERYONE also carry their own cutlery to the table would result in spills and fuss, so Alannah and Aran set up placing cutlery at all the places on the tables, while Aran told her about his kids, his fatherly pride making his voice ring with warmth. As they worked, Alannah could hear everyone working in the kitchen, too, along with the clatter of plates and cooking tools, and various pieces of equipment. The extraction fan was working overtime, but it was a high powered efficient fan, and didn't drown out the inane chatter and stream of one line jokes and awful puns, interspersed with instructions.

It sounded like Raphael was doing the instructing, which made Alannah happy, for he was a superior cook, despite

learning how to cook properly *after* he had become a vampire.

She and Aran had just finished the settings when Veris strolled into the dining room. “Look who just arrived.”

Behind him came three people. The red-headed woman was Nyara, who lived in the far distant—and undisclosed—future. With her was her partner, Cáel Stelios, and the giant, Kieren, who was actually a finger’s width taller than Veris and just as broad across the shoulders.

Nyara smiled at all of them. “We got here at the right time for once. The arrival chamber works perfectly.”

Taylor lifted her finger toward her lips, but didn’t quite complete the telling gesture. “I must introduce you to the people you don’t know, Nyara. They’re in the kitchen.” She smiled. “So is the wine.”

Nyara’s smile grew even broader. “Wine! Lead on!”

Cáel laughed. “Please tell me there’s some ouzo?”

“The brand you like, yes,” Taylor said.

Kieren shook his head. “I’ll pass. I don’t want to ruin my appetite. The smell is heavenly.” He raised his chin and sniffed.

“About an hour away, I think,” Veris said, as Taylor lead Nyara and Cáel into the kitchen. Aran trailed everyone, carrying the left-over cutlery.

Kieren put his hand to his flat belly. “Starving.”

“Good,” Veris said, pleased.

Alannah moved toward the pair. “Hello, Kieren.” She smiled up at him. He really was a big man. The two of them, this close, made her feel petite. It was a sensation she only ever felt in their presence. “How is the family?”

“Scattered to hell and gone,” he said, with a frank tone. “It’s Assembly time. That’s why I’m here.” He smiled, his grey eyes twinkling. “No one to cook for me, back home.”

Alannah laughed. He had to be joking. Their friends from the future rarely let slip details about their lives, but just listening closely had told her that Kieren had two partners and several kids, both adopted and natural, and at least one of them was already an adult. Plus, Kieren’s entire family lived in a complex that included other adults and families, including Nyara and Cáel, and their daughter. So someone there would have been able to assemble a meal. Was it even Thanksgiving there? Did they celebrate Thanksgiving? As their government was called an Assembly, and Alannah suspected it was a global government, life in Kieren’s time was quite different. Perhaps Thanksgiving wasn’t a thing there.

“We’re pleased to cook for you here,” Veris told Kieren, as if he had personally baked the turkey. Only Rafe wouldn’t let Veris in the kitchen, even if Veris wanted to help. Not because he was a terrible cook—which he was—but because Veris wouldn’t take directions. He would direct everyone else, instead, and sow confusion. Rafe had only put up with the chaos once. Now, Rafe glared and ordered Veris out of the room whenever he was running the kitchen.

Kieren sniffed again, looking very pleased.

Alannah laid her hand on Veris’ arm. It was bare, because he was wearing one of the sleeveless shirts he favored. She felt the comforting sensation of cool flesh and muscles shifting beneath. “By the way, *Far*, why on earth did you invite Kit, of all people, to eat with us?”

Veris’ brows wrinkled. It wasn’t the way Aran frowned. Her father’s expression looked thunderous by default. “Why shouldn’t he eat with us? He’s been a good friend to the family.”

“Sure, if dropping a fish on the verandah every month is being friendly. He dumps and runs.”

“How would you know, daughter?” Veris shot back. “You’re never here.”

Alannah ignored the jibe. It would pull her into an argument she didn’t want. More importantly, it would deflect her from the point she was trying to make. She had been navigating conversational shoals for years, and brought some of the slipperiest people to the point. She wouldn’t be distracted now.

“I should...help in the kitchen,” Kieren said.

“No, don’t go,” Alannah told him. “I’m nearly done.” She looked at her father. “Kit’s not part of the family. We can’t relax around the table if he’s here. We have to watch everything we say. It ruins the meal. The whole day.”

It was an exaggeration, but not much of one. One of the pleasures of visiting her parents was being able to let down her guard and speak freely, without worrying about who was listening. But she also liked listening to the strangers they brought to the table, and their non-time-travel conversations, so why was she complaining now?

“It’s Thanksgiving,” she added. “Well, the Canadian one, at least. Isn’t it supposed to be about family?”

Veris scowled. “You’ve forgotten the history of Thanksgiving if you think it’s just about family.”

“No, I haven’t,” Alannah shot back. Damn it, he was getting to her. She could feel her irritation building. Many conversations with Veris ended up like this—a battle of wills that she always lost. But not this time.... “You and Mom and *Athar* are so hot about staying current with the culture you’re living in. No one honors the roots of the holiday. Thanksgiving is *all* about family these days.”

“I thought it was all about Black Friday sales, these days,” Veris said, his tone mild. But he’d crossed his arms. Not a good sign.

“It kicks off the Christmas season!” Alannah replied. “Everyone in the family is supposed to sit around the table, eat and drink too much and fall asleep afterwards. It’s traditional! How can we be a family if there are non-family at the table?”

Quietly, Alannah. Your voice is carrying. It was Kieren’s mental voice in her head. He was a natural psychic, which separated him from the psi-filers of the future, who had been developed in a laboratory.

Alannah glanced at Kieren, startled. She *had* been speaking stridently. Damn it, Veris had got under her skin again. Although Marit had an even harder time dealing with him. She and Veris were *always* arguing.

Alannah grimaced. “I’m done,” she said quietly. “I just wanted to register my protest.”

“Which you have,” Veris said, his tone grim.

Alannah sighed. “I just want to relax and enjoy myself, today,” she added, trying to explain herself. Although the damage was done. *Far* was pissed at her.

“Isn’t letting down your guard a luxury here and now?” Kieren asked, his voice very soft, so that only her and *Far* could hear it. Which was the way she should have been speaking all along.

“There, see?” Alannah told her father. “It *is* a luxury,” she added, responding to Kieren. “One I value.”

“It’s one you shouldn’t expect or demand,” Veris replied, at a volume that nearly matched Kieren’s. “You’re lucky you have us and a place where you can be yourself. We passed through most of history and never got to fully relax.”

Alannah didn't quite roll her eyes. Veris rarely beat his chest about how things had been for him in earlier eras, while the stories she'd heard from friends with purely human families told her that the older generations did nothing *but* lecture about how easy everyone had it, these days.

Besides, the conversation with her mother on the phone a week ago had been reverberating in Alannah's mind all week, leaving bloody barbs. How long *did* she have before Veris, Brody and Taylor moved on to a life that didn't include her and Aran and Marit?

Veris telling her she was lucky to have them buried another sharp barb in her heart, and made her shift on her feet. "Exactly!" she railed at Veris. She lowered her voice, but it came out strained, instead. "How long *do* we get before you three are on to your next life? I want to enjoy the time we have left!"

Veris blinked. He glanced at Kieren and Alannah could almost *feel* her father's discomfort. Kieren was family in a way that Kit McDonald would never be, but Veris hated having anyone witness him being slapped around by emotions.

Her father scrubbed at his hair, leaving it ruffled. "We would never leave you, Alannah. Not like that."

"No? Mum thinks differently."

His eyes widened, making the painted blue pop even more than usual.

"Better talk to her, huh?" Alannah added sweetly.

You've made your point. He'll think about it now. Kieren's tone was gentle.

Alannah nodded in agreement. "Well, I should find something to do," she added lamely. She didn't glance toward the kitchen, because she had no intention of going there. Maybe she could head back upstairs and help Jesse with the

kids. Not that babysitting was a favourite occupation for her, but Aran's and Jesse's kids were cute as hell at this age....

Her mom came out of the kitchen, followed by Kit McDonald. Kit wore the same neutral expression he always did. The one that made her think that nothing ever got to him. That he sailed over the top of life and never got involved.

Taylor looked unhappy. She came up to the three of them and looked at Veris. "Kit says he needs to leave. I can't talk him out of it."

Alannah glanced at Kit, her middle sinking in a queasy way. Had he heard her?

But he wasn't looking at her. His gaze was on Veris. His jaw was firm, and Alannah knew with sudden certainty that nothing Veris could say would change Kit's mind.

For a fleeting moment, admiration competed with her guilt. If Kit left now, no matter what Veris said, that would make him one of the few people she knew, beyond Taylor and Brody, who had the strength to resist her father as his most persuasive.

CHAPTER SEVEN



KIT'S TRUCK RATTLED ACROSS THE metal bridge and it was only when the heavy treads of the winter tires bit into the snow on the other side of the deep gully that he realized he'd steered across the bridge without thought. Usually, the lack of railings made him cautious.

At least Veris and Brody had added tarmac to the surface of the bridge over the last couple of years, which gave his tires something to grip instead of frozen grating.

He steered the truck along the steep descent down to the main road, which crossed over the national highway that divided Canmore. The center of town was on the other side from the big log house. So was Kit's house. He'd have to turn

right to reach his house shortly after crossing the highway, although he was tempted to head into town.

He knew why the temptation was there. He was trying to distract himself.

He gripped the steering wheel even harder, letting the truth settle in his chest, instead of fighting it.

Veris' insistence that he eat with the family had been just Veris' opinion. Alannah clearly didn't feel that way about interlopers at the table. No matter what Veris said about friends, Kit hadn't been wanted there.

Working for thirty minutes in the big kitchen had underlined that grim fact. The conversations had flowed around the room. Subjects had shifted quickly and easily, and had left him completely lost.

Nearly all the conversations had been about people everyone knew that he didn't, about events that had happened in the past that everyone knew about that he didn't, and more.

The people in the kitchen were all comfortable with each other, knew each other well enough to tease and joke about foibles and opinions, to argue good naturedly. The arguments were clearly on-going ones.

They had all worked smoothly together under the direction of Raphael, the Latino with ancient eyes and a soft way of speaking. The work had been practiced. They'd clearly all known each other for a very long time, while Kit had been out of place.

And that was fair enough. He wouldn't have wanted a stranger at his family dinner table, either. If he *had* a family dinner table.

He thought of the frozen, shrink-wrapped turkey breast sitting in his freezer. He'd have to take it out when he got

home, so it could thaw in the fridge in time for him to cook it tomorrow. Happy Thanksgiving for one.

Kit shifted in the seat, discomfort skewering him.

The sound of Alannah's voice, lifted with irritation, played out in his memory once more.

He had been brought to surprised stillness, the vegetable peeler paused over the carrot in his hand, when he'd first heard it. He'd had to ignore the conversations around him and really focus on listening to what she said next. But he'd always had good hearing, which had proved valuable on missions.

What Alannah had said about family made perfect sense to him, too, once he'd got over his shock. They all deserved to eat in comfort, to relax and enjoy themselves. Everyone did.

Therefore, he had to leave. There was no choice in it.

As he wheeled the truck onto the well-ploughed main road, Kit played out everything he'd heard Alannah say to her father one more time.

There were odd notes in her reasonable protest. Implications he didn't quite grasp.

She had used his name, which had drawn Kit's attention. He'd missed what she'd said initially, but when he'd concentrated, he'd picked up the rest with only a few missing words that he could fill in for himself.

Alannah hadn't wanted him at the table, because then she couldn't relax. Because she would have to watch what she said. And not just her. Everyone would.

Kit frowned as he moved the truck around the big sweeping bend that the road took, aiming for the highway and the bridge across it.

Why would Alannah and everyone have to watch what they said?

Yeah, most families tended to be a bit more polite with each other, paid attention to the guest and jollied the conversation along so that the guest didn't feel left out. But it wasn't *that* onerous a task if the guest worked to meet them halfway, and he would have. He knew how to hold a conversation when he had to. He'd attended enough regimental dinners where polite conversation had been expected of him.

Alannah had implied that his presence would somehow throttle them. That he would suppress *everyone*.

As the truck zoomed smoothly across the highway, which was nearly empty this late in the day, Kit wondered if there was more to the family than met the eye.

Only...what?

All families had their secrets. Perhaps they just wanted to be able to run down the government or the way the economy sucked without a Canadian hearing them. But that was... trivial.

No, it had to be something bigger than that.

Maybe they were all nudists at heart? The idea made him grin. Or maybe they were all lushes and liked to tie it on good and proper when no one was looking. The stars knew Kit had more than one of them in his extended family, who made big family dinners uncomfortable with their loud voices and indiscreet meanderings. At least they had when he had still been attending big family dinners.

Only, Alannah wasn't like that. And he couldn't recall Veris ever doing more than taking tiny sips of anything. Neither Brody nor Taylor had ever knocked back a drink with relish that he could recall.

But...it just didn't seem to fit with Brody, Veris and Taylor that they would try to hide family indiscretions that way. Or

Alannah, come to that. She had a straight way of looking at herself and others.

He flexed his fingers as he recalled the touch of her flesh against the tip of his. Heat and incredible softness.

She had faced the unpleasant truth about dodging looking for work without flinching.

What would the rest of her feel like? Against his hand, and not just the tip of a finger?

Kit swore as he realized the familiar direction his thoughts were taking him. He snapped on his indicator as the turn came up, and steered carefully around the curved exit, onto the narrow road that would deliver him to the log house that was *his*. Only his house was much smaller than the one he'd just left.

And much emptier.

The thought came to him sideways and made him suck in a breath as discomfort speared him again.

He *did* dump fish and run. It was only when Veris caught him at the door and insisted he step inside that Kit actually stuck around and visited. And yeah, there had been invitations besides those times... All three of them had had Kit's phone number for years and Taylor often phoned and invited him for dinners, barbecues, games nights, and other events.

Kit couldn't remember accepting more than one or two of them over the years.

If the truth was truly stated by what one did, rather than what one said, then hadn't he demonstrated for four years that he didn't think of himself as more than a casual friend to the family?

No wonder Alannah had felt his presence at the table would be intrusive.

Yet Veris had told Kit he considered him to be close enough to the family to be counted *as* family. At least, counted as someone who could sit at Veris' table.

And Kit had been warmly pleased by it.

So what the hell, Kisekawchuck? You wanna fish or cut bait here?

Kit turned into his own roughly cleared driveway and the truck immediately began to shimmy and jerk under his hands. He steered on automatic, his thoughts crowding him, and halted the truck on the hard stand in front of the house. But instead of turning the engine off, he gripped the steering wheel and stared through the windscreen blindly.

Be a friend, or be more than a friend...

What would Alannah prefer?

CHAPTER EIGHT



ALANNAH PUSHED THE HALF-EATEN SLICE of turkey around the puddle of gravy. The turkey was delicious. The gravy was perfectly made, with just the right amount of thickness and with a subtle flavor that lingered on the tongue.

The mashed potatoes were the ideal texture and creaminess. There were green beans in bacon sauce, at the peak of crisp tenderness, the stuffing had lots of sage and onions in it, the corn was creamed, and just the way she liked it

She just couldn't eat any of it. The tight knot that had formed in her belly while *Far*, *Athar* and her mother had walked Kit McDonald to the door and bid him farewell had not eased. When dinner had been announced, and all the pans

and dishes sat steaming on the buffet, she had felt the tension in her gut increase.

Kit should be here, picking up one of the first plates as a guest should do.

Instead, everyone gathered about the buffet, talking quietly. Everyone was family. They could talk about whatever they wanted, and they were. Alannah had got her private family gathering, as requested.

Only now she couldn't relax.

None of her parents would look at her directly and the tension in her gut ratcheted tighter. They blamed her for Kit's departure. Of course they did.

She did, too. But if she refused to eat, then the level of upset in the house would rise even further. It would ruin other people's Thanksgiving, not just hers.

So Alannah had dutifully served herself a meal. Just by adding small dollops of each dish available, she filled her plate. She found a seat at the table where Jesse and Aran were sitting, and managed to choke down enough of the food that no one could accuse her of not eating. Although she ate so slowly that Jesse and Aran were finished long before she was and she felt full long before she thought she could stop eating.

Behind and around her, the other tables were noisy and cheerful. There were more people at the tables that didn't eat or drink than there were humans. Surely they appreciated not having to pretend to eat? They weren't forced to serve themselves a plate and cut everything up and move it around so that it looked like they had eaten some of it. They didn't have to find plant pots to pour their champagne into. They could sit at a bare place setting and just talk with each other about the peculiarities of their life, which was the *real* pleasure for the vampires here.

It certainly sounded as though they were enjoying themselves.

That let the tension in Alannah's gut loosen just a little.

One of the louder voices was Nyara's. When Nyara called for yet another toast, Jesse and Aran looked at each other with indulgent smiles. Alannah realized the corners of her own mouth were lifting, too. Nyara was a vampire when she was in her own time line, but because of the way she and her friends and family moved through time, their symbionts went into hibernation when they were in the past. Any past, and not just a past that pre-dated their turning, the way her family of natural jumpers experienced.

It meant that Nyara could eat and drink as she liked, and she was indulging herself thoroughly, today.

Marit seemed to be enjoying herself just as much. The migraine she had been suffering through was clearly resolved, for she sat at the table with London, Remi and Kieren, and Alannah heard her chatting happily and laughing almost as much as Nyara was.

Alannah let the conversations around her swirl, not really focusing on any of them. Jesse and Aran were happy to chat together about general subjects, which would let Alannah hop in when she wanted to...or not. Alannah knew Aran was pissed at her about making Kit leave. It was only now that Alannah remembered that he and Kit were friends, too. They were near each other in age, although if Aran kept lingering in history, he'd soon be older than Kit. But ever since Kit had taken Aran hiking along one of the more challenging trails in Banff National Park, the two of them had been buddies.

Not that Aran had much time for anyone outside his family, these days.

But he wasn't giving Alannah grief about Kit's departure, making her feel guilty. He hadn't protested when she sat at

their table. He'd just nodded and kept the conversation with Jesse open so that Alannah didn't feel like she was elbowing in on their table.

Sometimes, Aran was a decent guy.

For the first time in this long, horrible day, Alannah let herself drift and let go of all the nubbly problems digging into her mind like mining bits and tried to talk herself into eating just a few more bites before everything cooled off and become inedible. Then she could go find an isolated spot in the house, with a glass of whisky to sip, and call the day saved, for everyone but her seemed to be happy.

“...probably wouldn't be here at all except for that idiot Rufus Shore.” Nyara's voice lifted above the others. Her tone was withering, with a hard note of ruthless judgement that only true leaders could manage to inject.

The conversations around the table faltered, because everyone here knew who Rufus Shore was.

Alannah turned to check on Brody. Rufus Shore had done more to screw up her father's life than anyone else here.

No, he had screwed up the lives of *all* her parents.

Brody's expression was completely blank. He was holding in his reaction. And Alannah was not the only one who had swiveled to check on him.

Brody lifted his hand a little, a flat gesture that seemed to indicate calmness. “Old history,” he said, his tone even.

Alannah knew he was lying. Everyone else must surely see that, too. Rufus Shore had brought Dara, Brody's older brother, forward to this time from the fifth century, then *left* him here. Dara had put Brody through weeks of torture just to pay him back for having lived so long and for finding personal happiness. He had forced Brody to convince Taylor and Veris

he was leaving them. He had put Taylor and Veris through a different kind of hell.

And then there was Nial, from the other timeline, whom Dara had also abducted and pushed into a titanium cage to rot, leaving Winter and Sebastian to mourn for weeks and search uselessly for their lost mate all over their world.

When Brody's gaze settled on Alannah and his eyes narrowed, Alannah realized she was rubbing the side of her head. That was where the baseball bat had slammed into her head. The memory of the impact felt almost as though it had happened all over again. Her skin tingled, and her skull seemed to throb, as impossible as that was.

She put her hand down hastily. No need to make Brody feel any more guilty about the role he had been forced to play in his mad older brother's plans. Dara and his men had beaten Alannah with the bat to force Brody's hand, but Winter had not just cured her, she had made Alannah whole as if nothing had ever happened to her. Alannah hadn't suffered so much as a headache afterwards.

But Brody had carried the guilt for *years* and sometimes she still caught a glimpse of darkness in his eyes, when he thought no one was observing him, while he watched Taylor and Veris, and sometimes when she caught him studying *her*. Alannah wouldn't add more shadow to that darkness. Not today.

She smiled at Brody, trying to convey all her thoughts in that single expression.

"Oh, it's not old history at all," Nyara replied to Brody's airy assurance.

Alannah's gut tightened.

"Nyara, no," Cael Stelios said from Veris' table.

Alannah couldn't see Nyara from where she was sitting, not without leaning far to one side. But she imagined Nyara looking at her mate, perhaps only now realizing how loose her tongue had become, and maybe looking a touch uncomfortable.

“What do you mean, it's not old history?” Taylor said, her tone sharp. “Didn't you deal with Rufus Shore? Isn't he...out of commission?”

Alannah remembered the way Taylor and Veris had sat immobile for *days* after Brody had left them. Her mother had been less than an automaton. And Christmas that year had been...

Alannah shivered, remembering how Veris had become almost catatonic with stress and emotions. Alexander had rendered him unconscious with his vampire sedative, so that he could recover.

Yes, her mother would leap upon any hint that Rufus Shore might still be able to ruin their lives.

“He was penalized,” Cael Stelios said, his tone grave. “His actions were made public. His academic career was destroyed, and his credentials stripped from him, which meant he could not teach or coach or use his expertise in any way that might earn him money.”

“He should have been put into prison!” London said, from a seat where Alannah could not see her. But the plummy English accent was unmistakable. These days, it was threaded with the slightest of French accents, as she and Neven and Remi lived in Brittany. “He was directly responsible for hurting people and causing the death of others by his negligence.”

Cael gave her a small smile. “There is no prison that can contain a vampire who has learned how to jump through time

using teleportation. We had to rely upon the condemnation of his peers and colleagues to punish Shore.”

Alannah *could* see Neven shaking his head. “Hell of a system,” he muttered.

“Shore was a typical academic,” Kieren said in his deep, rumbling voice. “His ego was flayed by the loss of his reputation and social standing. His family left him. His colleagues would have nothing to do with him. He couldn’t find work for weeks and was forced to take on menial work, which he did badly and was frequently fired. He lost his house, and sold most of his possessions to make rent. Trust me, he *was* punished.”

And Kieren would know. He was a natural psychic. He’d probably dipped into Shore’s mind to read the effectiveness of the penalties Nyara’s organization had doled out.

Veris sat back and crossed his arms, which allowed Alannah to see him in between Rafe on one table and Cael on the other. “But if a prison can’t hold him, then there was nothing stopping him from jumping back into history. Maybe to find a better life back there?”

His tone was silky smooth. His expression was as flat and unexpressive as Brody’s. He was holding in all his feelings, too.

Alannah shivered.

Cael sighed. “Yes,” he admitted. “He jumped back somewhere in history. Unfortunately, he knows a great many bookmarks, as he was a historian with a wide range of eras in which he was an expert.”

Alannah sighed. She wasn’t the only one who made that sound, either.

“What are you doing to find him?” Veris asked sharply.

“Everything we can,” C  el said just as firmly.

“We shouldn’t be, though,” Nyara added.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“He’s a vampire,” Nyara said. “His symbiont won’t last in stasis back there. If he doesn’t jump back to his own time, he’ll die of stasis poisoning.” She made a soft sound and added, “We should let him.”

“Nyara...” C  el’s tone was chiding.

“Why not?” she demanded. “My people are turning history upside down, poking into every cranny that we even suspect he might know, looking for him. They’re risking stasis poisoning of their own. Why should they risk their necks for him?”

Alannah realized that despite her clear words and even tone, Nyara was *very* drunk.

“Where *are* you looking?” Veris demanded. His tone was still flat and emotionless. He hadn’t forgiven Nyara yet.

C  el waved his hand. “Every bookmark he’s ever been jumped to, and would now know for himself.”

“Including fifth century Britain?” Taylor asked. Her tone was still sharp. Alannah guessed what was driving that sharpness. Taylor was indignant and angry, ready to fight to spare her husbands further pain.

“First place we looked,” Nyara said.

“We didn’t expect to find him there, because it *was* the first place we thought to look,” C  el added. “But we looked anyway.”

Veris’ posture was unrelenting. His jaw flexed. “He’ll have gone back to a time that he’s comfortable with. One he knows well and likes.”

Brody leaned forward. “Did you look at his theses? The ones he wrote for his minor degrees? What were they on?”

“Kieren?” Cáel said, with an apologetic note in his voice.

Kieren frowned, clearly dredging his memory.

“Kieren is one of the co-captains leading the hunt,” Cáel added.

Kieren’s frown smoothed out. “Fifth and sixth century Britain. I remember thinking the man was a one note wonder. It’s not a popular destination for tourists *or* academics. After he got his doctorate, he moved onto eras for which funding was more certain.”

Brody sat back. “That’s where he is, then.”

“Not possible,” Kieren said flatly. “We turned that time upside down.”

Veris lifted a finger. “You turned the place upside down for the time you could stay there, which is how long?”

Kieren’s jaw rippled. He glanced at Cáel.

“We’ve had travelers last for over nine months, if they were fresh and their symbiont well rested,” Cáel said carefully and slowly. “But they were exceptions, not an average. The travelers who managed it were highly motivated. They knew to take it easy, to not exert themselves overly much, to stay as healthy as they could, to avoid even minor infections—which is harder than you think.”

“In any era, and for any of us,” Veris said, his tone still smooth. “But Kieren’s people were actively hunting a man and there are no interwebs there to track down his social accounts.”

Cáel blinked.

“Neural nets,” Kieren said softly.

Cáel nodded, his puzzlement evaporating.

Kieren turned to look at Veris. “We lasted six weeks.” His tone was almost apologetic. *Almost*.

Veris got to his feet, which meant everyone could see him. “We can stay there for years, if we need to. We can spend months travelling up and down Britain and across Europe, hunting down every little hint or rumor.” He was looking at Cáel and Nyara. “And Brody and I know that time and place. We lived through it.”

Brody sat up straighter. His expression was still controlled but Alannah could almost *feel* his eagerness.

Her mother was smiling, her gaze upon Veris, her eyes shining.

“*We* will find Rufus Shore,” Veris finished.

CHAPTER NINE



WHEN EVERYONE REALIZED THAT VERIS meant to leave immediately, the interior of the house took on a frantic air. Kieren was sent back to the future to gather information that would pinpoint an exact date for Taylor to aim for, even though Taylor and the other jumpers in the house said that she didn't need the data—the bookmark would already be there on the timeline, if she was meant to go there.

Cáel and Nyara—who suddenly seemed a lot more sober than she had before Veris' announcement—consulted with Veris and Taylor and Brody over by the kitchen door, their voices low.

Everyone else busied themselves with clearing the dinner tables, and cleaning up the meal and the dishes. Every now and then, Veris would call out to someone as they passed, and include them in the conversation. David was one of them, and he remained in the small group, his head down, speaking as softly as the others.

Alannah cleared the tables, then volunteered to wash the dishes that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher. Anything to keep moving and not have to think about the time jump her parents were about to make...or the possibly years-long search they would undertake at the other end of the jump.

They wouldn't have to contend with being separated when they arrived, because Taylor would complete a compound jump, taking their contemporary bodies across the timescape, instead of mentally inserting everyone into their bodies in the arrival time. They couldn't risk a linear jump like that because Brody might be inserted into the body of a young boy, and Veris could very well still be in what would become Norway, or Saxony, where he went when his village drove him out for killing his beloved wife, Tyra. Who had been Taylor, who had disappeared when she had returned to this time.

Oh, the complications of time travel!

Alannah had grown up listening to the tales of doom and disaster that her parents, and Alex and Rafe and Sydney and even Neven and Remi and London had shared.

So she kept herself busy, not letting her mind rest for too long on the risks her parents were facing.

Taylor found her in the butler's pantry, carefully stacking the piles of dinner plates and flatware that were used only for big family gatherings like this one...and were used more often than one might think.

Taylor was dressed in the closest to fifth century clothing that Sydney and London had been able to procure with zero

notice. The treads were modern tartan, and the leather strapping below Taylor's knees was too well cured and too smooth. The tunic over the top looked like a cheap, badly made cosplay garment and was whiter than any real fifth century garment could aspire to, thanks to modern chemicals. The belt holding it in around her mother's waist had shiny rivets that made it anachronistic, but not enough to make anyone suspicious.

The cape she wore wasn't really a cape. It didn't have a hood or shaped shoulders. It was a flat, hemmed piece of thick woolen fabric, a dark green that probably also had never been seen in the fifth century. But the brooch holding it around Taylor's shoulders looked utterly authentic—a beaten silver moon shape with a blue stone.

Her mother had wound her hair into a knot at the back of her head and pinned it.

“Not braids?” Alannah asked, trying to recall illustrations she'd seen of costumes in the fifth century.

“Saxon women wore braids,” Taylor said. “The last thing we can afford is to be mistaken for Saxons, especially with Veris' coloring.” She tugged at the treads distastefully. “These will mark us as strangers, anyway. I'll have to find more clothes as soon as we get there.”

Alannah nodded. Blending in with the locals was a survival axiom Veris often repeated. “If they rub blue paint into their bellies, you do it, too,” he would say. “You follow their faith, speak their language at all times, and obey the local laws, even if that means you have to sleep with the ugly head wife to avoid offense. And you'd better, by the stars, leave the head wife smiling afterwards, too.”

Taylor rested her hand on Alannah's shoulder. “We won't be gone long, from your perspective. A week. Maybe two. I

don't want to arrive too close to when we left. It helps us orient back to the present time if some time has elapsed."

Alannah nodded briskly. "Especially if you do spend years back there."

"I wonder...would you mind popping back here to check the house, while we're gone?" Taylor asked diffidently. "I can't ask Aran and these migraines of Marit's worry me—I don't want her to exert herself with big jumps from Australia."

"I can just stay here, if you like," Alannah offered.

"But...your job," Taylor said, puzzled.

"I got fired, Mom. A week ago. And I can job search from here as easily as I can from my apartment. It's all email and phone calls, these days."

"Fired! Oh, Alannah!"

Alannah shook her head. "It feels completely unimportant now," she said truthfully. "Besides, I need to rethink my priorities. I don't know if I'll be heading back to L.A. after this."

Taylor held her at arms' length, her gaze roaming over Alannah. "It's been too long since we talked."

"We talked last week."

"I mean *really* talked," Taylor said. "I know I upset you last week. Did...does that have something to do with why you're thinking about a change of careers?"

"Our phone call was a catalyst, Mom, not a reason. I think this has been building up for a while. I have a complicated... well, it's difficult to live a completely normal life. *You* know."

"I do," Taylor admitted. "Well, if you're staying here, that will let me relax a little more about everything at this end."

“I’ll be chewing fingernails the whole time you’re gone,” Alannah said bluntly. “It’s not going to be fun at your end.”

Her mother nodded. “It’s not,” she said. “But I’ll be with two of the most capable and ruthless survivors I’ve ever met. They know the time, the place, and how the people think. They even know the language.” She grimaced. “I’m going to have to learn it the hard way.”

“You’ll have years.”

“I’ll have days to not sound like a suspicious stranger,” Taylor amended gently.

“True,” Alannah agreed. “But you’re good at languages. *Far* is the one who will *look* like a stranger.”

Taylor’s smile was knowing. “He’ll trade services as a physician. They can pass anywhere and be accepted readily.”

“*Athar* will be the singer,” Alannah guessed. Singers in those times were entertainers and could find ready coin in any inn, tavern or village firepit, if they could tell a good story, play a lively tune and pass along fresh news.

“And I’ll be the dutiful, silent wife to one of them, as needed. Plus I’ll collect the money.” Taylor winked.

“Because women didn’t carry coins back then,” Alannah guessed.

“Robbers would look for a purse on Brody or Veris first,” Taylor agreed.

Alannah shivered. “I pity the stupid robber that tries.”

“So do I.” Taylor laughed and held out her arms. “Come here. This will have to do until we get back. Then you and I will head somewhere—oh, I know! Tuscany in the 1920s, for a plate of pasta each, and a big jug of the local wine. And we’ll talk.”

Tuscany in the 1920s meant that Taylor would be human and could eat, and both of them, with their dark hair, could pass for natives in a pinch.

“Sounds good, mom,” Alannah told her, stepping out of the hug. “I can hear *Far’s* voice getting louder. He wants to go.”

They moved out of the pantry, through the kitchen and into the front room, where everyone was assembling.

Veris and Brody were also dressed more or less like contemporary fifth century men. Alannah suspected that one or more local theatre groups might be short a costume or two. The swords on their hips, though, were the real things. Alannah didn’t know if both men had carried them through history from the fifth century, but she did know they had been in Brody’s and Veris’ possession for at least a few centuries, from a time when a man wore a sword every day, if he wanted to live to sunset, and his family with him. The swords would declare them as men capable of defending themselves.

They also wore knives on their belts, but those, Alannah knew, were considered to be little more than eating implements by contemporaries, while *she* knew both men could kill or maim just as easily with the knives as they could the swords. And if pushed to it, they could do without either.

Alannah drew in a long, long breath, reaching for calm. Her mother was right. Veris and Brody were survivors. And her mother had a will made of titanium. The three of them would be fine. They *would* be. And Alannah would tell herself that over and over, as often as needed, for the next two weeks.

“If you find Shore, bring him back to this time,” Kieren said.

“‘When’, you mean,” Brody said flatly, with his chin turned to examine the fold he was making in his mantle, as he arranged it over his shoulder.

“Fine, ‘when’,” Kieren replied. “I won’t argue about the chance that he’s anywhere else but Arthurian Britain, as you’re determined he’s there. When and if you find him, bring him here. A delayed letter drop to us will bring me here as soon as you arrive. I’ll bring a few capable people to help me take him back to our time.”

Veris looked at Cael. “Interesting that you’re not trying to talk us out of this.”

Cael smiled. “Talk *you* out of something?” He gave a little shrug. “You *are* the best people to do this. I’m actually kicking myself that we didn’t think of this sooner.”

Alannah studied Nyara, who stood still and silent, watching the preparation. She wondered if Nyara *had* thought of this sooner. But if she had, why not just ask? Why the drunken slip of the tongue act?

Because Veris would have objected to the idea on principal...because it hadn’t been his idea. The thought whispered in Alannah’s mind and she held her teeth together to stop her jaw from dropping as she studied *Far*. Would he have objected to the request? Maybe twenty years ago, he might have. She recalled him as a tall, blustery, loud-voiced man who treated everyone else with scathing disdain, but for her had only gentle hands and warm eyes, and could settle her to sleep with a few soft words.

Nyara might not understand how much her fathers had changed in such a short time in their very long lives. She might even believe that change wasn’t possible. For vampires who could live for multiple centuries, it would be easy to assume that change, if it came at all, came slowly.

Only, Veris and Brody had been living among humans, intimately involved in their lives and passing as human in the most complete way possible. While Nyara and her people

lived openly as vampires, without compromise or the need to take on human guises.

Taylor joined Brody and Veris, making a tight grouping. She held out her arms and both men stepped into them without hesitation.

Alannah held her breath.

“Two weeks,” Taylor promised, looking at her.

Alannah nodded.

“Bring chains and handcuffs,” Veris told Kieren.

“Good luck!” Alexander called.

“Be careful!” Sydney added.

“No, just be smarter than everyone else,” Neven growled.

“And...” Taylor said, bending her knees. “Now.”

The three of them disappeared.

CHAPTER TEN



A week later.

EVEN AS HE WAS CROSSING the metal bridge, which rattled now the snow had melted, Kit knew that something was wrong.

Taylor's bright red Jeep with the big tires sat where it usually did. Brody's Mazda MX-5 was beside it, under a waterproof tarpaulin to protect it from the worst of the winter. It wouldn't move from that spot until the snow melted in the spring.

Veris didn't have a car. He seemed to be happy to have one or the other of his spouses drive him anywhere he wanted to go, so the lack of a third car meant nothing.

But still, the hairs on the back of Kit's neck tried to stand upright, making him shiver under his coat.

He steered up the short incline to the flat shelf of land where the house and the small grove of pine trees were, and came to halt beside Taylor's truck. He stayed in the seat, his hands on the wheel and studied the house.

There was nothing out of place. No obvious signs of violence.

Moving slowly, his heart thumping, Kit lowered the driver's window and listened.

Nothing. Not a single human-made sound. No low-voiced conversations or the rattle of dishes or pots emerging from the half-open window. It was the window next to the big range in the kitchen. The matching window on the other side was closed.

There was no sound but the lonely murmur of the wind in the top of the pines, sounding cold and thin.

Kit closed the window and got out of the truck, shut the door quietly and stood still, every sense stretched to the maximum, taking in everything. From a tree behind the house, high up by the tip, a squirrel chattered angrily at him. The mountains that seemed to leap up toward the sky from directly behind the house bounced sound with the efficiency of cold rock. He could hear the tap-tap of goats' hooves as they clambered up the sheer cliffs.

Nothing else.

The open window bothered Kit. If the house was truly empty, it shouldn't be open.

He moved with cautious slowness around to the front of the house and the verandah with its stupendous view of the valley and Canmore. His hand was hovering by his hip, a leftover

from his Army days. He neither resented the old habit, nor welcomed it. It was just a part of his past, that was all.

He stepped up onto the verandah. He hadn't until now realized that it squeaked, just as verandahs did in the movies.

His heart picked up its pace a little more.

Normally, he would move straight over to the front door and use the brass knocker. As no one had popped up from behind the wood pile or the shed, he could do that now.

He refused to call the structure situated behind the pines a barn, despite it being painted red and having a big door and a loft. It had never protected livestock and, as far as he was aware, hay had never been stored in the loft. It was a workshop and would be protection for Brody's car when winter fully arrived, which was only a few weeks away now.

Kit tried to shake off the cold fingers walking up his spine by calling himself paranoid. He moved over to the front door and gripped the brass knocker.

The door wavered open at his touch.

Kit bent to examine the latch, although he didn't need to get that close to see the raw wood and splinters. The lock had been busted open.

He straightened, swallowed, and fought the need to look over his shoulder. There was no one out there. He'd visually checked every possible hiding place as he'd walked around to the front of the house.

Instead, he put one foot inside the house and leaned in and bellowed. "Taylor! Veris! Brody!"

Silence.

"Anyone!" Kit shouted.

No one answered.

He studied the front room. Nothing looked out of place. The chairs were not tipped over. They sat where they usually did. The room was mildly cluttered – books, an overflowing basket of toys in the corner, a tablet PC sitting beside an empty mug on a side table. The cushions on the window seat had been disturbed and a blanket was tossed to one end. Had someone snoozed there?

“Hello!” Kit called again. He weighed up moving further into the house, his gut instincts fighting with good sense.

Finally, he stepped out once more, moved over to the verandah steps and sat on the top one. He pulled out his phone, scrolled through his contact and dialed, and was grateful when the call was answered almost immediately.

“Kit McDonald,” Aran said, sounding pleased. “What mountain moved to make you phone me?”

“That’s just it,” Kit said. “I think some sort of mountain *has* moved.” Quickly, he explained what he had found—or not found, in this case. Because Aran was a friend of sorts, he added, “It just doesn’t feel right.”

“Gut talking?” Aran asked. He wasn’t laughing or blowing it off as Kit being paranoid, at least.

“Shouting,” Kit admitted.

Aran blew out his breath. “Here’s the thing,” he said heavily. “My folks are in Europe for a couple of weeks. Alannah is watching the house.”

Kit felt as though the verandah had given way beneath him. For what felt a very long thirty seconds, he was in free fall. Then the world righted, his orientation snapped back in, and he found the verandah was still beneath him, solid and unmoving. His heart thundered. “Alannah,” he breathed.

“Yeah,” Aran confirmed. “Here’s the other thing...” He paused.

Kit wondered if it was his own imagination, which was now spinning toward uncontrolled, that made him think Aran's pause was filled with caution and awkwardness. "What's the other thing?" His voice was strained.

"I got goosed by something, about twenty-four hours ago," Aran said. "I just landed in Canmore. I chartered a helicopter from Calgary airport."

Kit let out a breath that trembled. "Is that a twin thing?"

"I suppose. Alannah wasn't answering text messages or calls. I knew I had to get there. I'm waiting for the uber guy now."

"Archie," Kit supplied, for there was only one uber guy in Canmore, bravely trying to take on the local cab companies.

"Go into the house," Aran told him. "Check everywhere. I'll be there in a few minutes. I can see the car coming now."

"Okay," Kit said, standing up.

"Soon," Aran promised and hung up.

Kit put his phone away and turned back to the front door. He felt better about stepping into the house now that Aran had told him to go ahead. He moved back through the doorway and systematically quartered the house.

There were signs everywhere of someone living here alone. A single cup and plate in the kitchen sink. Only one unmade bed, in a room that wasn't the main suite. A duffel bag in the corner of the room, with lingerie and teeshirts peeping through the unzipped opening.

All the boots in the mud room were dry except for one pair.

And a lone laptop sat at the head of the long table in the dining room. The table had been restored to the center of the room where it usually lived. The laptop lid was closed, but the

computer was charging. The lead ran across the floor to the nearest power outlet.

Apart from the busted lock on the front door, there was no other sign of violence, not even subtle ones that a civilian would miss.

But the open window in the kitchen implied that Alannah had left the house suddenly, with no time to take care of things like shutting windows. Even if Alannah didn't care about leaving her computer plugged in, the open window told another story.

Did she leave of her own free will? The question nagged him. His gut said she'd been taken. Only...why? Even sex traffickers would find hauling their asses to Canmore and trying to smuggle someone out of the country too much effort. Violent abductions only happened in the movies.

Unless they'd just happened to be in the area.... Only it wasn't prime tourist season. Canmore was in one of the quiet periods, before the snow came in properly and the ski runs opened. But that didn't mean *no* tourists swinging through the town on their way to Banff. If one of the wrong types of people had spotted Alannah in Canmore.... Maybe she'd gone into town to have a drink where there were people, or to buy groceries. Perhaps she had been spotted and followed home where the asshole, or assholes, had learned she was on her own here and vulnerable.

Kit strode out of the house, his gut roiling and his heart going way too fast. He came to a halt with his thighs up against the guard rail along the edge of the verandah, and gripped the railing.

But he couldn't just stand there.

He moved down to the other end of the verandah, his fists balled and his heels thudding heavily.

Then back again.

No way could it be traffickers. They picked on prey that were easier to get out of the country. Woman and kids, mostly, in cities near ports. That meant the Greater Vancouver area. Not mountain-locked Canmore.

But telling himself that did not lower his heart rate.

He had completed eleven laps of the verandah when the blue Ford Explorer that Archie drove turned into the road up to the house. Kit caught the blue glitter from the corner of his eyes and turned to watch the Explorer climb up the path to the bridge, then, finally, to halt in front of the house.

Aran climbed down from the front passenger seat, said something that made Archie laugh, handed over cash, and took a small but stuffed-full backpack from the back seat and waved as Archie did a careful three point turn and drove back down the hill.

Aran came over to the verandah to where Kit stood. “Nothing, then,” he guessed, studying Kit’s face.

“Signs she’s been here. Nothing to say why she’s not anymore,” Kit replied.

“Only a busted lock and an open window,” Aran said softly, glancing over Kit’s shoulder.

“And my gut,” Kit added. He didn’t care about being called paranoid now.

“And she’s not answering anything,” Aran added. He lifted his phone to his ear.

Kit heard the call go through. The ring at the other end. Then the mellow voice of the voicemail prompt.

Aran disconnected with a grimace. “Same shit, twenty-four hours now.”

“She hasn’t blocked you for some reason? You two didn’t fight?”

Aran looked affronted.

“Man, I fight with my family all the freaking time,” Kit said with feeling. “You didn’t say something bad enough for her to ghost you?”

Aran’s mouth pulled into another rueful expression. “Nothing *that* bad,” he said. “So you call her. She’ll answer a call from you, at least.”

“I don’t have her number,” Kit said.

“Shit. Okay. Hang on.” Aran put his duffel on the edge of the verandah at the top of the stairs, then swiped at his phone.

Kit’s phone buzzed. Aran’s text message had Alannah’s phone number, which Kit’s phone had helpfully turned into a live link for instant dialing. He thumbed the link.

The call connected and rang. And rang.

Kit let it ring out and the computer voice kick in, then disconnected.

“She could be in Canmore.” Aran’s tone said he didn’t believe that any more than Kit did.

“Or Calgary,” Kit said.

“She didn’t take Mom’s truck,” Aran pointed out. “I’m going to check the house. Maybe that will tell me something that you missed.”

Kit stepped aside. “If you can find *anything* that sheds light on this...”

Aran nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ARAN PAUSED JUST INSIDE THE front door. He didn't bother examining the lock. Kit had told him it was busted because someone had forced the door in from the outside, and Aran trusted Kit enough that he didn't need to confirm it for himself. Instead, he looked around the room.

There were signs everywhere that Alannah had been here. Cups and books, and the window seat that she loved to use for snoozes during the day, and the blanket she had kicked to the end of the seat instead of folding it.

Typical Alannah.

"Just one person has been living here for a few days," Kit said, behind him.

“Yep. Mom and *Athar* and *Far* left a week ago, right after Thanksgiving.”

“They didn’t mention the trip,” Kit said.

“It was unexpected. A friend of theirs rented a villa on the sunshine coast in Spain. They jumped at the chance of a few days of no snow.” The lie came easily and sounded very sincere, because Aran had been lying like this all his life. He barely had to think about it.

He also couldn’t tell Kit that he’d jumped to Canmore the moment Kit had told him about the busted door lock, then lied about having the willies twenty-four hours before, lied about the helicopter charter, but had waved down the uber guy so that he arrived at the house the conventional way. All of it he’d done without thinking.

He also couldn’t tell Kit that he knew Alannah was somewhere in Canmore. He’d found her instantly on the timescape. And he would have considered that perfectly normal except for the busted lock.

And Kit’s screaming instincts.

He would have to find some way that looked human-normal of letting Kit know she was in the town. Aran mulled over the problem as he moved through the house. Everything looked perfectly normal to him. More normal than even Kit felt it should be. The clutter was typical for Alannah. She *did* clean up after herself, but only on her own terms and in her own sweet time, when it was convenient.

Aran wondered if perhaps the busted lock was completely innocent. Maybe she was in town buying hardware to fix it. Maybe she’d kicked it in while having a temper tantrum. The stars knew she had something on her mind these days that wasn’t making her very happy.

This could all be perfectly innocent and explainable, except that Kit was convinced that it wasn't.

Aran moved upstairs, Kit trailing him, and straight into Alannah's old room. The strewn clothes and bras hanging out of her duffel bag were pure Alannah, too. Aran moved around the room, while Kit stood just beyond the door, wearing an awkward expression.

The door had swung half-closed while Aran moved around the room. Hanging on the back of it was Alannah's handbag.

Aran's gut tightened. He took the bag off the hook, opened the door once more, and held the bag out for Kit to see. "Her handbag. She doesn't go anywhere without this. I bought it for her. It's her favorite."

Kit considered the bag. "Looks well loved," he agreed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"No, you don't understand," Aran said. "This is a 1923 Hermes Kelly bag. It's worth...I've got no idea. I won't tell you how much I paid for it, because the current market value is fucking outrageous and I'd be embarrassed to mention a figure."

In fact, he had bought the bag from Hermes *in* 1923, long before the style of bag was called a Kelly bag, because Grace Kelly hadn't even been born, then. It had cost him a few francs. But Alannah, who knew her status symbols, had been beside herself with joy over the bag, when he'd given it to her for her birthday.

"But that's the thing," Aran continued. "She didn't care how much it was worth. She just loved the bag and used it *like* a bag, instead of putting it in a hermetically sealed vault and waiting for it to increase in value before she sold it to buy a house."

Kit gave a half-laugh, wearing a baffled expression. “A bag is worth a *house*?”

“*This* bag is worth the down payment on one,” Aran told him. “And ‘lannah took it everywhere.” He hefted the bag. “I really think there is a kitchen sink in here, too.”

Kit gave a bemused smile. Then his smile faded. “She would have taken it with her if she was in Canmore.”

“Or Calgary,” Aran said in agreement. He hung the bag back on the hook behind the door. Kit was talking him into this. He was starting to worry that the busted door didn’t have an innocent explanation. That even though Aran could see Alannah on the timescape, she *was* in trouble of some sort.

He could just jump to where she was. There might be a bookmark on the timescape that would take him straight to her. Only bookmarks weren’t *that* precise. He could land in the middle of Canmore and still have no idea where she was.

And he couldn’t jump away with Kit watching him like he was, expecting Aran to produce...who the hell knew what. Intelligence that would tell them both where Alannah was right now?

Only there was no way to tell Kit he knew she was in Canmore. Not without some evidence that would make sense to a normal human.

Aran moved out of the room, and up along the corridor to the top of the stairs. The little kiddie gate cutting off the reading area from the stairs and the hall was still in place from Thanksgiving. He spotted the bright neon orange stuffie that India adored, lying on the floor by the armchair.

Automatically, he headed in that direction, stepping over the gate. It was hardwired into him now to pick up anything that might lead to one of the twins tripping, or get in the way of one of the triplets, or worse.

He bent and picked up the stuffie and grew still.

“What’s wrong?” Kit said instantly. The man had to be taut as a wire to notice Aran’s alarm straight away like that.

“Alannah’s cell phone. It’s on the floor here, next to the armchair.”

Kit almost bounced over the gate. He hurried around the chair and bent and picked up the phone. He turned it over and over. “That’s explains the no-answering.”

Aran curled his hands into fists. “I can maybe accept Alannah leaving without her bag. Maybe. But *not* her cellphone. She *lived* on that thing. Her contact list is a who’s who of Hollywood and she was always texting or talking to *someone*. She absolutely would not leave it behind.”

Kit swiped at the screen. “Not if she had any choice.” His tone was bleak. “PIN protected.”

“Try 10-15,” Aran said.

Kit tapped four times, then looked at Aran and raised his brow.

“My folks’ anniversary, which is a family secret.” As they’d been married in Nepal in a ceremony that the US government was still trying to decide was legal or not. The Canadian government hadn’t batted an eyelid. Menages were legal, here.

Kit swiped through the screen. “Your calls, my call, and a lot of other names I don’t know, and some I actually do know. I’ve seen them on TV. But no unlisted, unregistered numbers. It all looks perfectly normal.”

“They didn’t reach her that way, then,” Aran muttered.

Kit handed the phone back to Aran. “I’m going to find her.”

“No, I should. I’m her brother.” And he had resources and abilities he couldn’t exercise while Kit was dogging him. “You

stay here. Fix the door. Guard the house.”

Kit took a step forward as Aran turned to leave. He held up his hand. “You *can't* man. You're not Canadian and you're not set up for this thing. You just got off a goddamn plane, all you have on you is a duffel bag.”

“You have less,” Aran said coldly.

“I don't need more than I have,” Kit said, his tone just as cold.

“I can call in my uncles. Alex and Remi and Rafe and Neven. And Sydney. She kicks ass.”

Kit's jaw grew hard. “And I remember one of them telling me they lived in Spain. And France. You want to wait another twenty-four hours for them to get here?”

Aran seethed with frustration. He had to get Kit out of here and contained so he could go to work.

Kit stepped over the gate and over to the top of the stairs, before Aran realized he was leaving.

“No, wait, you can't get involved, Kit,” Aran said quickly.

Kit paused, five steps down. One eye peered at Aran up through the banister railings. “Too late.” His tone was bleak. “And I'm the only one who *can* do this. Trust me.”

Aran shook his head. “You don't know what you're getting into.”

“Do you?”

Aran hesitated. The shape of it, he could guess. This, whatever it was, had to have something to do with time. But what it was, exactly, he couldn't begin to guess. All the family's known enemies had been accounted for, years ago. And he couldn't say any of that to Kit. “I don't know exactly...” he began, before realizing where that would lead

him—into territory he couldn't speak of. He halted, his frustration rising.

Kit's gaze was steady. "You don't want to be a part of this."

Aran tried to protest, but he would not speak of family again. His parents thought highly of Kit and nothing Aran had learned of the man refuted their opinion. Telling him to butt out of family business seemed...ungrateful.

Kit gripped the down rail, his knuckles turning white. "You've got kids, man," he said softly.

Aran let out a silent sigh and squeezed the stuffie in his hand. *True.*

Kit nodded, as if Aran had spoken aloud. "I've got this."

"Kit," Aran said quickly, as the man turned to continue down the stairs.

He looked back.

"She's somewhere in Canmore," Aran said flatly, not qualifying the statement in any way. Let Kit make of it what he wanted.

Kit considered him. "More twin stuff?"

"Yes," Aran lied without a quiver.

CHAPTER TWELVE



KIT KNEW HIS JUDGEMENT WAS compromised by emotion, so he drove with care down the short slope to the metal bridge across the gully. At the same time he made himself take deep, rhythmic breaths designed to flood his system with calming hormones.

The truck rattled across the bridge onto the western bank, when Kit braked sharply. He let the engine idle, while a silent voice jabbered at him.

Was there something on the bridge or by the bridge that had goosed him when he arrived? Was that the thing that had convinced him something was wrong at the house?

Kit switched off the engine and got out. Moving slowly, he cast about the area in front of the bridge. Directly in front of the bridge, the graders and shovels had flattened out the slope up to the gully. But where the man-made level fell away, there was a shallow but wide depression in the road where snow melt had gathered into a muddy puddle.

Tire tracks climbed into and out of the puddle, leaving mud that had dried into a solid record of cars coming and going.

Kit bent to examine the ground beside the puddle farthest from the bridge. Vehicles coming to the house would not leave as distinct a set of prints as cars leaving, for they would have relatively dry tires.

The waffle tracks, the newest, were Archie's Explorer. Also new were the wide treads of Kit's truck. There were many more sets of chevron shaped tracks that matched the winter tires on Taylor's Jeep.

Kit crouched, examining the many tracks, sorting them out. He turned his head, then shuffled around the puddle to look more closely.

There. There was a set of tracks that did not match any of the others. It was faint, and had been nearly obliterated by the two sets of tracks—Archie's and Kit's—that had come after it.

But on the far side of the puddle, the strange set of tracks had jinked sideways by nearly a foot as the car emerged from the puddle. As it was *leaving*. Had the driver been surprised by the puddle? Or distracted in some other way? Say, something in the car with him?

Kit made himself take another controlled breath, tamping down his reaction to that possibility.

Because the car had emerged from the puddle, the tracks were built up into a near-perfect Braille representation of the tire tread.

Kit bent even closer to study them.

There were white flecks among the nearly black dirt. White flecks that weren't local.

Kit frowned, reached out and nudged one of the raised ridges with a finger. It crumbled apart.

The white wasn't small pebbles. It fell apart as the grey earth did, then, as a breeze wafted by, the white flecks lifted up and drifted away. They were lighter and smaller than the grey dirt.

Kit patted his pockets and found a pen, one of the very old ones with a clear case and a simple cap at the top and the nib at the bottom, without a click top, a clip, or fancy ergonomic design. The stars above knew how long it had sat at the bottom of his pocket. Years, likely.

He pulled the plastic ink tube out of the shell and broke it off at the nib, then shoved the nib back into the case, making sure it was sitting firmly. Then he took the cap off the back end and carefully scooped up as much of the white flecks as he could, while trying to avoid the grey dirt. When the pen case was three-quarters full, he capped it and put it back in his pocket.

He got back into the truck, started it and drove down the curved, descending track to the main road.

A tire didn't usually hold dirt in the treads. It had to pass through very moist mud to pick up and hold it that way. But even a few miles of highway driving would warm up the tire, the grooves would expand and the mud would drop out.

So the tire had to have come from somewhere local. Somewhere very close by. No more than a couple of miles, and via local roads with slower speed limits than the open highway.

Aran had said he thought Alannah was still in Canmore. The mud seemed to confirm that.

There was mud all over Canmore at the moment, now the snow fall from last week was melting. But mud made of the white, very fine sand he'd scooped up...that wasn't local. He'd never seen soil like that around here.

So.

Kit ran through the people he knew, who might be able to point him in the right direction. He settled upon the perfect candidate by the time he reached the highway overpass, and had to pick a direction.

He turned left to head into Canmore.

Even though it wasn't the peak tourist season, there were still a lot of cars Kit didn't know. Lots of out-of-province plates, and even a smattering of US plates. A lot of the faces moving about the main streets in the center of Canmore were unknown to him, too.

That might be a problem, he reflected. He didn't know who he was looking for.

He drove around the secondary roads to the edge of town where the light industrial businesses were located. He turned through the open gate of a property fenced off with chain-link. The fence held a big sign, right next to the gate. *Joe's Rocks and Soil.*

Josef Ratansky himself was dealing with customers. A pickup truck was backed up to a pile of pea gravel, the owner shoveling gravel into the back and sweating heavily, while Joe gave him advice.

All the other piles of dirt and rocks in the big yard were covered with enormous canvases and staked down. Joe was anticipating the next snow fall. He survived the winter with

contracts from the town to shovel snow from the sidewalks with the little cat he used to move soil around the yard.

Kit nodded at Joe as he got out of the truck.

“More peat moss, Kitty?” Joe called out in his thick Russian accent, grinning. He’d called Kit “kitty” ever since he’d learned Kit’s full name.

Kit didn’t know the guy shoveling pea gravel, but he nodded at him anyway. He had to be a new resident, to be buying pea gravel. Probably filling in holes and depressions in his driveway and footpaths before the snow came to stay for the winter.

“No, no peat moss,” Kit told Joe. “Not today. I’ve got a question for you.”

The new resident stopped to wipe his brow and leaned on the shovel. Kit suspected that he wasn’t curious so much as looking for any excuse to stop shoveling. His face was very red.

Kit moved closer to the big shed where Joe kept the cat and his cash register and books. Joe naturally followed him. The resident couldn’t do that without looking rude.

When Kit figured they were out of earshot, he pulled out the pen, uncapped the back end and tipped some of the white soil onto his palm. “There’s a lot more of this dirt somewhere around Canmore. Do you know where I could find it?”

Joe pulled down the corners of his mouth and poked his finger at the soil, much the same way Kit had done only a few moments before. “Not something you find just lying around these parts.”

“No,” Kit agreed.

Joe poked a bit more. “You know.... I think I do know where there’s more of this.”

“I’m listening.”

“That new hotel at the north end. The white house.”

Kit grinned. Everyone called the new Hilton the ‘white house’ because the exterior was pure white and without adornment, and the main foyer and public rooms contained in a round extension at the front, with no windows. “That’s where this stuff comes from?”

“Pretty sure, *da.*” Joe scratched above one ear. “They trucked in a ton of stuff from Calgary, but they left it too late to put in top soil. Came to me in a big panic two days before Thanksgiving. They wanted soil and fake lawn and everything to cover up the construction crap they had everywhere, in time for the opening.”

“And they have this white dirt?”

“Probably two tons left over after they were done construction. They shoveled it all into a corner, but this stuff is so fine and light...it just blew all over the new carpark.” Joe laughed. “New manager was beside himself.”

Kit funneled the dirt back into the pen, capped it once more and put it away. “Thanks, Joe.”

“No problems.” Joe scratched behind his ear once again. “What’s a warden doing, hunting down dirt? Bears take exception to it?”

“It’s blowing all over my yard,” Kit lied. His house was at the north end of town, too, so the lie would track. “Couldn’t figure where the hell it was coming from.”

“Ah. Manager’s name is...” Joe frowned. “Anderson.”

“Thanks,” Kit said. “Don’t warn him I’m coming, ‘kay?”

Joe held up a hand. “None of my business, *bratan.*”

Kit hurried back to the truck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE NEW HILTON HOTEL REALLY was an ugly thing, Kit decided, as he drove slowly into the carpark. The building was stark and white. The white dirt blowing all over the parking lot had turned the asphalt into a pale grey instead of shiny new black. The dirt must have been chosen for its color and the dusty quality had clearly been overlooked.

The snow melt had turned the white dirt into a soupy, sticky mud that sucked at Kit's tires. That explained why it liked to cling to tire treads.

He circled the lot and found the guest section, then circled that more slowly. There were only a dozen cars. The hotel was new and it was off-season.

He parked the truck in a bay that was at least six bays over from the nearest car, got out and pocketed his keys. He glanced around casually. No one appeared to be watching him.

He moved over to the nearest car and examined the tires. They were wearing white dirt infused treads, but the patterns didn't match the mud ridges he'd examined by the bridge.

He moved onto the next car, and then the next. He made it all the way around the guest parking lot, then moved over to his truck, leaned against the door and ruminated.

None of the cars in the lot had tires that matched the pattern by the bridge. Did that mean whoever it was had gone? Or just gone temporarily? Or they had a more secure secondary location where they were keeping Alannah? A hotel room wasn't nearly as private as most people liked to think. And the walls were far too thin. But maybe whoever it was who had taken her had no other options.

If one *had* to use a hotel, this was the building to pick. It was on the north edge of town, and a hundred yards of thistles and pine seedlings separated the mostly empty lot from the nearest row of private houses, which all had six foot tall fences guarding their privacy. Yes, this hotel was a lonely place.

Or maybe they had come by here to visit a friend, and weren't staying here at all.

Kit could feel sweat breaking out under his jacket. He wasn't a detective. He was better at puzzling out wildlife tracks, not figuring out human behavior.

Only, that was a lie. He was *very* good at figuring out how terrorists thought and anticipating their behavior. But that expertise lay in his past. It was a useless skill, these days. Even this whoever it was who had taken Alannah...they were criminals, but even master criminals didn't think the way terrorists did. Terrorists were a breed apart.

There was still the possibility that Alannah wasn't anywhere near Canmore. Only, Aran had said she was here. Kit didn't believe in voodoo shit, not even his tribe's brand of magic and mysticism, but there was something about the way Aran had spoken...

If this hotel didn't pan out, Kit would phone Aran and ask him where to look next. He didn't know why he should do that, but this whole day was on the outer edge of the weird spectrum. Asking Aran to point him in the right direction seemed like a smart thing to do, under the circumstances.

Aran's flat, sincere claim that his sister was in Canmore was just one more odd note among a lot of odd notes about Veris' family. Kit hadn't properly noticed them before, but Alannah's complaint about everyone not being free to talk while Kit had been in the house had made him tote up the... well, the odd things that had only registered subconsciously, until he'd deliberately dredged them up.

The way Veris' extended family seemed happy to drop hundreds, no, *thousands* of dollars on international travel to come visit for a few days. All of them, and often.

The way Alannah just showed up at the house. Or just showed up in Canmore, to pick up groceries or visit the pharmacy, or just shop. He couldn't remember seeing her ever driving a car. She just strolled across the parking lots, her long legs swinging.

The way Veris avoided drinking anything at all. He pretended to sip, but Kit had never smelled alcohol on the man's breath, even though the level in his glass dropped steadily. Kit had presumed Veris was either a recovering alcoholic and didn't feel comfortable sharing that with Kit, yet, or he was avoiding alcohol for other reasons.

But now Kit added that to the odd notes list.

Phoning Aran and asking him where to look for his sister didn't seem strange, on that list.

And there was still the smallest possibility, one Kit didn't believe, that Alannah had been so excited to rush to this hotel with a lover, she'd skipped out of the house and left her cellphone and handbag behind. Oh, and left the window open and busted the front door lock on her way out the door.

Yeah, right. And it wasn't simply that he didn't *want* the possibility to be true, either. It was just ridiculous. Alannah was sophisticated. The prospect of sex wouldn't cause her to lose all good sense.

Kit turned his mind away from that and weighed up his options, instead. He could step into the hotel. Move up and down the corridors, listening. See if he could spot or hear something that told him the asshole had Alannah in one of the rooms.

How long would it take the hotel security to spot him wandering the corridors of every floor? He couldn't give a good explanation for doing that, either. He had no proof that anything was wrong, except for a cellphone left behind and a busted lock.

And he wasn't a cop. He'd be tossed out on his ear because the staff at this hotel didn't know him. The senior management was new to Canmore. Anderson, the manager, was new. Kit could maybe talk fast if it had been any of the other hotels and motels in town, because there was a good chance he'd know at least one of the staff or they'd know him by sight.

A car jerked over the speed bumps at the edge of the guest lot, almost scraping its differential on the top, for it was a low slung Mustang.

Kit shifted a few inches to his left, so the truck hid him from the car, and watched the Mustang through the windows, his heart thudding. There was no reason why the Mustang was

the car, but the gut instinct that had been pushing him along was screaming at him again.

The Mustang parked in a bay between two other cars. A man got out and locked the car with an electronic beep, then moved confidently toward the hotel. He carried a green recycled shopping bag with no store name on it, and he wasn't angling toward the front entrance.

Kit had spotted the side entrance already. Even from where his truck sat, he could see the electronic lock on the wall beside it. Only guests could get in through that door, by waving their room key over the lock plate. Kit had assumed he would have to go through the front door and march through the foyer with his nose in the air.

Instead, he straightened and moved up along the side of his truck, angling toward the guest door, timing his pace so that he would arrive at the door just behind the Mustang driver.

Kit took only one flashing look at the man, then pulled out his cellphone and pretended to be reading texts and swiping as he walked. The man was tall, maybe just over six feet, with iron grey hair that floated around his shoulders in straight, thick locks. His full beard was neatly trimmed and pure white, but the face—from this distance—seemed to be unlined and youthful, in contrast to the grey hair and white beard.

The man moved like a young man, too. He had long legs and used them to elongate his stride. He covered ground quickly, forcing Kit to pick up his own speed so he could tailgate the man into the building.

The man reached the door and pulled a room key out of his back pocket, beneath the jeans jacket. Kit reached into his inner pocket and pulled a random credit card from his wallet clip and cupped it in his hand so the front of the card couldn't be seen.

Iron Grey pulled the door open, then held it open for Kit.

Kit looked up, made himself look surprised, and nodded. “Thanks.” He pushed the credit card back into his jacket.

Iron Grey nodded back without a word. Kit slipped through the door and moved along it confidently, as if he knew exactly where he was going. His heart hammered. Where was the goddamn elevator?

The elevators were in a recess along the corridor, two shining steel doors. Twenty yards farther down the corridor were more glass doors and beyond them, the hotel foyer. The corridor smelled of new paint and carpet glue, sharply astringent.

Kit pressed the up button. Iron Grey stopped to his left and just behind him, making the flesh on Kit’s back crawl.

Was this the asshole? Until Kit could examine the Mustang’s tires, there was no way to be sure.

But he *knew*.

The left elevator door slid open with a soft chime. More steel, more new carpet, and smoked mirrors on the back wall. Kit stepped in, and pushed the fifth floor button, the highest floor available by elevator.

Iron Grey stepped in and turned to face the doors. Kit looked at him and raised a brow.

“Three,” Iron Grey said. He had a mild accent, one Kit had never heard before.

Kit punched the button for three and stepped away from the controls. The elevator rose smoothly and swiftly and dinged again for the third floor. Iron Grey stepped out and headed to the right, as the doors closed once more.

Kit leaned heavily against the wall, his heart screaming. This wasn’t at all like raiding a suspected ISIS enclave. It wasn’t even close.

Now what?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ALANNAH HEARD THE LOCK ON the door clunk open and stopped tugging at the duct tape around her wrists and ankles. Not that she'd got anywhere close to loosening the stuff.

The door opened and the man stepped through and shut it swiftly. The green shopping bag he carried slapped against his leg.

What was in the bag?

Alannah's gut sank, while her heart shifted gears and began to beat so hard it hurt. She'd never really understood fear before. She remembered times when she had been afraid, mostly when she was younger. But that was nothing to the fear that had been living in her veins for the last few hours. It was a

hot, alive creature that crawled through her and made her tremble. Made her sick. If her mouth hadn't been plastered over with duct tape, she would have moaned aloud at the putrid sensations her fear created.

The man had charged through the front door of the house yesterday afternoon. Alannah had been sleeping on the window seat and had jerked awake, disoriented and confused. "What...?" she began, staring at the tall man with long hair and a snowy white beard. She couldn't put together a coherent explanation for why he had slammed through the door and stood in the middle of the room staring at her.

Then the man lifted his hand.

He had a gun in it. It wasn't a gun she'd ever seen before, but she knew it was a weapon, because he was pointing it at her.

The fear had shot through her then and she began to shake.

That was when he had fired the thing he held. She heard the soft noise, which was nothing like any gunfire she'd ever heard. Something slammed into her shoulder. She stared down at the short, narrow silver rod that stuck out from her shoulder, her fear making it difficult to understand what it was.

Then blackness had swept over her.

She had woken in this hotel room, with dawn light pouring through the opaque white curtains. Her ankles and elbows had been bound by duct tape and she had been lying on her side on the bed. Her mouth was taped over, too.

The man was slapping the side of her face.

Alannah could feel panic rising to the surface. It was difficult to breathe with her mouth taped shut. It felt as though she couldn't get enough air through her nose. She panted, which didn't help with the panic.

The man stopped slapping her, gripped one of her arms and hauled her to her feet. She nearly fell over, until he pulled her back upright and said something in a language she didn't know. He pulled out a switchblade and triggered it, then bent and sliced the duct tape between her ankles. It clung to the outer sides of her ankles but her feet were free.

“Do not bother trying to scream,” he told her. “There is only one other room occupied on this floor and it is at the other end of the building. No one will hear you.” He dragged her forward by his grip on her arm, toward the door that must lead into a bathroom.

He rolled the door aside and pushed her inside. He came in, too, and pointed at the toilet. “Use it,” he ordered.

Alannah stared at him blankly, then looked at the door. He wasn't going to leave?

And how was she supposed to lower her pants? With her big toes?

“You do not get to leave my sight, not while your feet are free,” he told her. “If you cannot figure how to get your clothes off by yourself, I will have to do it for you.” He ran his gaze over her, with a speculative gleam in his eyes.

Alannah's need to pee was stronger than her need for privacy. She could get her little fingers to touch together, although it strained her elbows to do it. She used them together to push her leggings down one side at a time. She just had to tug and pull hard. As they lowered, she caught her panties with her fingers and pulled them down at the same time.

It took three long minutes, and she ignored the man the whole time. Fuck him.

She sat and peed, sweet relief sweeping through her. Was that why they forced torture victims to pee and shit

themselves? The indignity, the helplessness it would generate would kill any morale the prisoner had managed to hold onto.

It took even longer to hitch her panties and leggings back into place. Her arms were screaming by the time she was done. The man didn't let her wash her hands. He yanked her back out into the main room, and shoved her at a barrel chair sitting by a small desk.

She fell into it. Before she could recover her balance, he grabbed her ankle and wound duct tape around both it and the chair's front leg.

Alannah kicked at him with her other foot. He just moved out of the way and finished the first ankle. Then he reached for the other. She kicked even harder, but his reactions were blindingly fast. He snatched her ankle out of mid-air, forced it down against the other chair leg and secured it with the tape.

Alannah realized she was crying. It wasn't because she was *crying* crying. The tears fell on their own. All she felt was fury at her own uselessness. Her parents would have figured a way out of this five minutes ago. She was helpless to stop the man from tying her down.

He gripped one of her wrists and yanked it down to the front edge of the chair and tied it with the tape, then sliced the tape around her arms, grabbed her other wrist before she could recover from the screaming relief and agony flaring through her freed arms, and taped it down, too.

She was immobilized.

Alannah looked at the man and hatred speared through her like hot acid. She still had no idea who he was or what he wanted with her. Right at that moment, she didn't care.

He moved to the closet and removed a bag from it. Or perhaps it was a case. It was hard to tell. It was made of a

material that looked like fabric, but the bag had structure that made her think of cases.

The man touched what Alannah had thought was a zipper on the top of the case. Her eyes grew larger as the zipper-thing opened like a budding flower. She'd never seen a suitcase like it before.

Then he began to pull out the things inside it and, suddenly, Alannah did care very much about what he wanted with her. She stared at the things he laid carefully on the bed.

A small black box, with absolutely nothing protruding or written on it that told Alannah what it could be. It was twice the size of an earbud box, but didn't look like it opened, or had a switch. It was just blank, and black. Anonymous.

The biggest object to come out of the case was a small flesh-colored box about the size of a pint milk carton, but slimmer. It had what Alannah thought were types of controls on the top of it. The remaining items were...well, she'd never seen anything like these things before, except that they reminded her in a way she didn't understand of the trays of surgical instruments in *Far's* surgery. And Alex's. Silvered metal, delicate and precisely engineered. But this man was handling them like they were all sledge hammers.

He tapped the controls on the flesh-colored box and ran his finger down a dark panel beside them, then flipped the unit over. The other side had a narrow opening along the length of it and as he flipped it, multiple slender metal fingers shot out of it and stuck up in the air, making the box look like a hedgehog with a mohawk. They were slightly larger than the needles *Far* called insulin syringes, and a bit longer than one, too.

Alannah stared at the multiple metallic points, her heart unsteady.

The man picked up his switchblade once more and moved toward her. Panic made her thoughts buzz incoherently. She couldn't think of what to do. She could only sit there, the fear gripping her throat and cutting off her breath. She was dizzy...

He moved around behind her, which was even worse. Alannah moaned, the sound muffled.

He gripped the back of her head and pushed it forward, forcing her chin down to her chest. He yanked her hair aside. Cold metal touched the back of her neck and Alannah cried out, a wordless, incoherent sound that vibrated against the tape over her mouth.

He gripped the neck of her tunic top, and sliced through it with the knife.

Alannah fought to stay conscious. She had to focus on her breathing, on staying calm, so she could breathe in enough air through her nose. Her mind careened.

The man tore the back of her top open almost to her waist. Then he ran his fingers up her spine.

There was a firmness and disinterest in his touch that told her this was anything but sexual.

He pressed against the protruding vertebrae at the top of her spine and made a sound of approval. Then he moved over to the bed and picked up the flesh-colored box with its silver needles. He touched the controls and the needles all retracted with a sharp metallic sound that made Alannah think of microscopic swords being shoved back into their scabbards.

She stared at the flesh colored box, suspicion turning into horror. Was he going to put that thing on her? On her spine?

Were those multiple needles supposed to go *into* her?

Alannah fought to breathe, to stay on top of her panic, to keep her cool. *Losing your head won't help you when the shit*

hits the fan. Brody's voice, lilting with amusement, while he stood at ease at the edge of the dojo, a three-quarter staff in hand, while Alannah tried to pick herself up off the mat, her own staff far out of reach.

The man held the box in one hand and delved into the suitcase with the other. He bent and peered into it, searching with his hand, his expression turning slowly to irritation.

Then he tossed the box back on the bed and muttered something that Alannah knew for sure was some sort of curse in his very strange language. He swore a few more times as he pulled a light jacket out of the closet and put it on, patted the pocket so that it jingled, then glared at her.

"I will be back in five minutes, which is not nearly long enough for you to work the tape loose, even if you could. Save your energy. You will need it."

He didn't slam the door behind him, but the lock thudding home made her jump, anyway.

Alannah stared at the flesh-colored box, her horror building. She knew, now, what would happen when he got back. He needed something to apply that box to her back. She didn't know what. It didn't matter. He'd gone to find the something he needed, and when he got back...

What did the box do? That was an unanswerable question right now. And it didn't matter. She had no intention of letting him put that thing on her.

That was when she started working on the tape, trying to stretch it or tear it. She strained her arms and ankles, twisting them into positions that pulled on the tape, and holding them there while the tape grew taut.

He'd wound the tape around each limb at least five times. Alannah closed her mind to how impossible that would make it to tear the tape apart. Or even stretch it so that it was loose

enough to pull her feet and hands through. There was nothing else she could do here. She didn't have vampire strength, and she couldn't jump....

Alannah grew still and considered. He'd left her alone. Neven had "jumped" without jumping, the time he had been drowning in a lake. Marit sometimes barely flexed to jump. Even London, tied up in ropes and lying on a cold cavern floor in Revolutionary France, had merely flexed her hips to jump out of danger.

Could Alannah jump away, without jumping? Would the chair come with her? She was virtually holding it with her hands....

Smiling, Alannah relaxed and let herself slump in the chair. She could throw her chest and hips forward and initiate a jump that way. She could deal with the tape and the chair once she was home.

She threw herself forward as if she intended to sail across the carpet toward the door, and mentally jumped.

Only to fall onto the carpet on her knees, the chair attached to her like a turtle shell. Her knees throbbed, and her wrists protested, for the weight of the chair pressed her palms into the floor.

"What the freaking *hell*?" Alannah breathed staring at the micro-tufts of low pile grey carpet.

She gathered herself and jumped again.

Nothing. She remained on all fours on the carpet, which smelled of glue.

Laboriously, taking half a dozen tries, she figured out how to get to her feet, then crouch down so the chair settled on its four legs and she could sit in it once more.

Breathing hard, she glared at the tools and boxes scattered on the bed cover. Was it possible that the fleshy box stopped her from jumping? *Far* had been trying to build a shield to hide people on the timescape, and he'd said he'd got the idea from the future, when he had experienced being beneath a shield that stopped time travelers from jumping.

The future... Alannah stared at the strange instruments and mysterious boxes on the bed. Recalled the odd way the suitcase had opened up.

The man's exotic accent.

If he was from the future, it explained everything. Even how he was stopping her from jumping.

Her gaze landed on the black box on the bed. Was that the culprit? Could she reach it? Turn it off?

Alannah rose to her feet once more, the chair forcing her to a near crouch. She waddled a few steps forward, until she was beside the bed. The box was right there, but with her hands being tied at the wrists, she couldn't pick it up.

Swearing, she shuffled backward a few steps and sat down carefully once more.

No other course of action suggested itself to her. Alannah went back to pulling at the duct tape, while she railed at herself to come up with a simple, elegant solution that would get her out of this.

That was when the man returned, the green bag slapping his leg.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ALANNAH FOUGHT TO CONTROL THE fear and panic building in her, as she stared at the green bag the man carried. He took it over to the bed, set it down and delved into it. He withdrew cellophane-sealed medical gauze and a plastic liter bottle with clear liquid in it. Alannah couldn't see the label but she knew the shape of the bottle. Put together with the gauze, she guessed it was some sort of sterilizing solution.

Her gaze drew back to the flesh-colored box with the narrow black aperture from which the little blades had snapped out.

Her heart screamed at her. Her mind jabbered.

The man tore open the gauze, pulled up a thick wad of it, then liberally soaked it with the sterile solution.

Holding the soaked gauze in one hand, he picked up the box with the other and turned it in his hand so the aperture faced outward.

Do something! Alannah railed at herself. She flexed her limbs, straining the tape, but it gave no sign of giving way. As he approached her, she fought desperately against the bonds. Panic had her by the throat.

The knock on the door was loud and brought both of them to a soundless standstill.

“Who is it?” the man called out.

Alannah screamed. It came out muffled and wordless. She sucked in a breath through her nose and screamed again.

“Hotel reception!” a woman called through the door. “I have your bill, sir.”

The man swore in his native tongue. Then, “Slide it under the door.”

Alannah screamed again.

“What is that sound, sir? Is everything alright? Do you need assistance?”

The man spun fast on one heel. The back of his hand, the one holding the box, slammed against Alannah’s temple. She sagged, as sparks flittered in her mind and dark grey fogged her sight.

“It’s just the television,” he called out.

“I can’t slide the bill under the door, sir. There is no room.” The woman sounded amused. “New carpet,” she added.

“Leave it at reception. I’ll pick it up there.”

Silence.

Then, “Sir, you failed to pay the deposit yesterday. The manager has asked that you pay now. I am happy to escort you to reception and introduce you to the shift manager, who can help you with this.”

The man swore again. “One moment!” he called. He dropped the box and the dripping gauze into the suitcase, then scooped up the black box and the instruments and dumped them in, too.

He came around behind Alannah. She would have cringed, but her head was throbbing and it was hard to breathe. She didn’t have the strength to sit up straight.

He gripped the back of the chair and dragged her over to the other side of the bed, then alongside it, stopping close to the headboard. She realized dimly that the position put her out of sight of the doorway.

Then the man smoothed down his long locks and stepped around the closet and into the narrow, short hallway to the door, disappearing from Alannah’s view.

Alannah heard the door unlock and gripped the chair, her knuckles turning white. Now was the time to do something smart to get herself out of this, but her mind was buzzing and fizzing. She could barely pull coherent thoughts together. She couldn’t even sit up properly.

She heard a grunt. Then the man staggered backwards, bowed in the middle.

Kit McDonald surged into the room, his hands out. He threw himself at the man, ramming him in the stomach with his shoulder.

Alannah held her breath, riding out her surprise and...yes, her raging, victorious delight that someone was here. Someone knew of her predicament. Someone could help her, after all, when she had thought herself completely alone.

The man fell backwards. But then he seemed to spring up again with impossible dexterity, almost as though the back of his shoulders *pushed* him back up from the floor. Alannah gasped against the tape over her mouth. It simply wasn't possible for someone to spring back up like that.

Even Kit seemed to be surprised by the man's lightning fast recovery. But not for long. His jaw flexed, then his face grew implacable. He surged forward again, his hands flicking out, over and over, but never connecting. Alannah realized that Kit wasn't trying to hit the man, but to get a grip on him.

What he would do to the man once he did, she had no idea. But the man seemed almost prescient. He kept bending to one side, fading away, shifting on his feet in little minute movements that nevertheless put him out of Kit's reach.

It could only have been thirty seconds, but it felt like long, long minutes to Alannah as she watched the two confront each other. She had always known of Kit's military past, but now the knowledge popped back into her mind in neon.

Kit was staying by the doorway. Blocking it. He was keeping the man trapped in the room. If the door was like other hotel room doors, it would slowly swing shut and lock itself, but it could be easily wrenched open from this side.

The man faced Kit, keeping him in sight. Which put his back to Alannah.

Had he forgotten she was there? She was tucked up beside the head of the bed, a good six feet away from the open space at the foot of it where the two men were confronting each other.

But that could be changed.

Alannah bent forward, which made her head throb like a bass drum, and straightened her thighs just enough to put her into the uber awkward tortoise position, the chair on her back.

She waddled forward, a few inches at a time, until she was at the end of the bed.

Then she paused, breathing hard. How could she capitalize on the man's inattention?

The two men were watching each other to the exclusion of all else, both breathing hard. Had Kit even noticed her move? He was facing her, but his gaze did not shift away from the man.

She wouldn't be able to pick the *best* thing to do. She didn't know enough about unarmed combat, even though she had been trained by two of the greatest unarmed combatants in the world. She didn't know enough about Kit's abilities and his style of fighting to guess what would serve him best.

But the longer she stood in this cramped position, the narrower her window of opportunity to do anything would become.

So do something. Anything at all. If Kit was any good, he'd capitalize on whatever change she added to the situation.

Alannah turned her head to one side, so that any impact would land on her shoulder, not her skull, and staggered forward as fast as she could, which was pitifully slow.

She rammed into the back of the man's thigh with virtually no impetus driving her. All she had was her body weight. She simply couldn't move fast.

But ramming into his thigh did marvelous things, anyway.

He staggered as his knee went out unexpectedly, listing to the right.

Alannah curled her right hand into a fist—the tape was just loose enough for her to tuck her fingers out of harm's way. Then she spun on one foot, bringing the frame of the chair around in a wildly swinging arc. Using only one foot meant

she could move *much* faster than trying to waddling anywhere with two feet.

The chair slammed into the side of the man's torso as he folded forward in response to his knee giving way.

The corner of the chair, where her fist was tucked up against it, splinted rigidly in place by the duct tape, rammed into the man's shoulder.

He grunted, the wind pushed out of him, and fell sideways, onto his hands and knees.

Alannah knew what to do with that. She realized she was smiling grimly as she jumped with both feet, brought her knees as close together as the tape allowed, and landed on the man's back with the weight of her and the chair.

He sprawled forward, his arms and knees giving out under the drop of her weight. She hoped his whole face had scraped across the carpet and given him a lovely carpet burn that would become infected and agonizing.

Alannah fell forward, her knees on his back. The chair stopped her from sprawling like the man was, but her weight was thrown forward, her feet and the feet of the chair jutting up into the air. She couldn't move. She couldn't lift herself up. She was anchored there, despite the man struggling to throw her off him.

"Stay there!" Kit ordered, his tone sharp.

"Yep," Alannah whispered to herself, her breath heaving. She couldn't look around to see what he was doing, either. She heard him moving.

The man slumped and grew still.

Alannah tucked her chin in to look underneath her, trying to figure out what Kit had done.

He gripped her shoulders. “I’m going to lift you up,” he warned.

“Yes, please,” she said breathlessly.

She was lifted up smoothly, and the chair put back on its feet, with her in it. Her head throbbed again, but the pain was receding, except for the spot where the man’s hand had connected with her.

The man remained on the carpet, completely still.

“What did you do to him?” she demanded, both awed and surprised.

“Vulcan neck pinch,” Kit said, digging into his jacket.

Alannah couldn’t help her jaw dropping.

Kit pulled out something and gave a small sound of satisfaction. He opened it. It was a folding knife. He bent and used the blade against the tape, sawing very carefully.

Alannah wasn’t sure where the giggles came from, but they swept through her, making her shake. She held them in, even though she wanted to laugh like crazy. Maybe she *was* going crazy.

When she thought she could speak without hysterics, she said, “How did you know I was here?”

“Later,” Kit said, his voice distant, as though his thoughts were far away. “I need to get you far from here before we can talk.”

“I thought....” She swallowed. “I thought Aran would be the one to find me.” On the timescape. But she couldn’t say that.

“He told me you were still in Canmore,” Kit said shortly.

So Aran *had* found her. How had Kit got involved, though? Why would Aran stand back and let Kit do the work?

Her other wrist came loose and she flexed her wrists and rubbed them, now she could move them freely. Where Kit had torn the duct tape away, her flesh was pink.

Kit worked on her ankles.

Alannah had a hundred questions but knew he would answer none of them. Not until they were out of the room. So she ignored the burning pressure to know exactly what was going on and why Kit was here and not Aran.

The man on the floor twitched, his hands shifting. He was coming around.

“Kit...” Alannah said warningly.

“I know,” he said just as quietly, his glossy dark head down. “Damn this stuff is sticky as hell.”

The urge to laugh struck her once more. It was because she was so close to being free, she knew, and mentally sat on the impulse.

Kit gripped her ankle and jerked it. The duct tape tore away from her leggings with a low growling sound. Kit shifted and worked on the other leg.

The man groaned.

Alannah held in the need to warn Kit once more. He was right there. He could hear for himself that the man was coming back to consciousness.

The man groaned again, and Kit gave a soft curse and turned. He slid his hand under the man’s chin. His thumb spread backward and pressed into the side of the man’s neck. He held it there for a long moment.

The man’s hand stopped twitching.

Carotid artery. The memory whispered silently. Old lessons, older conversations, laughter over disasters barely averted, confrontations only just survived. *Far’s* voice, in

lecture mode. *“The movies make hitting someone on the back of the head to knock them out look as safe as anesthetic, but you stand a real chance of cracking their skull. You will concuss them at the very least—that’s what knocks them out. Better to immobilize them some other way. And if you have to render them unconscious, there’s at least three ways that don’t involve blunt instruments.”*

All those conversations and stories, over the years. Alannah had never thought that one day they would directly apply to her life.

Yet here she was.

Kit yanked her other ankle free, with the same low tearing sound. Then he stood and gripped her arm. “Up you come.” His tone was brisk, but kind. And she *was* glad of his hand under her arm, because her quads, her hamstrings, her back... *all* of her protested as she got to straighten up for the first time in many long hours.

Her hips twinged.

“Can you walk?” Kit asked, his black eyes studying her. Assessing.

“Maybe.”

Kit pushed the chair out from behind her and turned her around.

Her torn tunic slid down one arm. She got her hand up fast enough to slap it against her chest so her breast wasn’t revealed.

Kit’s face shifted. An emotion flashed across it too fast for her to interpret. He stepped behind her. She felt him tugging at the torn back of the tunic. The tunic came together behind her neck and stayed there. It sat higher than it was supposed to. He must have tied the raw ends together.

“That will hold it for now,” he murmured. “Try walking.”

Alannah tried a step. Her legs held her up. She took another, and although all her muscles protested over the movement, she remained on her feet.

Kit guided her to the door and put his hand on the lever and looked at her. “This is the last room on this end of the floor,” he told her. “Out the door, turn right, then through the door right next to this one. Down to the ground floor, then out a side door. My truck is not far from that side door. Got it?”

She nodded. “The woman who knocked...?”

“A friend. One I didn’t expect to find here. She owed me a favor. Now we’re square.” He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Becky went back to the reception desk even before he opened the door. She knows nothing about you.”

Alannah shivered. Anonymity was good. It was a relief to know she wasn’t about to cause an international diplomatic incident or something. Her fathers would never forgive her for that.

“Ready?” Kit asked her. His hand was still under her arm, warm and solid.

“Yes.” Even if she wasn’t, she’d grit her teeth and hang in there. Anything to get out of this room.

The man on the floor behind them groaned again. Loudly, this time. Alannah jumped.

Kit didn’t flinch. He pushed on the door handle and opened the door, then looked out carefully. He tugged Alannah forward.

She stepped out and began to tremble. She was out of the room. It took concentration to overcome the high-noted aria in her mind, built by dizzy relief, but she remembered to turn to the right and then right again, to push on the fire escape door.

Kit held the door open. She moved forward stiffly, gripped the cold iron railing and forced herself to hurry down the concrete steps as swiftly as her feet could manage.

He kept pace with her easily.

The next floor landing had a big white sign next to the door, and a red number. 2.

One more flight to go. She stumbled down the first half, gripping the handrail, and was very glad that Kit was supporting her. They turned at the landing and moved down the last set of steps. She was three steps from the bottom and the door into the corridor with a big “1” on it, when two floors above them, the fire escape door was thrust open so hard that it slammed against the wall.

Shoes scraping on the concrete.

Alannah’s heart shot into her throat, making it hard to breathe. She almost levitated down the last three steps.

Kit put his finger to his lips.

She nodded.

He eased open the door and she slipped through it. Her legs were cooperating more now she was on a level surface.

Kit brushed past her and turned to the right. The corridor ended right there, with a glass door that revealed a barren landscape of white dirt, with a concrete path that took a turn to the left beyond the door.

Kit pushed the glass door open. It clicked electronically as it swung open. Alannah moved through it and shivered at the touch of the cool air. It could only be about fifty degrees, but the fresh air smelled heavenly.

Kit hurried past her. “Can you run?” he asked over his shoulder, then took off in a loping sprint that covered the ground faster than it should have.

Alannah tried, but her hips and quads protested. She shuffled after him, but a ninety-year-old could have lapped her.

It didn't seem to bother Kit that he was leaving her a long way behind. He dug keys out of his jacket as he ran and tripped the lock fob. She spotted his truck when the tail lights blipped on for a second, and understood then that he was going to get the truck going, then pick her up. It was up to her to stay ahead of the man, who would burst out through the door at any second.

The thought added speed to her feet. She hurried as best she could, feeling her legs and joints easing with each step.

The green truck backed out of the bay and around in a sharp curve, as Kit hauled on the wheel. Then he worked the steering wheel the other way and tromped on the gas, bringing the truck skidding around in her direction.

Alannah moved to the left, so she would be on the passenger side of the cab when he stopped.

He skidded to a halt and looked past her.

Alannah heard the glass door sigh open and footsteps on the concrete path. The sounds gave her strength. She tore open the truck door. It felt as though she levitated into the seat, although she must have put her foot on the step and boosted herself up. She couldn't remember gripping anything and hauling herself up. Just falling into the seat.

She reached for the door, but Kit took off before she could close it. The door swung shut by itself, propelled by the sudden acceleration.

Alannah gripped the padded dashboard, horror building in her throat when she saw the man standing in the middle of the narrow access out of this section of the parking lot, into the bigger section beyond and the front of the hotel.

The man looked as though he had no intention of getting out of the way even though Kit gunned the engine.

Alannah held her breath, fear spearing through her.

“Hold on!” Kit cried and jerked the steering wheel to the right. The truck lurched in that direction, and bumped up over the concrete curbing, into the soft white sand that separated the two sections of parking lot.

Alannah let out a wordless exclamation, gripped the handle on the doorframe and hung onto the dash with her other hand. The truck bounced over the white sand, the left fender taking out a spindly sapling that still wore a nursery tag. Something thudded loudly underneath the truck, giving a deep boinging sound. Alannah sucked back her startled cry. But the engine didn't cut out and a touch of relief trickled through her.

The truck rocked over the other side of the divider onto the dirty tarmac, the engine howling. The back tires slipped on the dirt, then bit into the curb. The truck jerked forward.

Then they were racing for the entrance to the hotel, which Alannah could see just ahead. Across the road from the entrance was a lot filled with weeds and baby trees. Then houses behind their fences. It looked normal. Peaceful.

Kit glanced in the mirror and swore softly, as he wheeled the truck into the street and tromped on the gas once more. The truck rattled down the road, heading for a busier street. Alannah had no idea where they were, except that she could tell by the shapes of the mountains on either side that they were on the north side of the town. Kit was heading east, toward the highway.

She twisted on her seat to look through the back window.

A steel grey Mustang turned into the street and followed them. The man was behind the wheel.

Alannah clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Turn around, put your seat belt on and hold on,” Kit told her. “This is about to get interesting.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



KIT WORKED THE STEERING WHEEL, his shoulders moving as he forced the truck around tight corners and into barely seen alleys, switching directions swiftly. Alannah could do nothing but hold on and hope. Kit knew Canmore’s back streets far better than she did.

As the truck tore through yet another back lane, fences and garage doors flashing past far too close to the doors for Alannah’s comfort, Kit glanced down at the dash and swore even more heavily than before.

“What?” she cried, alarmed.

“We’re losing gas,” he said shortly. He glanced in the mirror, his lips pressed thin, his jaw held tight. “Right...” he

said, almost to himself, and settled himself in the seat.

When the truck reached the end of the lane, he wrenched on the wheel once more, turning them to the left. Alannah had no idea what direction it was. She'd got completely turned around with Kit's swift cornering.

The truck shot along the road, which turned into a long curve that she recognized. As it hugged the curve, the engine roaring, she said, "You're heading for the highway? If we're losing gas, shouldn't we head to where there are people?"

Kit didn't react. Not physically. His expression didn't change. He was concentrating. His voice emerged flat. "I don't know if innocent bystanders will stop this guy. Maybe he doesn't care about witnesses. But out beyond the town...that changes things. I can do something there."

Alannah shivered. It wasn't because she was cold. Which she was. It was the thought of the man ruthlessly getting rid of witnesses as he pursued her.

Who was this guy?

She tried to look over her shoulder to check if the Mustang was behind them. But she couldn't twist enough to counter the surges of the truck as it climbed the on-ramp to the highway.

The truck roared onto the Trans Canada Highway, and shot past a little Ford Fiesta in the outer lane, the driver sending them a startled look. The highway bent to the north-west, heading for Banff.

The truck picked up even more speed now it was on good, flat fast road. The highway was completely clear of snow. The surface looked dry. But there were cars in both lanes, going much slower than Kit.

"You keep this speed up, the Mounties will *make* you stop," Alannah cried over the noise of the engine working hard.

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Kit said, his tone grim. “Turn in the seat. Keep an eye on our rear. I have to concentrate.” He switched lanes abruptly, steering around a tour bus.

She extended the seat belt so she could turn in the seat and look through the rear window. She waited until she could see past the tour bus. “Can’t see him.” All the cars she could see seemed to be white or blue.

“He’s driving an 8 cylinder Mustang. You’ll see him eventually.”

“Unless the RCMP pull him over first.”

“I can live with that, too. Park gates ahead.” His tone was one of warning.

She turned back to face the front. Kit picked the lane for season pass holders and drove sedately up to the booth. The warden inside touched his fingers to his brow. Kit lifted his hand from the wheel in a flat wave and kept driving through.

As soon as he was back on the highway proper, Kit picked up speed once more. The truck jerked and swayed as he steered around the slower vehicles. Alannah turned to look through the back window once more and watched freight trucks, family sedans and minibuses fall behind them as he surged ahead. She frowned, peering between the cars. “I think...he’s behind us,” she said reluctantly, as she spotted a darker dot of a car moving between others at a great rate. It was a long way behind, but... “He’s catching up.”

“To this thing? Big shock,” Kit said, his tone flat. “Gas just hit the empty mark,” he added. He didn’t sound upset about it.

A big green direction board flashed past. Alannah could only see the back of it, steel gray and rivetted, as it grew swiftly smaller with distance.

“Turn back around and hold on,” Kit told her.

She settled back in the seat and gripped the rail and the dashboard.

“I’m going to pull off the highway,” Kit told her, speaking loudly to be heard over the engine. “Carrot Creek is coming up.”

“There’s a turnout?”

“No.” He didn’t seem upset about that. “When we stop, you get out and you head west, into the trees. There’s a fence. You climb it and you run like hell. I’ll follow you. Got it?”

She nodded, then realized he might not see that. “Yes,” she added. Then, “You *will* follow me, right?”

He glanced at her. “Yes,” he said flatly, pulling his gaze back to the road. “Ready?”

“Yes.” She gripped harder.

The truck was in the left hand lane, and she fully expected Kit to move into the right lane. The verges were clear of snow, and there was enough room for the truck to pull right off the road.

But he instead turned left suddenly and sharply, using a minimum of brakes. A utility corridor, the gravel weedy and pale, ran across the twenty-yard wide median strip between the north-bound and south-bound lanes, shooting between pine trees and knee-high grasses waving in the afternoon breeze.

Kit braked sharply at the edge of the south-bound lane, and peered north for oncoming traffic. Then he stomped on the gas and the truck roared across the highway, onto flat, mowed green grass. It was the one place where the hip-high concrete barriers weren’t up against the edge of the highway. The truck bounced and rolled down the slope toward a public path. A hiking trail.

Kit swerved and brought the truck parallel with the path, and halted. “Out!” he ordered.

Alannah’s adrenaline was already running high. She slid out of the truck like an otter, rounded the hood and ran across the hiking path. Five yards farther on was the wire fence Kit had spoken of. She aimed for one of the support posts, intending to hurdle over the fence with a hand on the post.

But the fence was higher than she realized. She put a hand on the post and climbed it by shoving the toes of her flats through the square holes formed by the wire, then pushed herself off and over the fence.

She landed in a crouch, and thrust out a hand to steady herself.

Head for the trees.

But the trees were everywhere. There was no need to head for them.

Alannah pushed off the ground with her thighs and hand. Running was something she knew well, but these shoes wouldn’t help her. She couldn’t go barefoot, though. Beyond where the ground had been mowed around the hiking path, the grasses were thigh high, with no way to see what was underneath. Running at her usual pace was out of the question. She could put her foot in a rabbit or gopher hole and that would be it.

From far to her left, the direction they’d come from, she heard the snarl of a heavy, high performance engine, working hard.

The Mustang.

Alannah ran into the trees, trying to choose her footing. Her flats had zero grip and her feet slid almost every step. Down at ground level where the sun didn’t easily reach the roots, the grass and leaf litter was damp and slippery.

She wove around the trees, trying to make sure that they were directly behind her, hiding her direction. She could hear Kit's heavier and slower steps. But he was catching up because he had better footwear and could trust his boots to support his foot if it came down in the wrong place.

I should jump away. The thought came to her as she curved around another huge pine, trying to avoid rubbing her bare arms up against the branches. They only *looked* soft.

She couldn't use the timescape to help her right now. Kit wasn't in the family. Besides, jumping back home would leave Kit to deal with the man. And as competent as he seemed to be in this situation, that didn't seem fair.

She would just have to deal with this in the human way. She and Kit.

And for a brief moment, she felt a warm reassuring sensation in her chest. She wasn't alone in this.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



ALANNAH WAS FAST, WHICH PLEASED Kit. She had a runner's body and long legs, but her shoes were flimsy indoor things. Yet she made great time across the grasses. Kit kept his pace steady, and her back in sight and let her pick the direction. Sooner or later, the lake would force her north or south, unless she happened to angle through the narrow channel between the ends of the two lakes.

He kept his hearing turned behind them, listening for sounds of pursuit. The Mustang had pulled up sharply by the truck not long after Kit had got through the thick belt of trees that lined the fence. He moved quietly, but didn't think that would baffle a man who seemed relentless about pursuing Alannah and catching her again.

Any self-respecting human trafficker would have given up back in Canmore. There were far easier and less risky pickings to be had, just about anywhere. So who was this dude?

It wasn't the first time he'd asked himself that question, in the fleeting moments when spare thought could be had.

The brief glimpse he'd caught of the strange items inside the bag on the bed were troubling. They spoke of more sinister reasons for targeting Alannah.

Only...what reasons were they?

And the man had almost unnatural strength and speed of reactions. Kit had never had to tackle anyone who could move as fast as he.

From far behind, Kit caught the sound of a footstep, carried on the wind. He might have missed it if the wind had been in the other direction. But it came to him, clear as a moose snort; the cracking of summer-dry leaves.

Iron Grey had to be stepping under branches to find dry leaves with his foot. He was trying to avoid the grass, which hid clear footing.

Amateur, Kit thought. The branches would slap him around, scrape him and leave resin on his skin that would itch like crazy. Better to risk uncertain footfall in the grass.

But Iron Grey *was* relentless.

Kit risked slowing down enough to pull out his phone and check the reception and confirm what he suspected, that they were between towers. He had zero reception.

He put on a burst of speed and caught up with Alannah. It took a few minutes and he could feel his breath whistling in and out in a way he hadn't experienced since training days. He didn't tug her elbow, because that would pull her off balance.

He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it, then slowed down. "Take a breath," he said very softly.

She halted and came back to where he was standing. *She* was breathing easily.

Kit let his breath ease before speaking. "Any idea what this guy wants with you? It might tell us how to play this."

Alannah pressed her lips together. The furrow that had been between her brows on Thanksgiving weekend came back. She shook her head. "No idea at all. I'm not even supposed to be here. It was a last minute change of plans, on Thanksgiving."

"Your folks went to Europe. Aran told me."

She raised her brow. "We shouldn't talk too much. He might hear us."

"From back there?"

"He might have good hearing. *Very* good hearing," she said defensively.

"I have good hearing. And I only heard him behind us because the wind happened to blow in the right direction."

She looked like she was ready to argue the point, then she let out her breath and shook her head a little. "Okay."

"You know something about this guy?" Kit demanded.

She shook her head again. "I only know he's not going to give up. He's come this far. And we can't go much farther. We'll run into the lake or mountains."

"You can go over mountains," Kit said absently, thinking hard.

"*These* mountains?" She laughed. "These are the Rockies, the tallest chain of mountains in North America."

"There are always passes, if you know where you're going," Kit replied. He stirred, his breath coming easier. Time

to move on. “You’re a good runner,” he observed.

“Track and Field in high school. Orienteering in college... and later, too.” She grimaced. “When I have time for it.”

Kit was pleased and let it show. “Then I don’t have to worry about you slowing me down.”

She laughed again. Softly, as if she was afraid of being heard. But Iron Grey wouldn’t be within hearing distance yet. There were too many trees with their thick branches in the way. “Other way around, Kit McDonald,” she said.

Kit tamped down on the warmth that wanted to expand into something more. This was not the time.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Her caution was raising his. “We’re not going to shake him loose by running, and the truck is back that way.”

“And it’s a dead piece of lead,” Alannah added. “It’s not going anywhere.”

He didn’t argue with her. “There’s another way to deal with him.”

She put her hands on her hips. The thin tunic hem lifted in the breeze, revealing the waist band of her leggings and creamy white skin above it. “What’s the other way?”

Kit made himself look away from her and told her what he had in mind.



ALANNAH GRIPPED HER ANKLE, FUMING. The ground was damp under her ass, and while she wasn’t running the cold dug into her flesh. It had to be less than fifty degrees by now. The shadows were growing longer. Soon the sun would disappear behind the mountains and the chill would really set in.

But in the meantime, she had her temper to keep her warm. She rubbed at her ankle, massaging the tendons and keeping the flesh warm...and the mosquitos away. That was another problem with stopping. She slapped at her arm as she felt another Everest-sized mozzie land there.

She dipped onto the timescape again, looking for the man. Not that it helped tell her exactly where he was. The timescape spread across infinity, taking all universes, and all of time. Trying to separate two points only a hundred yards apart was like trying to single out a grain of sand from others from a hundred feet in the air.

There was an odd quality about the timescape that didn't make her any happier. It wasn't menacing, or scary, for the timescape was utterly indifferent about mortal humans and their affairs. The strangeness was more of a feeling within her, in response to accessing the timescape. A sensation that seemed to bubble up from her middle, up through her spine, to spill out like a trickling fountain, spreading soothing coolness.

The strangeness made her uneasy. She had always relied on the sameness of the timescape. She found the vast impersonality reassuring. To find it changed did not improve her temper.

Alannah froze when she heard the crack of twigs and rustle of damp leaves. The man wasn't even trying to sneak up on her. Although, it wasn't like she could run away from him.

She put her hand on the ground by her hip and looked around.

The man stepped out from between the trees. He wasn't breathing hard. He lifted his hands, which were empty.

Alannah glared at him. "I was just sitting here minding my own business, not making a sound. Did you track me down by pheromones?"

His brow lifted. She'd surprised him.

Then he smiled.

Alannah nodded. "Yeah, thought so, asshole."

"Where's the other?"

"Went ahead to get water for my ankle. He'll be back in a second." She made it sound as sincere as she could.

The man rolled his eyes. "This will all be easier if you just cooperate."

She laughed. "This will all be easier if you just stand still a second."

"What?"

The branch Kit wielded hit the man squarely on the back of the head. The man fell forward and hit the ground with a solidness that made Alannah wince. He didn't fold and slide to the ground the way she thought unconscious people would.

"I told you to hit him *hard!*" She scabbled to her feet, her irritation building.

"And crack the man's skull?" Kit retorted. He put his boot on the man's back, holding him down, then bent using the branch as a prop, and slid his hand under the man's chin.

"That'll hold him for about a nanosecond," Alannah pointed out.

"It worked enough to get away from him last time," Kit said.

"And now look where we are."

He frowned, studying her. "You're angry?"

"Too bloody right I am! Using me as *bait*. It's...cliched!" She couldn't think of a better criticism than that. Besides, what Kit didn't know, what he *couldn't* know was that the man was a vampire. She was certain of it, now. The man had all but

confirmed he was tracking her by pheromones, something only vampires could do.

Was he also tracking her on the timescape? Was that why he could let them go so far out of sight and still catch up with them?

“Using you as bait worked,” Kit said mildly. He didn’t look at all put out by her anger, which just made her angrier. “We can go back to the truck and sort out getting home.”

“And have him come after us again?”

“He’s out cold,” Kit pointed out.

“That’s what *you* think!”

“He’s lying pretty damn still for someone who isn’t out,” Kit shot back. “Trust me, he’s unconscious. I know what I’m doing. But he won’t stay that way for long so I suggest we move it.”

Alannah stayed right where she was, fury twisting her gut and her thoughts. “You know nothing!” she shot back. “Not about me, not about *him*.” Nor about how useless it was to try to ditch the guy. He would just find her again, no matter where she went on this timeline.

Kit turned back to face her. “Is there something I *should* know?” he demanded. Finally, *finally*, she saw something other than implacable neutrality on his face. “Because if there is, tell me. Maybe it will help me get you home faster and right now, that’s my sole priority.”

“The sooner the better, huh?”

“Yes,” he snapped.

She stared at him, startled. He was *really* angry. She had missed the signs, but now she could see them. The tautness in his jaw, the narrowed eyes, the flexing tendons in his throat, underneath the smooth, warm flesh.

Then his eye widened. “Watch out, Alannah!”

She'd grown lax. She'd forgotten to watch the man lying on the ground behind them. Alannah threw herself forward, all her instincts switched to escape mode. She flung out her arm. It slapped across Kit's middle, and she curled it in, holding onto him, as everything in her body leapt toward safety.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



IT WAS THE SAME PLACE. Almost. The same mountain range. But the sun was high in the sky and it was a *lot* warmer. And the trees were different. The big one she'd sat beside, waiting for the man to track her down, was almost half the size it had been.

Alannah let go of Kit and spun on her heels, alarm tearing through her. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," she breathed to herself. She'd jumped across time. *Fuck*.

A wisp of what she thought was fog trailed through the branches of the trees.

"Where did he go?" Kit demanded. The anger hadn't completely gone from his voice. His puzzlement was keeping

it contained, though. “He just...disappeared.”

“I know how it looked,” Alannah assured him.

He looked around the tiny clearing they were in. “This... isn’t where we were,” he said slowly.

Fresh alarm speared her. “What did you say?”

He turned to look at her, his gaze direct. “This isn’t where we were.”

“Mountains, trees, hello,” she replied. How the hell could she get him back to their time without giving away what she was doing? Oh, this was going to be impossible!

“The trees are wrong,” Kit said, turning slowly to inspect everything once more. “They’re too small. And the air...” He looked up at the sky. “The sun is too high overhead and it’s too warm. It’s almost like...it’s summer.” He sniffed. “Smoke,” he said softly. Then, more loudly. “*Smoke.*” He turned on his heel again. “Wildfire...” he breathed. He pointed northwest. “That way.” He paused, his head cocked. “And coming closer,” he added softly.

Alannah looked uselessly through the trees. “I don’t see anything.”

“You’ll hear it first,” he assured her. “And the smoke will get thicker, long before the fire gets here.” He turned once more, observing *everything*.

Alannah’s heart sank.

His gaze came to rest upon her once more. Black eyes, unyielding. “If I look at my phone, what will it tell me?”

“That you have no signal,” she assured him. “We’re out of reach of towers here.” It was the truth, but not in the way he would think she meant.

He pulled out his phone. “No signal, not even a network.” He put the phone away. His gaze came back to her. “Time

travel..." he breathed.

Alannah flinched. Then she pulled herself together and tried to laugh. "What? What are you talking about?"

He shook his head. "Someone...I can't remember who. Said that once you take away the improbable, whatever remains is the truth. Or something like that."

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," Alannah said. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, using Sherlock Holmes as a mouthpiece."

Kit grimaced. "I've never read the Sherlock Holmes stories. Jack London was more my speed, when I had to read fiction."

"Had to?"

He lifted a hand. "You're distracting me."

Lord, I hope so, Alannah breathed mentally. "You don't like reading stories?"

"That's not the point." He turned again, assessing. "Iron Grey just vanished. No...you pushed me. Then...it went black. Just for a split second." His gaze came back to her. "What did you do?"

"Me? I pushed you out of his way. Iron Grey." It was better than calling the man 'the man', even in her mind.

"Then it went black, then we were here. Which isn't where we were. And it's..." He turned again, as if he was casting for evidence, for truth. "It's not even the *time* we were in. The trees are the same, but they're smaller. Ergo, we're in the past." He turned to face her once more. "*You* can time travel." His expression was one of stunned awareness.

Alannah gave up. "Most people get hung up over the time travel. But you're surprised that *I* can do it?"

Kit pushed fingers through his hair in a gesture that seemed distracted. “It’s more that this is what your family is hiding... it’s the whole family, isn’t it?” His gaze came back to her.

Alannah threw out her hands. “What is *wrong* with you? Can’t you be shocked? Hysterical? That’s what normal people do!”

“You tell a *lot* of people about this?” Now he did seem surprised.

“No!” She wanted to stomp her foot. “Stop focusing on the wrong things!”

“Don’t worry. I’m getting the main points, too,” Kit told her grimly.

The thick, breath-robbing smell of woodsmoke was growing stronger. “I should jump us somewhere else,” Alannah said. “It’s dangerous, being out of your subjective time.”

Kit’s eyes narrowed. “Dangerous...” he repeated. “You’re not just talking about bushfires, are you?”

“See?” she cried. “That’s what I mean! I tell you it’s dangerous and you start sorting out categories of danger! You’re supposed to freak out and want to go back!”

“Categorizing risk is an occupational hazard,” Kit told her.

“Then categorize *this*,” Alannah shot back. “Iron Grey isn’t human. He’s a vampire.”

Kit stared at her. His expression didn’t change. His narrowed eyes didn’t move. Then, slowly, he crouched. Then sat heavily, as if his legs had given up. He rested his arms on his knees, staring at the ground between his boots. “Vampire...” His voice was hoarse. “If time travel is real, then vampires...it tracks.” He lifted his head. “*Veris* is a vampire.”

His voice was still strained. “It explains everything about him I couldn’t fit in.” He frowned. “Your *father*?”

Alannah nodded. Finally, Kit was reacting with the shock she had thought a normal person should display if the facts of her very unusual life were revealed. It took facts about *people* to move him. Abstract facts—that time travel was a thing—had barely moved the needle.

Facts about people he knew, though. That Iron Grey was a vampire didn’t seem to bother him as much as Veris being a vampire.

“It’s the time travel,” Alannah explained. She might as well tell him everything now. The damage was done, and Kit was focused upon the people equations, anyway. “*Far* and mom travelled far enough back in time to when he was still human. They got my sister Marit out of that jump. Another time, they jumped to Constantinople, when *Athar* was human and a slave. That’s where Aran and I were conceived. Sixth century Byzantium.”

Kit stared at her. “It’s all of them...” he breathed.

“Mom was turned only a few years ago,” Alannah said. “It was that or die. *Far* and *Athar* weren’t about to let her die, so...” She shrugged.

Kit lifted a hand and touched the tips of his fingers on the other hand. “Veris, Brody, Taylor.” He considered. “Alexander. I’ve never seen him drink. So Rafe, too? Yes. Sydney... maybe. London, no. She appreciates food too much. But Remi for sure. Neven...maybe. David, too. Nyara and her friends... uncertain. They eat and drink but there’s something about Nyara....”

It was frightening how easily he had catalogued which of her family were the vampires. “You’re not supposed to be able to tell what they are,” she pointed out.

“Only I’ve spent enough time around them to spot the inconsistencies. And *this*, vampires, and the time travel...it explains everything. Even how all your extended family can indulge in endless travels around the globe.” He looked up at her. “Aran is human.” He said it flatly.

“So am I.”

“I know.” His voice was flat. Sincere. Then he swore. “The time travel. It’s not just through time. It’s space, too. You can stay in the same time, but jump from point to point.” He rolled his eyes. “Aran didn’t rent a helicopter at all. He *jumped* here. Even while he was talking to me on the phone.”

“Aran is good at it,” Alannah admitted. She cleared her throat. The smoke was grabbing at the back of it, making breathing hard. “We really should move,” she added.

Kit *didn’t* move. “If you take us back, how does it work? We’ve been here for four minutes, more or less. Does that mean four minutes will have elapsed when we get back? Or do you return to where you left?”

“I can go anywhere I damn well want to,” she muttered. “I can *hear* the flames.” And she could. It was far away, but it was distinct.

“This is important,” Kit said. “I need to know how to deal with Iron Grey when we get back. If it’s the second after we left, that’s one thing. If time has passed...” He paused. “Does *he* know about time travel?”

Alannah thought of the strange objects on the bed in the hotel room. The language he had used. “I think he’s from the future,” she admitted.

Kit stared at her for a long moment. “Because this is the past for future travelers,” he said slowly. “It’s...this is a whole new level of complication.”

“Not really. It’s just the same thing, from a different subjective point in time.”

“I meant...this is why he wants you,” Kit replied. “Iron Grey. I couldn’t figure out why he was pursuing you. But this is why. Because of your...abilities.”

“I’m a jumper,” Alannah said. “That’s what we call ourselves. Or travelers. But that makes me feel pretentious. And you can’t afford to be arrogant when you go back in time. Speaking of which....” She glanced to the north, where the wind and smoke and crackle of fire was coming from. “I’ll take you back, then I’ll disappear.”

“Into time?” Kit asked.

“Yes. Somewhere. Another timeline.” It was a risk, but it was better than letting Iron Grey get hold of her. But if he could track her across the timescape... She wouldn’t tell Kit that. She had a feeling that if she did expose that vulnerability, he would insist on sticking with her.

“What about your parents?” Kit said. “If they’re in Europe, they could come back, help with this.”

“They’re in the past,” Alannah said patiently. “Sorting out a different sort of problem.”

He studied her. Looked *through* her. “It’s a whole different mindset, a completely different way of thinking...” he muttered to himself. He got to his feet. Finally. “If Iron Grey is from the future, then he can time travel. Why does he want you, then?”

“Not everyone is a jumper. He might have come back here with a jumper,” Alannah replied. She was hazy about how Nyara’s people used time. “He could have paid for a trip, then abandoned his traveler.”

“Time travel is *commercialized* in the future?”

Alannah shook her head. “I don’t know for sure. Nyara and her people don’t talk about what it’s like where they’re from, because they don’t want to change time back here if they reveal too much. But they have paid travelers.”

“Nyara is from the future.” Kit blew out his breath. “Okay...”

She was handing out shocks that would have sent anyone else staggering, but he was taking it all onboard with barely a quiver. His stoicism was mind-blowing.

He frowned. “Iron Grey is from the future. He found you back here. Targeted you. Couldn’t he target you no matter which universe you’re in?”

“You picked that up? Multiverses? I didn’t even use the word.”

“You said timelines, plural. And I’ve studied physics. It makes sense.” Kit waved the topic aside. “Can he find you anywhere you are?”

“Possibly,” Alannah admitted.

“What if you jump to where Veris...your parents are? Can you do that?”

“Technically, sure, I could jump there. If I’m supposed to, there’ll be a bookmark I can find. But you don’t understand. Fifth century Britian and me on my own...it’d take two microseconds for me to get into trouble. My appearance...” She touched her hair. “I’d look like a local, but I wouldn’t sound like one or behave like one and that would make people suspicious and wary. And some of them might decide that I’m open season, if I’m a stranger. It’s way, *way* too risky.”

Kit considered her. “You do look like a Celt,” he agreed. “But how do you know that?”

She blinked, astonished. “How do *you* know that?”

“I don’t read fiction. I read non-fiction. A lot of it. Most of it history.” He shrugged.

Oh. She touched her hair again. “I know I look like a sixth century Celt because that’s where *Athar*...Brody...that’s where he’s from.” She hesitated. “Only, I’m taller than most women back there because Taylor is tall, and I had all the advantages of being raised in *this* century.”

“Decent food, warm shelter, lack of danger,” Kit murmured. “Good food alone would make a big difference.”

“Exactly.” His knowledge of history was making this much easier. Only, the sound of the fire was growing louder and the smoke thicker. “Let’s go,” she said flatly, moving toward him.

“Can you take us a year ahead?” Kit asked. “Not back to our time?”

“Why not back to our time?”

“Iron Grey. He’ll reacquire you as soon as we go back.”

“He can probably do that no matter where I am,” Alannah pointed out. “But if I keep moving...”

“I need a moment to think this through.”

“You haven’t been doing that already?”

“I was...distracted,” he admitted grimly. “You said you can jump anywhere you want. Any time and place, I presume that means.”

“No one can access the timescape the way Aran and Marit and I can.”

He gave her another thoughtful look. “That’s a conversation for another time. *Time*.” He let out a breath. “Look, we both agree that Iron Grey probably can’t jump through time by himself, yes? That’s why he wanted you?”

“Agreed,” Alannah said. Into her mind flashed an image of the flesh colored box with its mohawk of needles.

“So even if he can locate you the way he did the first time, he can’t reach you easily?”

Alannah said cautiously, “If he’s from the future, he probably accessed highly detailed historical records to figure out where I would be. Those sorts of records—detailed records of the past—don’t exist here and now.”

“We’re making those records for the future, every day,” Kit said, his tone thought-filled. “The internet, every photo we take with our phones. Everyone is a historian now.”

“Yes,” Alannah agreed.

“So anywhere out of his physical reach would be safe?” Kit asked.

“Well...” She sighed. “It would be safe from *him*.”

Kit tilted his head. “Because travelling to any time but our own is high risk...” he finished. “Yes?”

“Yes,” she said flatly.

He nodded. “So, we go back to our own time.”

“Where Iron Grey is. You said he’d reacquire me.”

“Not if I’m with you,” Kit replied.

She bent forward and coughed. Hard. Her eyes were watering. “We have to go,” she wheezed, waving the smoke away from her face.

Kit cleared his throat. “Can you take us back to the moment we left?”

“Sure. But he’ll be there still.”

“Not if you take us back to my truck. He’ll be two kilometers to the west.”

She stared at him. “Your truck. The one without gas?”

“That one,” he agreed. “Can you do that? Right time, different place?”

She rolled her eyes. “I said I was good.”

“I know. What I *don't* know are the limitations of time travel. I didn't even know it was a reality until a few minutes ago, so give me a break.”

Alannah looked at him. Noticed the furrow between his brows. *Stress*, she realized. “You're right,” she admitted. “Sorry.”

His furrow cleared away. He seemed startled. “Okay, then. I'm guessing you have to be touching me in some way to take us both back...?”

She nodded. “My parents first learned about time travel because of a kiss.” She held up a finger. “We know now that kissing isn't necessary.”

Kit didn't look abashed, or upset or even disappointed. Instead, he just looked thoughtful. “But close contact *is* necessary...” he concluded.

Alannah suddenly felt nervous about putting her arm around him. “It's nothing personal,” she warned him.

“Of course.” He held out his arms.

Alannah slipped under one of them and wrapped her arm around his back, which gave her a chance to measure the true width of him, which the unstylish warden's uniforms hid. She'd seen that he was strong. The width of his back and shoulders confirmed it. She felt heat against her arm. “You'd better put your arm over my shoulders,” she told him.

His arm came down over her shoulders.

Alannah held still for a moment, painting the image she needed of her destination, and building the jump in her mind.

“I’m going to bring us to the side of the truck facing the fence, so we’re on the path. Less chance of a car passing by seeing us suddenly appear.”

“You’re the jumper.”

“Okay, bend your knees and on three, jump into the air, because I won’t be able to lift you.”

“I didn’t jump into the air when you brought me here,” he pointed out.

“You were falling backward. Impetus is what drives the jump. The direction doesn’t matter.” She looked up at him. “I can push you onto your back again, if you want.”

His smile was knowing. “I’ll jump,” he assured her, bending his knees.

She bent hers. “One, two, *three*.”

She jumped and felt him come with her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE FOOTING WAS FIRM AND even and Alannah stepped out from under Kit's arm quickly. The green Ford was right in front of them. She could reach out and touch it. Alannah was pleased at her precision. She was more pleased to be able to breathe properly again. She took in deep lungfuls of the fresh air.

Kit crouched, then lowered himself to the ground and worked his way under the truck.

"Doesn't matter what's wrong," Alannah told him. "You're still out of gas."

He wriggled back out from under the truck. "Just wanted to confirm the problem. A piece of rebar is jammed in the bottom

of the gas tank. The front tire must have flipped it up when we drove over the divider in the parking lot.”

She remembered the ringing sound and nodded. “So... wave down a car?”

He moved to the back of the truck, and punched at the digital pad on the tray cover, unlocking it. “If we head back to civilization, Iron Grey will find you. What he *doesn't* know is how to move in the bush.”

“Neither do I,” Alannah pointed out, alarm building in her. “You’re not suggesting we head back into the trees?”

“If we go off grid, he can’t reach us. Not easily and not without me knowing he’s coming. He’s not a bushman.” He opened the cover and pushed it back, revealing the interior of the tray.

Alannah’s eyes widened. “Is that...a side of beef?” The package was wrapped in clear, heavy-duty plastic and was the size of a suitcase.

“A bison leg,” Kit said. “Friend of a friend had the whole beast. I got the leg for helping him cut it up.”

“That you’re just carrying around in the back of your truck?”

“I was bringing it to Taylor,” he said. “Figured it was a change from salmon.”

Alannah pressed her hand over her mouth to hold in her laughter. It wouldn’t be a humorous expression. She could feel the stressors and strain of the day nagging at her, looking for an exit, a way to vent themselves.

If only she could hide on the timescape somewhere... She reached for it, to reassure herself it was there, and felt the same liquid mental coolness wash over her that she had felt before. It was the strangest sensation she had ever experienced

when dealing with the timescape, but it wasn't alarming. Not now. It felt simply...different.

She couldn't jump anywhere and leave Kit here alone to deal with Iron Grey, so she focused instead on what he was doing. Yet the cool sensation lingered in her mind. She didn't object to its presence. Like the timescape itself, it was reassuring. It meant she had options.

Kit dug deep beneath the folded back sections of the cover and tugged and hauled a backpack out. He stood it on its base. The pack looked loaded...and heavy.

"You just happened to have that with you, too?"

"It lives in the truck. When I'm at work, it lives in whatever car I'm in."

"You're a prepper?"

"I'm a survivor." He moved the pack to the end of the tray and lowered the gate. "I spend too much time away from civilization to risk being caught without basic gear." He dug in the pack and withdrew a coil of blue nylon rope and moved back along the side of the truck. "Come here."

"The longer we stay here, the closer Iron Grey gets. Vampires can move fast, you know."

He glanced at her. "I do, now." He pulled the plastic wrapped bison closer to him and wrapped the rope around it. "Here."

She moved closer. "What are you doing?"

"Taking it with us. Turn around."

She held still. "You're going to put that on my back?"

"You haven't got the strength to carry the pack," he told her. "And you'll get tired too fast carrying this in your arms. You'll need your hands, anyway."

“We *have* to take it with us?”

“It’s this, or you get to eat whatever I can catch between now and sunset. A snake, maybe. Squirrels. There’s lots of them around, still.”

Alannah sighed. She’d never eaten bison, although foodies she knew raved about it. It had been all the rage at the trendy restaurants in L.A. a couple of years ago. “A steak sounds better than a snake,” she admitted.

Kit grinned. “It is. By miles,” he agreed. “Turn around.”

She turned and lifted her arms as he instructed. He slid the rope over her arms, just like a backpack. The rope had been doubled on both sides. “It shouldn’t dig into your shoulders too much,” Kit said. “It’s not heavy.”

“Glad you think so,” Alannah murmured. She shifted her arms and shoulders, trying to settle the odd package more comfortably.

“We’ll head out for a mile or two, then stop and resettle everything,” Kit told her. He moved around to the tailgate, and bent and slipped his arms into the backpack loops, and stood, the backpack on his back. He closed the gate and pulled the cover back over the tray, and locked it. “Ready?”

“To head into the wilderness? Not even close,” she said. “But let’s go before I change my mind. Which direction?”

“Across the highway, then east-northeast.”

She nodded. “That, I can do.” She hitched the ropes and her unconventional pack and tried not to think about what was lying against her back. “Let’s go.”



CROSSING THE HIGHWAY MADE HER heart skip, but they made it across without any cars blaring horns at them or the RCMP pulling up to arrest them for endangering drivers or wandering on state land.

They clambered carefully over the triangular concrete barriers next to the northbound lanes, and slipped into the trees on the other side.

Alannah slapped at the mosquitos that tried to eat her bare arms as she worked to keep up with Kit's measured but ground swallowing pace. She quickly learned that her shoes were going to be a real problem. They grew wet from the moisture on the ground, then stretched as she walked, and constantly slipped off her feet.

She paused dozens of times to put them back on and wondered if Kit had string or tape in his pack that she could use to tie them on. Then she would hurry to catch up with him, only to repeat the process a hundred yards farther on.

Kit finally stopped and lowered the pack to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Alannah told him, hurrying up to where he waited for her. "My shoes won't stay on my feet."

He shook his head. "We're about a mile in from the highway. We can afford to stop for a bit. And I can do something about the shoes."

Relief touched her. She carefully slipped the ropes from her shoulders.

"Not on the ground," Kit said, as she lowered the bison down.

She looked around, puzzled. "Where, then?" There was only grass-covered earth and trees anywhere she looked.

"Hang it from a tree branch."

Alannah took it over to the nearest pine and ducked under the lowest branches. A broken off stub of branch at chest height looked strong enough to hold it. She hung the rope over it and waited to see if it would hold.

Then she went back to where Kit was digging through the interior of the pack. Sitting on the ground, it came up to mid-thigh. It was a big, framed pack, one of the professional ones hikers and orienteering competitors used for multi-day events. Some of the contents of the pack littered the ground next to his feet. She spotted more rope, but most of the objects were in waterproof wrapping, and unidentifiable.

He made a small sound of satisfaction, and pulled out a pair of boots inside a giant resealable plastic bag and held them out to her. “Socks are in the boots.”

“Your boots? I’ll slide around inside them.”

“Put both pairs of socks on,” he told her. “Or stuff one pair into the toes.” He eyed her feet. “I don’t think you’ll have to, though.”

“Is that a way of saying I have big feet?”

“I’m a small size,” he told her. “Go on.”

She took the boots from him, sat on the grass and put them on. They were only a size or two too big, and she marveled. “You have *tiny* feet,” she observed, standing up and stamping each foot.

“No one has ever complained afterwards,” Kit said, his gaze on the interior of the pack. He said it absently, as though his thoughts were far away.

Alannah felt the flush race through her, turning her chest and neck and face red. It was, she told herself, just the unexpected juxtaposition of being out here in the middle of the Canadian wilderness and being hit with a joke so old it creaked. But it really wasn’t that at all. She knew perfectly

well what Kit was alluding to. The joke was that the size of a man's feet indicated the size of his cock. Kit's off-hand comment implied that the joke didn't apply to him.

And until that moment, she hadn't thought of him in that way at all.

Liar. You were speculating about his shoulders, noticing the warmth of his back. And you've been following his ass for the last mile.

And it was a fine ass, too.

Her flush deepened. She turned away, bent and fussed with the leather thonging that tied the boots closed, and fitting her leggings inside. She slapped at the mosquitos impatiently.

"Here," Kit said, right beside her.

She sucked in a startled breath and looked up.

He held out a folded garment. "It'll keep your arms covered. You don't have to worry about warmth. You'll be warm enough while you're moving, and we'll have a fire when we stop."

She took the garment and unfolded it. It was a light cotton jacket with a zipper and pockets on the hips and the chest. The cuffs were elasticated.

Kit moved away, his head down, his eyes on the ground. He looked under trees, and around them, moving away steadily.

Alannah was relieved to see him go. She needed a moment to recover.

Recover from what, girl? You're being a teenager. Her mental voice was astringent. And she *was* being stupid.

Kit returned five minutes later. By then, she had herself under control. She had put on the jacket and zipped it closed, grateful for the thin layer of protection.

He carried a handful of leaves and stems that he held out to her. “Native sage,” he told her. “Crush one of the leaves and rub it on your face and neck and your hands. Carry the rest with you. It’ll keep the mosquitos away.”

She took the leaves and stared at them. “You’re kidding. Will it turn my face green?”

His smile was easy. “Do you care?” In the diminishing light, his teeth seemed very white.

Alannah laughed a little. “No.” And she didn’t. Now the sun was lowering and they were among shady trees, the mosquitos were driving her crazy. “How come they aren’t eating you alive?”

“Don’t know. They just don’t. Perhaps I don’t taste as good as you.” He glanced up and around. “Sunset in two hours.”

“Two? The sun is almost touching the horizon,” she pointed out.

“It’s touching the mountains. The true horizon is a lot lower than that,” Kit said. “We’ll go another hour, then we’ll set up camp for the night.”

She shivered. It was going to be a long, damp and cold night. “How long do we have to stay out here for?”

Kit shrugged. “Until Iron Grey gives up.”

“How will you know he has? We’re out here.” With no Wi-Fi or convenient networks.

“I have friends. They’ll let me know.”

“Friends? Out here?”

He just smiled. “Trust me.” He went back to the pack and returned the contents, packing them with care, but not dawdling, either.

“Why *are* you doing this, anyway?” Alannah demanded. “You should have dropped the bison at the house and left. Instead you left Aran sitting around twiddling his thumbs and *you* came after Iron Grey. Why?”

“One,” he said, glancing at her quickly before returning his attention to the pack. “I didn’t know about the time travelling thing. Had I known that Aran is a jumper, I might have called it a different way. Two, you’re both American. I’m the Canadian, and the park warden. I can move a lot more freely in these parts that you can. And three, why the hell shouldn’t I want to help? I’m supposed to just stand by while you’re abducted?” He straightened, looking outraged at the idea.

Alannah shivered. “You know I could have jumped us both back to the house? There are...defenses there.”

He stared at her for a long, long moment. His eyes in the lowering light were veiled by shadows. “I don’t know about any defenses. I’ve never spotted them and I’ve been there dozens of time. I did think about jumping back there, but it’s not a good idea. Iron Grey will go back there. It’s the first thing he’ll do. He’d find us there. It would hem us in. We’d be under siege conditions.”

“Instead, he’ll go back there and find Aran,” Alannah said softly.

“Who can jump away.”

“So can I.”

Kit hesitated. “This way is better,” he said finally. “I can control things.”

“I’m not your responsibility,” she snapped.

Kit’s gaze didn’t let her go. “For right now, for as long as he comes after you, you are.”

“I can take care of myself!”

“And you’ve done it for way too long,” he replied with eerie calmness. “You’ve forgotten how to rely on people who care about you. I’m guessing that people who genuinely care are pretty rare in Hollywood.”

He bent and buckled the pack closed, then twisted and pulled it up onto his back and settled it in place. He didn’t ask her if she was ready. He just moved off into the lengthening shadows between the trees, his footfalls nearly silent.

CHAPTER TWENTY



ALANNAH HAD BEEN UTTERLY WRONG about the night being cold and uncomfortable. Not long after sunset—true sunset—she found herself warm and dry and lying upon a soft mattress made of layers of cut underbrush covered by a rubber sheet that made her think of yoga mats. Even the air was perfumed, for Kit had added more wild sage to the fire.

He had located a fir branch hanging horizontally three feet above the ground, and had anchored the tip to the ground. Then he had propped the ends of other branches against it, just on one side, along the length of the branch. They had forced that side of the branch to tilt toward the ground, which formed a long, low shelter beneath it. He'd tied a plastic sheet over the top of all of it, making the shelter waterproof. Then he had

built the “mattress” with soft fronds of undergrowth that looked like fine ferns, with the sheet on top.

All of this Alannah had watched in between gathering firewood and kindling and dumping it by the fir’s trunk.

After clearing out all the ground cover and leaf litter, Kit had built the fire, next. She had half expected him to rub a stick against another to start the fire, but he had pulled out an ordinary box of matches from his backpack instead.

As soon as the fire was blazing, he had unwrapped the bison leg and hung it on a stick over the fire to cook. In between turning the leg to cook evenly, he had rammed sticks into the ground on the opposite side of the fire and woven thinner branches between them. The wall was very efficient at reflecting the heat back toward the fire and the shelter that faced it, for Alannah could feel the warm air around her, bathing her face and hands.

She eyed the hefty bison leg and wondered how long it would be before she could eat it. She was starving, but she wasn’t going to bitch about it to Kit. She’d had visions of sleeping on prickly grass in the open, cold and uncomfortable in her thin leggings, to wake to find herself wet through from dew. Thanks to Kit, none of that would happen.

She even had a soft bed with a thick quilt, for Kit had unzipped and opened up the sleeping bag that had been strapped to the bottom of the pack and spread it over the mattress. “We sleep beside each other for warmth,” he’d told her. “But you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I know,” she said, and she did. He exuded an indifferent competence, as if he was working through a list of necessary tasks. Had she upset him somehow? His mood had changed since they’d stopped to swap out her shoes.

Kit was digging around in the pack once more. He seemed to be looking for something specific. He made a small sound

of satisfaction and pulled out a bright orange bag, that he tossed toward Alannah. “Something to eat while the meat is cooking.”

She caught the pack and held it up. “*Cheezyies?*” She looked at him. “You had these in the pack... You eat this stuff?”

Kit stared back at her. “I like ‘em.”

“Clearly. I thought the food you’d pack would be...I don’t know. Something with dense calories. Like jerky.” Every competitor she knew raved about the value of packing jerky.

“We’ve got protein.” He pointed to the bison leg over the fire, which was dripping fat that hissed when it met the flames.

“Yes, but you don’t walk around with bison steaks in your pocket every day.”

His smile was fleeting. “There is a whole smorgasbord of protein all around us.”

“Oh, hunting. Right.”

She opened the packet of cheezies. She didn’t like them terribly much, but she *was* starving.

Kit prodded the bison with the point of his knife, testing. Then he pushed the knife into the earth so it stood upright, and picked up his phone.

“You have reception?” Alannah asked, amazed.

“Cell phone tower, about half a klick away,” he said, his head down, his gaze on the screen. “We’ve been heading toward it all afternoon.”

“Just to make a call?” she asked, as he raised the phone to his ear.

“Just for that,” he agreed.

She stared at him, amazed. She had walked and stumbled and cursed the mosquitos. While he had been laying down

plans over plans, over plans. “What else do you have planned?” she demanded.

He lifted his chin. “Yeah, it’s me,” he said into the phone. “I’ve got her. She’s safe.”

Aran, Alannah realized.

Kit frowned, listening. Then he shook his head. “You can give up the dance around the truth. I know about the time travelling.” Then he winced and pulled the phone away from his ear. His gaze shifted to her, and Alannah knew that Aran was swearing about her telling Kit the truth.

She stared back at Kit. She’d had no choice. Kit had figured out most of it himself. What was she supposed to do? She couldn’t have kept up the bluff. Kit was too intuitive.

Kit put the phone back to his ear. “Done, man?” he asked mildly. He listened, then lowered the phone. “He wants to talk to you.”

“I bet,” Alannah said grimly. She knew she was about to get even more of an earful than Kit had just got.

Kit tossed the phone to her. Alannah lifted it. “Hey.”

“You’re really alright?” Aran’s voice was harsh with concern.

“I’m really alright,” Alannah said truthfully.

“There was some fracas at the new Hilton. I saw it on the bulletin board.”

“That was us,” Alannah confirmed. “There’s a guy...a vampire. I think he’s from the future. Tall, slender, iron grey hair but young features. Black eyes, full white beard.”

Aran drew in an audible breath. “Shit, Kit is listening to...” Then, “Why on earth did you tell Kit? Why did you expose us like that?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Alannah said flatly. “He figured out most of it himself. I just couldn’t keep up the bluff anymore without coming off sounding stupid. Concentrate, Aran. This dude, Iron Grey...he’ll head back into town to try to find me. He’ll check the house, first thing. And he might find you a good substitute for me. You’re a better jumper, and he might know that.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Aran said, his tone grim. “That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. I can’t see you on the timescape, Alannah. I haven’t for hours. Not since about an hour after Kit left here.”

Alannah held still, her thoughts racing. The coolness of the timescape—she knew it had something to do with this. But... how?

Instinctively, as she had been all afternoon, Alannah reached out mentally to the timescape. The same coolness she had experienced before brushed her mind now. It brought her comfort because of its sheer indifference. The timescape wasn’t human, didn’t have emotions or feelings, or judged mere humans. It simply was.

“Alannah?” Aran prompted.

“I’m thinking. I’ve been feeling something different on the timescape all day,” she confessed. “Let me try something. Hang on.”

She lowered the phone, aware that Kit was watching her closely. She dropped her gaze to her knees and let her hands and shoulders and head relax. It was easier to reach the timescape if she wasn’t tensed up.

Instead of merely touching the timescape with her mind, she went there with her whole mind...and as far as she was aware, her whole body, too. It was the way she initiated compound jumps. First, go to the timescape. Second, look for the bookmark that would be there, the bookmark that called to

her, that told her where and when to go. Then let herself be drawn to the bookmark, pulled across the timescape by its call, to be delivered to a different time and place.

But this time, she merely accessed the timescape with her mind and being, and hung there, looking around. The coolness, like the soft touch of a sea breeze on a balmy afternoon, bathed her.

How had the coolness begun? She wasn't sure. Except, the first time she had noticed it was when she had been afraid, when Iron Grey had been chasing them. She had wanted to hide from him, to hunker down while the master predator moved on.... Ah!

Even though she didn't have a body that she could perceive while on the timescape, Alannah was merely human, and used to having a corporeal presence, so it always *felt* like she was still in her body even though she couldn't see it. So now she straightened up, as if she had risen from a hiding place and was stepping out into the light.

The coolness withdrew, almost as though she had thrown off a cloak.

Alannah withdrew from the timescape and said into the cellphone; "Can you see me on the timescape now, Aran?"

He didn't answer for three seconds. Then, "Yes. You're somewhere north of me. In the middle of nowhere, it feels like."

"That's one way to describe it," Alannah agreed, looking up at the mountain peaks all around them, their white tips showing above the tree tops, glowing in the starlight.

"What did you do?" Aran said. "To hide?"

"I can't explain it. But wait..." She slipped back to the timescape, this time just enough to see it there. Then she mentally hunkered down as she had earlier in the day, as if she

was hiding behind a rock, and pulled a mental camouflage sheet over her. The coolness slipped over her like satin against her skin.

“And you’re gone again,” Aran breathed. “Alannah, what the hell?”

“Jesse can shout across the timescape. I guess I can hide from it,” Alannah said, withdrawing from the timescape completely.

“Well, hide from anyone on it who might be looking for you,” Aran said. “Later, we must explore this. See if you can teach me and the others.”

“Later,” Alannah agreed. “First, we have to sort this Iron Grey bastard out.”

“You sound just like *Athar*,” Aran said with a chuckle. “Let me talk to Kit. Strategize.”

“I can strategize,” she said, irritated.

“You know how to walk out of wherever you are, then?”

She held her teeth together against the need to swear. Then she looked at Kit. “Back to you,” she said and tossed the phone in an arc high enough to clear the firepit.

He caught the phone and said into it; “I can walk us out. It’ll take two days. But no one will find us in the meantime.” Then he listened.

Had he heard everything Aran had said? The man had phenomenal hearing.

Kit nodded a few times. He didn’t smile. Then, “Bringing them here might increase the risk.”

Aran must have told Kit he was bringing Jesse and the kids to the house. Alannah knew that Aran’s response to the higher risk was to point out that he was the jumper, and that Jesse could shout for help, anyway, so if they were with him, the

risk was considerably less than having Iron Grey come after Jesse and the kids in England, which was where they were currently living, in a three hundred year old cottage that was bursting at the seams with five children in it.

Besides, Aran could always have Jesse shout to Alex and Rafe and Sydney, and Remi, Neven and London, and have them jump to the house with little or no delay...and they were all superior fighters. All but one of them were vampires, too. They'd soon sort out Iron Grey if he dared show up at the house.

Kit nodded as Aran replied, then said, "You're the expert. I'll leave that side of it to you. Two days, then."

He disconnected the phone and considered Alannah.

"Aran is bringing Jesse and the kids to the house. Possibly the rest of the family, too," Alannah said.

"You heard that? Good."

"I was extrapolating." She ate a cheezie, grimaced, and put the bag aside. "What's at the end of two days?"

He rubbed his jaw. "If you can keep up, we'll reach the Stoney foothills."

"I don't know Canmore like a local. Where's the Stoney foothills?"

He pointed to the peaks to Alannah's left. They were the chain of mountains to the east of them. The western ranges were much farther away and hidden behind the taller lodgepole pines. "The foothills are on the other side of them."

Alannah's mouth dropped open. "You don't mean to walk *over* the mountains?" she breathed.

"Through them. There are passes. I've been heading toward the easiest pass all afternoon."

“I thought you were heading toward a cell tower!” Her heart was jumping about and her stomach was clenching, making her wish she hadn’t eaten any cheezies at all.

“Where do you think the cell tower is? They don’t forge trails to set those things up, if there’s a perfectly good one to hand.”

“I’m wearing yoga pants! And a cotton top under a cotton jacket...I won’t last in the cold! It’s *October*, Kit!”

“And a warm October, at that,” Kit replied with the steady, unmoving calmness that made her want to scream at him to see him react. “You haven’t said you can’t walk the pass, but I already know you can. You’re just concerned about cold, and you don’t have to be. I’ll get you through the pass with not a touch of frostbite.”

She blew out her breath, aware that she was trembling. She knew enough about hiking to know that cold was one of the killers that every hiker worked hard to combat with specialized layers of garments and at least three ways to make fire. It didn’t take too much of a drop in temperature to disorient a hiker, or make them think that instead of moving briskly on toward civilization, they should stay right where they were, as they slowly froze to death.

And the snow caps on the mountains here were considerably lower than they had been the last time Alannah had jumped to Canmore. It would be very cold in the passes.

The old safety mantras ran through her mind. *Shelter, warmth, food. Three minutes without air, three days without water, three weeks without food.* They could both survive even if they didn’t eat another bite, and water would be easy to collect, up at the snow level.

She shivered again.

“You’ll be fine,” Kit said, his voice low. “Trust me.”

“I have to, don’t I?” Alannah replied. She was horrified to hear the tremble in her voice and realized she was very near tears. The thought of crying in front of him was even more upsetting than the idea of walking over the Rockies.

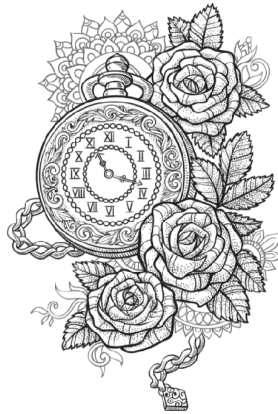
She pushed the cheezies bag even further away, then bent her knee and tugged at the lacing on her borrowed boot.

“What are you doing?” Kit asked, his tone merely curious.

“I’m going to sleep,” Alannah said. “I’m going to need it, apparently.” But what she really wanted to do was lie down and close her eyes, and pull the bag over her head so she didn’t have to show her face to Kit McDonald any more. He read way too much about her from it.

He saw way too much about how she really felt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ON THE SCREEN, RAFAEL RUBBED his hair, making it spike in all directions. “I just don’t think going there is a good idea,” he said, his tone insistent. “Remi, you’re the criminal. Back me up here.”

Aran hid his smile at the criminal jab, because he was on camera, too. They all were. He found it interesting that everyone in the chat room; Alexander, Sydney, Rafe, Neven, London and Remi, and Jesse, too, were all using their own devices. Not one of them was sharing a camera.

From the background behind Remi, Neven and London, Aran guessed the three of them were all sitting around the tiny table in their kitchen in Brittany.

Alex, Rafe and Sydney were all in different rooms of their sprawling house in Spain. Rafe was in his book-lined office, while Alex looked to be in his surgery—Aran suspected he had the laptop propped on the surgery bed itself. Sydney was in her regal office, with the grand curtains behind her.

Jesse was upstairs in the reading nook, and Aran could hear the children on her microphone feed. They were sleepy and cranky, for they were on Greenwich time and Jesse had woken them up for Aran to bring them here.

Remi pulled himself upright with the haughtiness only a Frenchman could display with the single adjustment of his shoulders. “Former criminal, you Byzantine gutter rat.”

Rafe grinned. “You’ll have to try harder than that.”

Aran cleared his throat. “As much as I hate to agree with Rafe on this, he has a point. This guy, Iron Grey, hasn’t shown any ability to jump. We’re pretty sure that’s why he wants Alannah. But if she’s out of reach, he’ll come after me, next, because I’m right here.”

“And local,” Rafe added. “While we’re hours away via commercial travel. And if he *is* from the future, there’s a chance he doesn’t have documentation that will let him cross borders.”

“Nyara’s people always have very authentic papers,” Sydney pointed out.

“But they’re the official travelers,” Neven said. “They do their research and have resources to acquire authentic documents. This guy...I get the feeling he’s here unofficially.”

“None of Nyara’s people would do what he did to Alannah.”

“None of them have need to,” Jesse said, her contralto sending a warm finger along Aran’s spine. He loved the sound of her voice. He’d noticed it first among her many charms.

“They all know how to jump themselves,” Jesse added. “This guy is a maverick.”

“A pirate,” Alexander said. “Looking for plunder here in the dark ages.”

“Which means you guys need to stay away,” Aran repeated. “Sydney and London can’t come anywhere near here.”

“But *we* could be there,” Remi said. “We are useless to Iron Grey.”

“Yes, but how do you plan to get here, if Sydney and London can’t risk coming here?” Jesse asked sweetly.

No one spoke.

My wife just made five vampires with thousands of years of experience between them speechless. Aran didn’t bother hiding his smile. “She has you there.”

Alexander shook his head. “No. We are *not* leaving you there alone. I agree that you should stay there to coordinate with Kit, when the two of them pop up again, but that doesn’t mean we sit on our rears and leave you hanging out there like a sacrificial goat. Neven, one of you—I don’t care which, but I think it should be Remi—one of you goes to Canmore. London jumps them there, then *immediately* jumps back home, where the other of you watches over her like a hawk. Sydney, you jump Rafe to Canmore the same way. In and out, don’t even pause to take a breath.”

Sydney considered the plan, then nodded regally. The queen had given her assent.

“Why Remi?” Neven asked, his tone merely curious.

“He’s a fighter and can fight dirty, but you’re too principled,” Alexander replied. “At least until London is threatened. Then, I have no doubt you’ll do whatever it takes to protect her.”

Neven nodded. So did Remi.

So did Rafe, and Aran realized that Alex had tapped Rafe to come here for the same reason. Alex knew himself well enough to know he would pull his punches...unless Sydney was threatened. Rafe, though, had learned ruthless infighting from Veris and wouldn't hesitate.

Aran let the relief he was feeling show freely. "Thanks, Alexander. It will help having a couple more warm bodies to hand."

"Luke warm, more like," Rafe said. He was grinning, as if he was looking forward to an adventure. "Dig out Veris' weapons store, Jesse. I'll be there in a moment or two."

"Me, too," Remi said stoutly. "But I have no need for weapons."

"Show off," Rafe muttered.

Sydney's screen had already shut down.

Aran lifted his hand in farewell. "I'll leave you to talk. I gotta go."

"Take care, Aran," Alexander said. "This vampire is not a jumper, but if he *is* from the future, he may have brought tools and resources with him that give him an edge."

"If he's not a jumper, he'll make the same mistakes Veris always slaps us around for," London said. "Underestimating people from the past."

That was an interesting thought. Aran nodded and exited the chat room, then shut down Alannah's laptop. He had things to do.

One of triplets began to wail, upstairs.

And a round of diaper changes was first on the list.



IT TOOK ALANNAH MORE THAN an hour to fall asleep, even though she pretended she was. Kit could hear her breathing under the crackle of the flames. When it dropped down to the slow, deep breaths of true sleep, he moved around the campfire to the shelter side and sat between the shelter and the flames.

He felt easier when he was there, but hadn't moved until she was properly asleep because Alannah would have been embarrassed to know he was actively guarding her. His position between her and the fire meant someone would have to come at her from either flank. Only, the trunk of the tree was in the way of a direct attack from the left, which left only the right side for him to guard, even though he monitored all directions.

There was a possibility of someone coming *over* the shelter and attacking his back, and if real vampires lived up to their fictional abilities, Kit wouldn't put it past Iron Grey to try a leap over the shelter. But Kit had made the shelter with that chance in mind. The branches he'd tied to the back side of the main branch were longer than usual, with their main stems thrusting up like the spikes of a palisade. And the vampire would have to leap across more than ten lateral feet while also lifting himself more than six feet in the air to clear the spikes.

Yeah, Iron Grey would have to be pretty damn good to make that leap.

But still, the possibility kept Kit awake and alert. He would have to ask Alannah in the morning about the true abilities of vampires. In particular, this ability of theirs to track by pheromones. From how far away from the hunted could they track?

Kit had been planning on exploring this with Alannah tonight, but he'd upset her enough with talk of walking over the mountains that she'd turned to the pretense of sleep to avoid more conversation.

Her orienteering skills were a double edged tool. She knew just enough about the dangers of the wild to be scared of them. Kit wasn't afraid of the dangers, but he did respect them. And he knew enough to be confident that they could make it over the pass. There was only one high section, and they could move through it during daylight, which would help. So would her abilities as a hiker and cross-country runner.

While Alannah slept, Kit worked on the bison haunch. He carved off the outer layer of cooked meat and put it on a flat rock he'd cleaned to cool off. When it was cold, he put it on a clean section of the original plastic wrapping. In the meantime, the newly exposed meat cooked over the fire. When he'd taken off as much meat as the haunch would provide, he would wrap the plastic up, tie it with the string he'd woven from grass, and put it in the pack. It would fit, because his back-up pair of boots weren't in there anymore.

He had emergency rations in the pack, but the fresh meat would get them through to Stoney land. What happened then would be...interesting.

Plans, and more plans. He kept busy; carving off meat, listening to the night sounds of the forest around him, and once, turning the haunch to let the other side cook.

Around two a.m., Alannah stirred. Kit paused from his carving to monitor, to see if she fully woke. She might be disoriented when she woke.

She turned, her face toward the fire, and gave a deep sigh. The sleeping bag shifted, revealing one shoulder and the thin tunic top, which had slid over the corner of her shoulder and down the arm.

Kit twitched to pull the top back into place. Or did he really want to smooth his fingers over the pure white flesh she displayed, to feel its warmth and find out for himself if it was as soft as it seemed?

He turned his mind away from the speculation, for it was pointless.

“You should sleep,” Alannah murmured, so softly that at first Kit thought he was imagining it.

“I will in an hour or so.” He could feel the tiredness pulling at his bones. He could get by on only a few hours sleep tonight, if he kept moving tomorrow and slept well tomorrow night. Staying afoot wasn’t an issue, and tomorrow night he wouldn’t have a haunch of bison to cook and carve.

Alannah didn’t answer and for a while, Kit thought she had drifted back to sleep, for her breath remained calm and deep. But then she spoke again. “Will he find us?”

“He’d have to be good.” He kept his tone confident.

“Maybe he is. I should just jump us....somewhere. Somewhere safe.”

He shook his head, even though she probably had her eyes closed. “He’s looking for you because you can do what do you. If you jump, who’s to say it won’t tip him off? He found you once in time. We don’t know enough about him to know how he tracks you from a distance. Analogue and out of the way is safest.” He paused. “You’re too used to using time to your advantage.”

She didn’t pause as long to respond, this time. “You might be right. My fathers are always harping on about respecting time and not using it. But we grew up thinking that way.”

“I figured,” Kit said, keeping his tone easy. Her voice was sleep-filled. She might yet drift off if he didn’t say anything to alarm or anger her and stir her fully awake.

After a while, she said, “My brother is the *real* time jumper. He turned time into a money machine.”

He thought about that. Once one got beyond the staggering fact that time travel was real, then the possibilities expanded. Using time to make money seemed like a logical progression. Any new technology was first exploited by criminals, then entrepreneurs would spot the legal ways to skin the cat, and would get to work. That introduced the technology to the masses. “Go back to Mesopotamia, pick up a freshly made idol, bring it forward to this time and sell it for a fortune. Like that?”

“Something that doesn’t show age,” Alannah breathed. “He digs diamonds out of the Kimberley fields in the 18th century, long before anyone valued them. Says they’re just lying on top of the dirt like every other rock.”

“Gold from the Klondike,” Kit guessed.

“And opals from South Australia. Marit pointed that one out to him.”

He shook his head admiringly. “But you don’t use time that way.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Mostly because I let the stories *Far* and *Athar* and Mom always tell sink in too deep.” After a moment, she added, “Afraid, I guess.”

“You’ve more courage in your little finger than most men scrounge up in a lifetime.”

Her silence was much longer this time. “Me?” She sounded more awake now.

“It’s not that you’re afraid,” he added, carefully wrapping the small pile of steak slices. “I think it’s because you’re trying

too hard to be human...only you're more than just human." He picked up the string and with one hand holding down the plastic, contrived to wrap the string around it and tie it off. While he worked, he said, "I always knew you were different in some way and hiding it. Your whole family is utterly unique, but you are in a class of your own. I had no idea what that difference was, but you were doing everything you could to hide it, and stay human normal. Repressing yourself like that...it shows in odd ways."

"That you noticed."

"I know the signs," Kit assured her. He got up and moved over to the pack hanging on the trees, and stowed the meat inside it and buckled the pack. If there were any bears still up and about this late in the season, they would not be able to reach the meat without ripping the pack apart. He would haul the cooked bones and leftovers a good half mile away from here and leave them for the wildlife to eat. A bear would go for the easy pickings before trying to get into the pack.

"Why do you know the signs?" Alannah asked. Curiosity colored her tone, alerting Kit that he had revealed too much. He came back to the fire, lifted the haunch off the two tripods and added more wood. If he waited long enough to answer, she might drift back to sleep.

"Kit?" she asked as he settled on the ground once more.

He plucked his knife from the ground, and used the flat stone to hone the edge of it. It had done a lot of work this night. While he worked, he sought for a way to deflect her, then settled for turning it around and pushing it back toward her. "You feel like you don't measure up. Not compared to Aran. And Marit...you said something about her being... something more than just a time jumper. You feel like you're nothing, compared to them."

Her breath came faster. When she spoke, he could hear the pain in her voice. “I *am* nothing. I was a small cog in Hollywood, now I’m not even that.”

“You’re not nothing,” he said sharply. “If you were nothing, then we wouldn’t be here.” He realized how that statement could be misinterpreted and added quickly. “Iron Grey wouldn’t be hunting you if you were nothing. You have a talent, Alannah. It might not compare well to the overachievers in your family, but that’s not how you should measure yourself.”

“I was trying to *not* measure myself against them,” she said softly.

Ah... The note of understanding sighed in his mind. “By being more human than normal humans,” he said, as softly as her. He didn’t wait for her confirmation, because he knew in his gut that he had nailed it. “That’s something I know, too.”

“You do?” Her voice was startled.

He cursed silently. This wasn’t helping her sleep. But at least she was talking civilly and not showering him with anger and resentment as she had been that afternoon.

Picking his words with care, he said; “The Stoney land we’re heading for...it’s my folks’ land. The McDonald family are part of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation. One of the more successful ones. They own businesses all through the foothills, from Calgary all the way up to Edmonton and into the northern lands. The real money maker is a construction company that spans the province. It won the contract to build the Olympic village in Calgary for the Winter Olympics in 1988. And my father will tell you, if you ask him, that the family’s success was made possible only because the family worked together to *make* it successful.”

He halted, unable to go on. He’d never told this to a single soul. It hurt to speak the words. Bitterness rose in him, and he

stabbed the knife into the ground with more force than was strictly necessary.

“Only, you’re not working the family business,” Alannah said slowly, with dawning awareness in her voice. “You...you joined the military, then you became a park warden.”

“Army,” he said, speaking around the hard knot in his throat. “Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry.” And then onward from there, but that wasn’t something to share.

Her silence this time stretched long and thin and tense. Still speaking softly, but with full alertness, she said, “Did you walk away, or did they push you?”

He was breathing hard. Too hard.

Both. The word whispered in his mind. Pushed, propelled, sprinting away...it made little difference.

But he couldn’t speak that aloud because Alannah was awake and aware now and would ask the next natural questions and those he *wouldn’t* answer. Not ever.

“Go to sleep,” he told her, meaning it to be a gentle suggestion, but it emerged harsh and dictatorial.

He let the false impression remain uncorrected. If she thought he was pissed with her, she would retreat once more and stop asking questions that hurt to even consider, let alone answer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ARAN FOLLOWED THE DELICIOUS SCENT of fresh coffee into the kitchen and found, as he suspected he would, Rafe working over the stove, with frypans spitting and hissing.

A French press stood on the wooden chopping block island behind Rafe, two clean mugs beside it and the sugar pot behind it.

“You know us too well, Rafael,” Aran said as he poured the two cups. He put sugar in his and left Jesse’s unadulterated.

“Breakfast in about eight minutes,” Rafe told him. “Lots of calories to make up for the broken night.” He glanced over his shoulder. “At least two of ‘em are teething. I could hear the pain in their voices.”

“Ambesol is a boon to the frazzled parent,” Aran admitted.

“I waited until I could hear all five sleeping before I started breakfast,” Rafe said. “Jesse is prowling up there. She needs coffee, calories and to relax.” He grinned. “I know she won’t let herself sleep just yet.”

“Enemies on the right, feverish babies on the left. We might have to shoot her with a tranquilizer gun before sleep happens,” Aran admitted. He picked up Jesse’s cup. “I’ll coax her down.”

He climbed back up the stairs, and hung over the railing at the top and held out the mug.

Jesse was circling the reading nook, picking up toys and stuffing them in the baskets. She put the basket she was carrying down and came over and took the cup.

“Sausages, hash browns, toast, eggs and fried green tomatoes,” Aran said. “Five minutes.”

“Rafe is trying to put me to sleep with high carbs and fat?” Jesse guessed.

“Propping you up so you can keep going a while longer,” Aran replied. He pushed locks of hair out of her eyes. “You’ll have to sleep sometime today.”

She nodded. “Just not at the same time as you.”

Military thinking. Leave someone awake and alert at all times. “Rafe’s here,” Aran reminded her. “And Remi’s out in the shed, digging through the weapons cache.” He grinned. “So much for not needing a weapon.”

“He *doesn’t* need weapons. Not what we think of as weapons. He throws things, remember?”

“I do. I saw him take out a sprinting man at 100 yards with a beer bottle, when I was fifteen,” Aran admitted. “Now I shift to high alert whenever he gets near throwable objects.”

“He’s also the outside sentry,” Jesse pointed out. “So I can relax long enough to eat and drink a gallon more coffee.”

“Come and eat, then,” Aran told her, and held out his hand.

She took a deep swallow of the coffee, took his hand and let him lead her downstairs.

Rafe was putting the two plates on the little table under the back window when they moved into the kitchen. He waved to the plates, and sat at the other end of the table with them.

“You are a prince among vampires, Rafael,” Jesse told him and kissed his cheek.

“I was born penniless and grew up a slave. Not a drop of nobility in me,” Rafe said, but he sounded pleased anyway. “All five are still sound asleep,” he added.

“Better than a baby monitor,” Aran said and picked up his knife and fork and ate hungrily.

“While I have the attention of both of you, there’s something I’ve been meaning to say,” Rafe said.

Jesse glanced at Aran, lifted a brow. Aran shrugged and kept eating.

She turned her attention to Rafe. “Yes?”

Rafe threaded his hands together in front of him. “No one in the family will ever tell you this, Aran, and I’m only saying it out of one corner of my mouth, and I’ll deny I said it if you ever try to claim I did, but the way you’re using time to make a living...well, it’s admirable, in a way. Sydney likes that you have no fear about using time, while the rest of us have crept around it, afraid to rattle the snake cage. You’re doing what she thinks we should do.”

Aran ate another forkful of the tomatoes, even though his appetite had abruptly diminished.

“Make money?” Jesse said, her tone cool.

“Use time, instead of pretending this extraordinary gift some of us have is a toxic curse upon the family.”

“Hell, Rafe, if *Far* heard you....” Aran said, putting down his knife and fork.

“Which is why I’m saying this *sub-rosa*,” Rafe said calmly. “Thing is, Aran, you’re using it the wrong way.”

Even Jesse stopped eating.

Rafe held up his hand, probably sensing her sudden wariness. “No, *wrong* way isn’t what I mean.” He gripped his hands together. “I don’t know how many others in the family have noticed, Aran, but I have. You’re visibly older than you should be. You’ve been spending too much time in the past. And if we can see it, how long before normal humans—friends and colleagues—how long before they start to notice? Especially these days, the way people take photos all the freaking time with their cellphones...all it will take is someone pulling up a photo of you taken even five years ago, and being staggered by the difference.”

“People age at different rates,” Aran said dismissively.

“Are you being a life coach right now, Rafe?” Jesse asked. There was still a tinge of coldness in her voice. She was on the defensive because she thought Rafe was attacking him.

Aran put his hand on her wrist, to reassure her. “It’s okay,” he said quietly.

“Is it? Rafe is saying...what exactly, Rafe?” Jesse said, turning to him. “That Aran shouldn’t do any more jumping?”

“No, I’m not saying that,” Rafe said easily. He wasn’t moved by Jesse’s prickly attitude, but then he’d faced down Veris and even Brody, both in high dungeon and holding weapons in their hands, and he’d done it more than once. Rafe only *looked* like a thirty year old Latino fresh from the provinces. “I *am* suggesting that you stop making the very

long jumps back...oh, don't bother denying you do that. You could step into the bathroom, disappear back into ancient Mongolia for twenty years, and return to the bathroom a minute later and none of us would even notice. Except that if we were to compare how you look now with how you looked five years ago, we'd judge you had aged by ten or fifteen years. So you're making jumps and staying back in time. I don't care where or why. But for Jesse's sake, you should think about an alternative career."

Aran could feel the resistance, the *resentment*, trying to build in him.

"You don't understand, Rafe," Jesse said, and Aran could tell she was struggling to sound reasonable and calm. "This is important to Aran."

"And I was partial to mead, but I had to give that up," Rafe shot back. He lifted his hand again. "Let's not argue. It just gets in the way of good sense. Aran, you know as well as any of us the risks you take every time you jump back. And that isn't why I'm saying you should stop with the long jumps. You're going to grow older than Jesse. A *lot* older. And you're physically old enough already that in a year or so, your metabolism is going to drop off a cliff."

Aran stared at him, baffled.

Rafe leaned forward. "You'll get *old*, Aran. You'll feel it in your bones. Your eyesight won't be what it was. You'll have to wear glasses to read anything. And you won't be able to eat breakfasts like this because they'll put your heart at risk because they're full of fat, and because you can't drop the weight the way you used to. Which will spike inflammation, and that sets off a whole bushel of problems, including cancer and auto-immune diseases."

Aran shook his head. "So what? Getting old is part of being human."

“Not in this family,” Rafe said flatly.

This time, it was Jesse who rested her fingers on *his* wrist. “Remember who his spouses are,” she said softly.

Alexander, the physician who had been in general practice for fifteen hundred years. Sydney the strategist, who could often see further into the future than Veris.

“You really want to be turned when you can’t see much, and your joints ache when it rains?” Rafe asked. “You’ll carry that with you the rest of your very long life, for near immortality *is* the legacy of this family. Time travel is just a bonus that comes with the long life.”

Aran sat back, his anger gone just like that. Rafe had flipped around his understanding of...just about everything. Certainly, about the real shape and meaning of his family and their peculiarities. “I *like* time travel,” he said, but not with any great emphasis behind it.

And I was partial to mead, but I had to give that up.

Rafe grimaced. “Long life comes at a cost. Most people can’t see the cost. All they can see is how cool it is to live a thousand years and find out what life will be like then. Of cheating death and living essentially forever.”

“Maybe I don’t want to live forever,” Aran said. “Maybe Jesse doesn’t and if she doesn’t, then I’m not going to go on without her.”

Jesse’s expression softened. There was a warmth in her eyes that told Aran she would have plenty to say to him about that when they were alone.

Rafe smiled. “Oh, yeah? An inveterate time traveler like you doesn’t want to travel into the future? Long life is just another, slower version of time travel, Aran. You don’t want to see Nyara’s world, see time travel commercialized? Veris is still alive then. Maybe Brody and Taylor, too.” Rafe paused

and considered what he'd just said. "Scratch that. They're all three alive in that time, because Veris would say *exactly* what you just said, if either of them passed. Ergo, they live until Nyara's time at least."

Another, slower version of time travel. "I hadn't thought of it that way," Aran admitted.

Jesse looked thoughtful, too.

Rafe sat back. "I'm guessing that you and yours don't need active income any more. Not with the way you've been milking compound interest and inflation."

Aran wanted to smile complacently. "We're not hurting," he admitted.

The corner of Rafe's mouth lifted. "Stay exactly that reticent about your finances. *Forever*," he said. "Salt it away under a dozen or more different IDs. Spread it out so no one person or institute can tie them together. Sydney can help you with that—she was trained to deep dive into records and find what people were trying to hide. She knows how to hide things so no one can dig them up."

Aran rubbed the back of his head. "I guess I'll take up knitting..." he muttered.

Jesse pressed her lips together in a sympathetic grimace.

"You were a successful lobbyist in Washington DC," Rafe said. "Sydney could use someone like you."

"To do what, exactly?" Aran asked. He was only a tiny bit interested. Sydney's form of politics was *olde worlde* polite. It was diplomacy, not dog fights.

"We come across other time jumpers in other worlds," Rafe said. "Not just our alternative selves, but people we don't know, who have tripped over time travel themselves. And lately, we've met time travelers who were *trained*, the moment

another traveler suspected they were jumpers. And they were trained using Veris' manual and principals."

"That damned book," Aran growled. "It's too conservative."

"For you, who grew up knowing about time travel, sure. But Veris' manual scares the shit out of most people, which is exactly where they need to be when they're first learning to jump. They can toss the thing when they've got a few successful jumps under their belt...and that's where you come in."

Aran just shook his head. "You've lost me."

"You teach them how to use time properly," Jesse said.

"That's not all. You teach them to respect time," Rafe said. "And show them the possibilities, if they use it properly."

"The way you're showing me right now?"

"Only, you can do it better. You know how to sell policies." Rafe sat back. "I can only hit people over the head with it, until they give up and see what I'm trying to say. Look, we know that some of us in this time survive until Nyara's time, when the natural time jumpers—you—somehow work with the vampires who time travel using teleportation. And Nyara and her people won't say much, but I get the impression that the natural jumpers save their ass in some way. So there is a future for us, one where we won't have to hide our true natures."

"We just have to live to see it," Jesse murmured.

Aran glanced at her, startled. "You want that, Jesse?"

"I think...maybe I have to think about it some more," Jesse said cautiously. Which meant she didn't want to discuss it in front of Rafe right now.

"We have to convince the time travelers we meet that wanting to live to see that future is a good thing, because right

now, there are too few of you,” Rafe added. “Worse, you’re all related by blood, except for Sydney and London. The more time travelers we meet and bring into the fold in this time, the greater the chance that we’ll survive to see the future we want to see.”

Aran let that settle into his mind.

“Wow...” Jesse breathed.

Wow, indeed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“YOU’RE SMILING,” KIT SAID, WHEN he turned back to wait for her to catch up with him.

Alannah didn’t lengthen her stride or try to jog to where he waited, because that would drain her energy faster than a steady walk. “I was just thinking how wonderful the smell of coffee is in the morning.”

She had woken at what Kit assured her was just after dawn, even though she couldn’t see the sun behind the mountains to the east. Kit held a collapsible metal mug out to her, the contents sending up curls of steam. “Coffee, meat and mashed potatoes,” he told her.

“You’ve got *potatoes* in your pack?” she asked, sitting up and reaching for the coffee.

“Hold it by the handle only,” he warned her. “Rest the bottom on your hand and you might collapse the mug. You won’t like what happens after that.”

She carefully held the mug by the handle. The metal would make it too hot to rest upon her hand, but she would be careful anyway.

“I had dehydrated potato flakes in my pack,” Kit said, heading back around the fire. “Good for energy,” he added and bent over a small, flat bottomed fry pan sitting on a rock pushed well into the coals of the campfire. “Eat, and etc., as fast as you can. We’re leaving as soon as you’re ready.”

Alannah scrambled to put on her borrowed boots and jacket. She scrubbed at her hair with her fingers, tearing at knots and wincing.

Kit handed her a folding metal fork with a flat head and she ate quickly. The bison had been pulled and fried, and she could scoop it up with the mashed potato, which wasn’t too bad for something that had been flakes a while ago.

She drained the coffee, which tasted ambrosial, and twenty minutes later, they had set out for the day’s hike.

Alannah recalled the coffee now with a fond smile, for that had been two hours ago. “I’m gaining a new appreciation for the convenience of coffee shops. I’d love another cup of coffee, but to get one, we have to collect firewood, build a fire, boil the water...” She shook her head.

“Keep moving,” Kit said, not quite touching her arm and waving in the direction they had been travelling. “We’ll stop at noon and you can have coffee then.”

“You’ll build a whole ‘nother fire like last night just for lunch?” She turned and walked alongside him as Kit trudged

onward.

“It doesn’t need to be much of a fire to boil water,” he said absently, his gaze far ahead.

The view ahead was a magnificent one, worthy of postcards. It was little wonder he was staring at it. Snow-capped peaks soared above them, crisply defined in the still air. The sky was cloudless, painting a blue backdrop that didn’t seem real.

“It’s gorgeous,” Alannah said.

Kit glanced at her, then back at the mountains. “Yes.”

“You said there was a pass through them?”

“There is.”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“You’ll see.”

She had to be content with that.

They walked for a few more minutes in silence. This time, Kit didn’t pull ahead with his long-legged stride. She seemed to be able to keep up with him. Maybe he was keeping his pace slow enough to match hers, which was shorter despite her own long legs.

“Is this why you became a warden?” she asked him.
“Because of views like this?”

“I’ve seen better.”

“You have? Where?”

“The Andes.”

She thought about that. “Isn’t that...I don’t know...disloyal or something? These are the *Canadian* Rocky Mountains.”

“They are,” he agreed easily. “But that doesn’t mean I have a blind spot about them.” He glanced at her. “You could hop

over to South America any time you want. Peru has the best of the Andes. Check them out for yourself. Then come and tell me which ones you think are the best.”

“Aren’t they all just...grand?”

“They’re all different. But these...” He waved his hand toward them. “They’re backdrop, when you’re working. You get so you take them for granted. You’re too busy trying to run up a five in three slope after a rabid goat...you tend to not notice the prettiness.”

“Pretty.” She laughed. “That sounds like ...I don’t know, it’s like calling the Taj Mahal a domestic residence.”

“You’ve seen the Taj Mahal?”

“Yes.” She waved away a mosquito with her sage branch. “When we were seventeen, Aran and I spent the year playing Global Bingo.” Being able to speak the truth like this was refreshing. Normally she bullshitted about being taken to India on a family vacation.

“Global Bingo...” Kit sounded amused. “You’d jump somewhere, come home and stamp it on a map?”

“That’s right. But if we didn’t go together, or if we got into trouble, then it didn’t count.”

“Trouble?”

She nodded. “The point was to pass as tourists. If anyone asked us for passports, or took too much interest in us and forced us to jump home again, then we weren’t doing it right and that jump was cancelled out.”

“Training yourselves.... Was that Aran’s idea?”

“I wanted to see all the tourist spots. Aran put the polish on it.”

“And you *didn’t* get to Peru to see the Andes?”

“It’s not exactly a sexy, well-known destination,” Alannah said defensively. “And I was seventeen. Buckingham Palace was a big deal for me.” She paused. “We *did* get to Chile, to Cabo de Hornos, to see the tip of South America.”

They had taken another dozen steps before Kit said, “How did you win the bingo pot, then?”

“No pot. The point was to stamp as much of the map as possible...and for Mom and *Far* and *Athar* to not find out. *Far* would have skinned us alive.”

“He still will, if he ever finds out,” Kit replied. “But he won’t hear it from me,” he added quickly.

Alannah shrugged. “*Far* is mellowing a bit, these days.” She realized she was staring at the jagged peaks once more. “If you don’t work here because of the view and chasing rabid goats irritates you, then why *are* you a park warden?”

For long moments, Kit didn’t answer. Alannah wondered if he intended to ignore the question, for it was direct and nosy. They marched onward, always up-slope, although the slope was not anywhere near five in one, here.

“I earned a B.A. in Environmental Conservation while I was in the Army,” Kit said, startling her, for he had been silent for so long. “Afterwards, when I got out, being a warden seemed...peaceful.”

Alannah nodded. She had no direct military experience, but she’d heard Jesse talking with her guard down, late at night, when there was only family around. “You don’t have to stay clenched and suspicious out here?” she proposed.

“Something like that.” He took a few more steps, his head down, frowning. He did that a lot, she realized. The twin shallow folds between his brows were constantly on stage. “Then there was the view,” he added.

Alannah laughed. “Which you never look at.”

“No,” he agreed heavily.

“Sounds like you need a new career.”

“Maybe.”

They walked another few minutes, then he said, “I thought for a while that...maybe...a wilderness tour company. A small one. I’d be looking at the view, then.”

“You mean, start your own company? Take tourists around the mountains?” She was astonished. Kit McDonald was so laconic and laid back, she had a hard time imagining him chatting to tourists about the history of a place and all the other patter a tour guide usually handed out.

Kit kept his gaze ahead, his chin up. “Yeah, well, I didn’t think about it for too long. You know how many tour guides there are, operating just out of Banff National Park?”

“No idea, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s hundreds of them,” she said. “But if you really want to do it, then there’s gotta be a way to pull it off.”

“If you want it bad enough, the universe will deliver?” he said, his tone dry. “I know personally that it doesn’t matter how much you want something, just wishing it so doesn’t work.” There was a note in his voice that took Alannah a second to identify because it was unexpected.

Pain.

It prodded her into saying, “What did you want that you didn’t get?”

Kit shook his head.

“No, really,” she insisted. “You seem like a...capable guy.”

He still didn’t look at her. “I wanted a tour company,” he said flatly.

Alannah felt a small jerk of disappointment. He was deflecting her. But that was typical for Kit. He deflected everyone about almost everything. But some people were like that. In her family, everyone was an open book, whether they wanted to be or not. Even Alexander, one of the most private men she'd ever met, regularly had his decisions and actions dissected by the family. He tolerated it well, because there was no one else who knew the full truth about him and his life, who could help him when he needed it. Which was the situation for everyone in the family. They were close because they had no one else.

Kit clearly was in the same category. He would talk...but to only a few people he utterly trusted. He had spoken of a family. Likely they were the people among whom he let himself relax and speak freely. Alannah wasn't one of the people he trusted, or he wouldn't be trying to deflect her now.

So Alannah kept her tone breezy as she said, "You could have a tour company if you wanted one. You just have to find a unique marketing proposition that differentiates your company from the hundreds already out there."

"You know marketing?" he asked, his tone as light as hers. "That's what you studied at Harvard?"

"Economics," she said. "Probably the complete opposite of marketing. But I've spent years working in the spin capital of the world. I've watched the best of the best position a movie in a way that maximizes appeal, even if it's the tenth coming of age movie that year."

He glanced at her. The furrows between his brows had gone. "Movies all do seem to be the same, these days."

"That's because it costs upward of fifty million to make even a basic movie," Alannah told him. "Hollywood is risk averse. If a movie style did well last year, they'll put new treads on it and push it out because they can guarantee

revenue. They can't do that with a brand new concept, even if it's a stratospherically high concept idea. No, make that *especially* if it's a risky new high concept idea."

"So how would you spin a tour company to make it different from all the tour guides in Banff?"

She thought about it for a while. "It's no good going for something that puts a facet on it that you have no interest in yourself. You'll burn out and hate yourself in a year. It has to be something that fits with you, that you can see yourself providing to tourists for years."

"Okay."

Alannah mulled it over. "You said you thought working as a warden would be peaceful. You wanted to gear down after the Army."

"Pretty much."

She shook her head a little. Kit was next to impossible to open up if he didn't want to. "Okay, so instead of taking the average tourist and showing them the normal things so they can stamp their bingo map, give them what you wanted when you took the warden job."

She'd taken five steps before he responded. "What did I want?" His tone was curious.

"Healing," she said. "De-stress and detox. Take them to placid lakes and get them to watch sunsets over the peaks. Listen to the wind in the tops of the trees. Feel the cold of a mountain pass on their cheeks and watch goats climb up vertical walls."

"No one would pay to watch sunsets."

"You'd be surprised," Alannah told him. "Pitched the right way, people will pay for almost anything. You sell the experience, not the views...although the views provide the

experience. Harried executives will fork over the cash to be provided with the Canadian equivalent of ten days in an ashram, so they can avoid their second heart attack.”

Kit didn't respond.

His silence pushed her into defending herself. “I got to sleep on a soft mattress last night, and I was warm and dry this morning, and all you have is a knife and a back pack. Despite the fact that some asshole is so determined to snatch me and... I don't know, turn me into...”

She halted, thoughts careening off each other.

Kit moved back to face her. “What?”

“That's why he wants me,” she said. “Neven was the first. Maybe that's where Iron Grey got the idea. Grab a time jumper, shackle them in some way, and use them to move around time and universes as much as you want.”

“Neven was the first?” Kit was frowning, his gaze not on her, but somewhere far away. He was adding it up, too.

“Years ago. A couple of...well, old enemies of the family, long gone. They made him jump them to all sorts of places. They were doing it to screw over my family, because Tira hated us that much. Actually, she hated my mom the most, because she could time travel properly and got to have children with her vampire husbands, because of it.”

Kit was staring at her, his eyes slightly wide.

“Old history—you'll get to hear all the war stories eventually, now you're in the know,” Alannah assured him. “I know why Tira wanted Neven as a time taxi, but I can't figure out why Iron Grey wants me for one.”

Kit smiled. He had very white teeth and seeing them was always startling, because he didn't smile like that very often.

“*What?*” Alannah demanded, for it felt a lot like Kit was laughing at her.

“You really don’t see it, do you? Or perhaps it’s just that you’re so used to hiding it and staying normal.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“You told me Aran uses time to produce income. He goes back to South Africa for raw diamonds. Picks up gold from the ground in the Klondike, a hundred years before the gold rush.”

Alannah shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

Kit threw out his hands. “*That’s* why Iron Grey wants you. Profit, pure and simple. Or maybe not pure at all. He’ll figure out a way to have fun, too, but I guarantee what drove him to this in the first place was the idea of milking time for revenue, just like Aran does. Money drives criminals and entrepreneurs alike.”

Alannah stared at him. Why hadn’t she thought of that? She *had* grown up used to the idea of time travel. She’d watched Aran working his schemes for years. Kit had known about time travelling for thirty nanoseconds and had figured this out, not her.

It jolted her to the core. She studied Kit, seeing him differently. Seeing *everything* differently. Even the trees around them seemed as though they had shifted and become... significant.

How long had she tried to be purely human and ignored this side of her life?

Too long.

And now it was reaching out to grasp her by the throat.

She had kicked and screamed and tried to pretend she was anything other than what she really was, while Kit had accepted all of it, barely without a quiver, and now had

assimilated the strangeness of her and her family so thoroughly he could come up with answers she could not.

Their surreal conversation should have made this wild landscape feel at odds with it, only it didn't. With Kit in the mix, having a conversation about squeezing time for the money it could provide while standing between mountains seemed...appropriate. It *was* Kit.

"You're smart," she said softly.

The corner of his mouth lifted. He hadn't shaved, so the skin showed a dark stubble, which made his lips seem soft in comparison. "Well, I'm not stupid."

She leaned forward and stretched up the few inches needed to press her lips against his, delighted that she *did* need to stretch.

His lips *were* soft. At first.

She heard his quick, surprised intake of breath. Then his hands pressed in around her waist. He was kissing *her*.

And it felt so good!

Alannah's thoughts stuttered to a stop, except for an incoherent but fervent wish that this kiss continue, that his hands move over more of her body, even though they were big hands and were sliding over her back, exploring.

When did their bodies come together? She didn't know, only that it felt right to have him pressed up against her like this. Everything about Kit was right, from his woodsy scent to the heat of his body, to the breadth of it and the strength she could feel flowing from every muscle.

Then he gripped her waist once more and pushed her away from him, far enough so that they stood separately, their breathing heavy and fast.

Alannah didn't need a written summary to understand what he wasn't saying. "Sorry," she said stiffly. "That won't happen again."

Even as she said it, she felt a keen sense of loss. She had never reacted to a man like this, before. Not with this strength and overwhelming *feeling*. She was trembling with it.

Kit shook his head. "I can't keep guard...I can't...divide my attention." He hitched the backpack into place once more, turned and walked.

Shaking, Alannah turned and trudged after him, making no attempt to catch up with him.

They were two miles further on, and a good few hundred feet higher in elevation when it occurred to her that Kit hadn't said he didn't want to kiss her. He'd only said he would not divide his attention by kissing her.

Despite the chill in the air at this higher elevation, warmth fizzed through her and her thoughts turned to the night ahead. Two days to walk over the pass and out of here. Two days that would include at least one night beside a fire....

Don't be stupid, 'lannah, she told herself. This is not the time or the place for what you have in mind!

But as she was swiftly learning, everything about Kit McDonald *did* fit into her life.

Her *real* life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ALANNAH WAS SO BUSY WATCHING Kit's rear and thinking hot, erotic thoughts, that when he stopped and lowered the backpack to the ground, she was surprised. "Oh, it's midday already?"

"Bit passed that," he said, glancing at the southern sky where the sun hung. Up here in Canada, the sun never seemed to climb to directly overhead, the way it did in L.A. "Hungry?" Kit added.

"Starving," she said truthfully, letting her gaze drift over his usefully sized shoulders and the narrowness of his hips in comparison.

"Want coffee?"

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“If you collect the wood, it won’t be,” he told her, unbuckling the backpack. “Small stuff. Twigs, nothing larger than your thumb in width.”

She nodded and went in search of the firewood.

Why was she letting herself get distracted like this? Kit McDonald wasn’t the average Hollywood wannabe actor, who would screw anyone if they thought they could get an acting part out of it. Kit was...off-limits. She didn’t know why it was so, only that it felt that way in her brain, even if her mind was busy thinking about how wonderful it would be if he wasn’t.

He was Canadian. Yes. That was it. She was American, and this, being in Canada, was just a temporary aberration. She had a career in Hollywood....

Only, she didn’t, anymore.

Alannah straightened from picking up a good, solid, dry branch, and stared blindly at the tree that had shed it, as she added the branch to the small pile she was carrying under her other arm.

Fuck him and get it out of your system, then you can move on. The thought whispered in her mind.

Only, that was Hollywood thinking.

And she had a feeling that Kit McDonald would not allow himself to be used like that.

He’s so much older...!

Only, Jesse was technically a lot older than Aran, yet they were a near-perfect couple. Their relationship worked well.

Time travel and near-immortality tended to counter any arguments Alannah could make about age differences, anyway.

So why was she hesitating?

Alannah stirred and went in search of more dried wood for the coffee fire, her brain working hard.

By the time she found her way back to where Kit was waiting, she still had no good answers.

He'd dug a hole in the ground, a small one. He broke up her twigs and added them to the hole. Then he lit a tiny fire. Two green branches across the hole held up the pan, in which was what had to be lunch.

“What’s the white stuff?” Alannah asked.

“It will be chicken alfredo when it’s cooked.”

Her stomach rumbled. “Sounds like Bel Air level cuisine to me.”

“Bison is better for you. But the pasta will give you energy.”

She resettled her rear on the flattened grass on the other side of the fire to Kit. “Kit...”

He held up his hand. *Stop*. “No. Not before we’ve eaten, and maybe not then, either.” He’d guessed exactly what she was about to say. Was she that obvious?

“But—”

“Leave it alone, Alannah.” He lifted his chin and his black eyes bore into hers. “We’re in...strange circumstances. The time to talk about anything will be when we get back to normal.”

Disappointment touched her, but she nodded. It was a very sensible way to deal with this. Leave it until later, when there were not bizarre pressures swirling around them. “Very well,” she said, her tone a little stiff.

Kit went back to stirring the pasta with a fork.

She cast her gaze about. They were much higher than they had been this morning. She had never hiked this high. No orienteering contest would ask competitors to run this high, either. Not unless it was a feature of the contest and advertised well in advance so competitors could train for it.

Although the world class contest held in the mountains in Switzerland, one year, she remembered particularly well. She had stood at the 2,000 meter high point and looked out over the view, which had been breathtaking, with rolling glens and snow-capped peaks in the distance. It had been chocolate box-top pretty.

Only it wasn't *this* view. She hadn't looked up at peaks soaring above her, almost as though they were leaning in over her, as they seemed to do here. The air here was crisp and clear.

Alannah studied the peaks visible over the top of the trees. They were grander than the Alps, but she couldn't say why. They just were.

"Here, come closer. We'll share the pan," Kit said.

Alannah brought her gaze back to the little fire, and the pan that Kit was holding out. The pan steamed gently and she caught a whiff of garlic and her mouth instantly watered.

She shuffled closer and took the fork he offered and scooped up a forkful of pasta and meat dripping with sauce. The steam warned her to cool the food and she blew on it before eating it.

"Good, hmm?" Kit asked as she made appreciative noises. He scooped up his own mouthful with a spoon.

Alannah took the pan and rested it on the flattened grass beside the fire, and ate steadily. She was ravenous, and only barely managed to leave at least half of the meal for Kit.

When they had finished, he rinsed the pan with a little water, filled it with fresh water and put it back over the flames to boil, for coffee.

Alannah sat back, her knees up against her chest, her arms around them. Now she wasn't hungry, she was happy to wait for coffee. She found her gaze drawn back to the peaks, but not for long. As Kit worked over the collapsible cup, making coffee, she watched him.

It was warm next to the little fire, which made Alannah aware of the slight chill of the air against her back, even through the light cotton jacket. She shivered.

"We can't stop long," Kit said, as if he'd spotted her shiver. "We'll cool down too much and neither of us is wearing clothing that is good for high passes."

"Just let me bolt down the coffee and we can go. Water's boiling," she pointed out.

"Water boils at a lower temperature when you're higher up. We'll give it another minute."

"We've climbed high enough to make that sort of difference?" She was amazed.

"We'll be in snow by tonight."

She shivered again. Two days ago, the idea of braving a night outdoors on snow, wearing the thin layers she was wearing would have horrified her. But not now. After last night, she knew that Kit would contrive to keep them both warm and dry.

She watched him carefully pour water into the cup, his head down, which only seemed to emphasize the strong jaw and chin. And the thick dark brows that were drawn together.

Alannah let herself simply look. And absorb. She'd never really *noticed* Kit before. He was her parents' friend, and a

reticent one, at that. Now she was seeing him in a completely different way.

He stirred the coffee in the mug, then took great pains to scoop out a tiny twig that had dropped into it. Simple movements, his big hands and long fingers moving delicately.

While high overhead, the wind whistled with a keening note that made Alannah aware of just how alone they were.

Kit held the cup out to her. His gaze was steady, his eyes dark with more than the coal black irises.

Alannah's arm felt heavy as she reached out to take the cup. Her belly seemed to contract, to throb. Heavy, heated longing coursed through her. She fumbled to take the cup by the handle, her fingers thick and uncooperative.

Kit made no move to shift his gaze away from her. His eyes seemed to bore into her, speaking everything he wouldn't say, not here, in his place. And that seemed...wrong.

Alannah couldn't bear the tension anymore. She looked down at the coffee cup, her heart hurling itself against the wall of her chest, unaddressed wanting making her tremble.

When they got back to normal, she repeated to herself firmly. This aching need would be resolved when they got back home.

But...what if she didn't want him when they got back? What if it was only here, in the wilderness, under strained circumstances, that this compulsive lust could exist?

Alannah made herself sip the coffee as quickly as she could, as she had promised, while dismay replaced need in her veins, and chilled her in a way the cold air could never have managed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



WHEN MARIT SPOTTED DAVID THROUGH the big living room window, walking up the path to her front door, she sighed and put the homemade lemonade aside and went to the front door, which was open to allow the cooling afternoon sea breeze to wash through the house. It was the first hot day of early summer and still eighty degrees outside.

She pushed open the flywire door to let him in. “You just can’t leave this alone, can you?”

David stepped into the room, which instantly made it seem smaller. He was a tall man, although not as tall as either of her fathers. Neither was he as broad across the shoulders, although

he had probably spent more centuries wielding a sword than either of them.

“I cannot leave it alone, no,” he said in his deep, well-modulated voice.

“You could have phoned.” She glanced through the closed screen door. “Where did you jump to?” There were not too many completely private locations in her little suburb. “And why didn’t you jump straight here?”

“That would be...rude. You didn’t know I was coming.”

“That’s never stopped you before,” she said tartly.

He held up a hand. “I wanted to talk. Annoying you the moment I arrived wouldn’t have helped me do that.”

She returned to her cane rocking chair, but didn’t tell him to sit down. He never waited for invitations. “Nothing has changed since I told you about it. I’m still getting headaches. I’m still missing other versions of me on the timescape.”

But the meditation technique he’d taught her *did* help. Which was just as well, for her employers wouldn’t tolerate her taking any more time off. Bludging, in Australia, was a heinous social crime that would quickly alienate everyone she knew. As Marit liked the life she had found here in Perth, she had no intention of ruining it.

David sat on the front edge of the sofa, as Marit had guessed he would. He folded his hands together between his knees. He was wearing a long-sleeved business shirt with the cuffs rolled up just above his wrists, and elegant trousers that were probably silk and would be incredibly uncomfortable on a day like today. He didn’t seem to be bothered by the heat at all, though.

Then she recalled where he had grown up; in and around the Greek islands, where super-hot and arid summers were the norm.

“You’re still not able to see your other selves?” he pressed.

“Some of them,” she qualified.

“They’re not in other timelines, or back in the past?”

Her irritation grew. “I would have found them, if they were.”

He nodded, as if this was as he expected. So why had he asked? Her temper stirred, but she held it down. It was too hot to argue. Unlike people born and raised in torrid Western Australia, it took her a few weeks of hot days to acclimate to the summer. She didn’t remember it being like this in Los Angeles, when she had been younger—but everyone in L.A. got through the summers with the help of air conditioning. Australians scoffed at air conditioning. And they didn’t think eighty degrees was hot, either.

And she’d just got rid of the last headache. She didn’t care to bring on another. “Nothing has changed,” she repeated, as calmly as she could. “I don’t know why they’re disappearing, only that they are.” She considered him. “Are your other selves all accounted for?”

“As far as I have reached out to check, yes.” That seemed to annoy *him*. “Why *you*?” he muttered.

“Because whatever it is that is happening should only happen to you?” Marit asked, indignation touching her.

“We’re polytemporals, both of us,” he said patiently. “We’re the *only* polytemporals. If something is happening to the timescape, then it is logical to assume that we should both be affected.”

“Unless it has nothing to do with the timescape. Not everything that happens has to do with time.”

David looked at her with a pained expression. “*Everything* that happens affects time,” he said flatly.

True.

Marit squeezed her hands together, then realized she was copying what David was doing with his and put them quickly back on her knees. She weighed up telling him what she had been mentally tussling with all day, as she grocery shopped and cleaned her little house.

He was annoyingly correct on one point. They *were* the only polytemporals. She was still trying to fully understand all that it meant to be a polytemporal, while David had lived for centuries during which he could explore his abilities and limitations. As there was no one else around to ask or from whom to get advice, she was stuck with him.

Marit sighed. “You should probably know that Alannah—this timeline’s Alannah—has disappeared from the timescape, too.”

David pressed his fingertips to his temples. “What is going *on*?” he muttered, sounding aggrieved and deeply puzzled, as if whatever was happening to the timescape, it was a personal insult to him.

Marit had been feeling the same deep confusion since reaching out to check on her siblings when she first awoke, as she did every morning. It pleased her to see David was just as flummoxed as her.

Only, Alannah was her sister and a fellow time jumper. Marit would have jumped to Canada straight away to check on her, as soon as she’d failed to find Alannah on the timescape, but caution had held her here, and made her go about her day as usual. Time jumps were precarious things. If Marit begun jumping all over the place looking for Alannah, she might upset a delicate situation. Or perhaps it was something even more basic; maybe Alannah had found a lodestone-protected location and had jumped there to get away from everyone.

Having Marit chasing after her might ruin Alannah's reach for time out.

Marit knew more than most how strong that need to simply drop off the face of the world for a while could get. Being trackable and locatable every second of the day was an uncomfortable feeling that sometimes turned into mental hives. Even here on the other side of the globe from everyone in the family wasn't far enough away, at times. When anyone could jump here instantly, Perth might as well be next door to Canmore, instead of Western Australia.

So she had held still and not panicked. She had worried, instead. At least a dozen times, she had reached for her cellphone to call Aran and ask him if he knew where Alannah was. Even though he was in Britain, he and Alannah could usually guess exactly what each other was doing at any one time. Alannah would have told Aran, at least, where she was going. She was rash, sometimes, but she wasn't stupid, not when it came to moving around time.

Yet the possibility that Alannah was simply grasping for some real privacy held Marit's hand, and she'd put the phone down once more.

David dropped his hands, and looked at her. "Aran is in Canada," he said shortly.

Marit felt her jaw drop. "No, he's in..." Automatically, she reached for the timescape, to locate him.

He was in Canmore.

"He was in Britain this morning," Marit said, sitting up.

"He's not there now."

Marit took a fast inventory of the rest of the family. Her parents were far away, back in time, as she expected. But what she found drew her to her feet. "Remi and Rafe are in Canmore, too."

“The two soldiers,” David concluded, standing up, too.

Everyone in the family was a soldier of sorts, but Marit didn't dispute him. “Let me get my bag.”

The bag that had her long hunting knife in the side pocket.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



BY THE TIME THEY STOPPED for the night, Alannah was cold despite constantly moving. Her body was working hard because of the elevation, but the exertion didn't seem to make any difference. The sun had disappeared behind the mountains a long time ago, and the warmth in the air had departed. The coldness clung to her face and neck and hands and she could feel it clinging to her leggings, clawing to get through to her flesh.

Kit seemed to have a destination in mind, so she didn't badger him with suggestions that they stop and get a fire going, so she could huddle over it.

The trees had thinned out, until there were almost none, except for straggling clumps here and there. Snow appeared in patches, mostly in the shadowed areas. But as the afternoon wore on, the snow became more frequent and thicker underfoot.

To Alannah's left, which she knew instinctively was close to true north, she spotted a narrow blue-green band that grew steadily closer as they climbed. Finally, she could make out details. It was a band of water. Possibly a river, or a very long and narrow lake—she wasn't certain which, for the water didn't seem to be moving at all, except for when a breeze touched the still surface and sent shadowed ripples along it.

They had drawn level with the water when Kit paused to look around, his boot resting on a rock.

Alannah stopped next to him and watched him size up the land.

“There,” he said firmly, pointing.

What he pointed at was a trio of lodgepole pines, looking spindly and faded, this late in the season. They huddled on a little hillock close by the water. One of them, she saw, had a branch hanging low to the ground, but it didn't look nearly long enough to provide shelter for the night the way the big, broad pine branch had done last night.

“Okay,” Alannah said doubtfully and headed toward the trees. It was very rocky around here, and the grasses were thin and short.

The trees were farther away than she had realized. As they got closer to them, she saw that the low lying branch was much larger than she had guessed. And the ground itself changed from barren rock to normal earth and grass, with a thick layer of snow laying over all of it. The snow was a few days old and the sun had melted it down a little, especially around the bases of rocks and clumps of grasses. Even this

high up, there was not an even blanket of pure white snow. She spotted animal tracks and the wind up here had scattered dead leaves and twigs across the surface of the snow.

Kit lowered the big backpack down to the earth at the base of the pine with the long low branch and looked around, sizing up the area.

“Branches for the side of the branch?” Alannah guessed.

His smile was quick, but warm. “Use my knife.” He pulled the sturdy knife from its holster on his belt and held it out to her. “You’ll have to cut fresh stuff, up at this level. We have to stay warm.”

She agreed with him one hundred percent. The serrated edge of the knife was an adequate saw for the ends of the branches she collected. She had to move over to the nearest other clump of trees to gather enough branch ends that were at a height she could reach. By the time she thought she had collected enough, Kit had weighed down the tip of the big branch with stones, had started a fire of spindly branches and dried pine needles and twigs, and was building a heat shield on the other side of the fire, made of greener branches that would bend easily.

Alannah silently helped him with the shield. There was no way she would sit on her ass and get even colder, for the fire didn’t seem to be throwing off heat the way last night’s had.

Then she propped the branch tips she had cut against one side of the big branch that was their shelter, spread the plastic sheet Kit handed her and weighted everything down with pebbles and small stones.

Eventually, everything was done. Green growth from the pines, what little there was, made a thin mattress with the rubber sheet over the top. The sleeping bag was unzipped and laid over it.

Kit pulled out the bison meat and dug in the backpack for more supplies. The furrow was back between his brows.

Alannah reluctantly sat down. She didn't want to talk to him, for she got the feeling he wasn't in the mood for talk. As usual.

He made another meal from his dehydrated supplies, along with pulled bison. A fried rice, this time. It was hot and filling. The coffee, afterwards, was as delightful as lunchtime's cup.

They ate in near silence, until close to the end of the meal. As Kit handed her the coffee, he said, "Would you like me to heat more water? You could take a bucket bath. Water won't be an issue now." He inclined his head toward the lake behind them.

"It's drinkable?"

"I've got purifying tablets, but even without them, we could boil the water to kill off most bugs."

"A bath sounds heavenly," she confessed.

"You know how to do it, out in the wild?"

"Oh yeah," she said. She'd learned how to sponge off in the cold by not undressing completely, just removing the layer in the way and putting it back in place even while she was still damp. After a day of competition jog-walk-running, washing off the sweat was a treat. It would be now. Only, she was used to having a tent, privacy, a change of clothes and deodorant. Competition camping was sybaritic compared to this survival-level camp.

Kit set about boiling water, letting it bubble for minutes after it had come to the boil. Then he handed her the pan. "It's not a lot of water." He handed her a cloth that looked like an old towel, torn into pieces. The edges weren't hemmed.

“It’ll do,” she assured him, and looked around. “Stay where you are and watch the fire. I’m stepping behind the tree.” The smoke was blowing in that direction and would keep the mosquitos away. She didn’t mind smelling of smoke. It was inevitable, out here. But she itched to wash away the sweat.

It was one of the best baths she’d ever had. Despite the touch of the cold air, and having to don the same clothes, she felt refreshed and clean as she carried the empty pan and damp cloth back to the fire. “That was heavenly,” she confessed, and shrugged back into her borrowed jacket.

“Climb under the bag and stay warm,” Kit told her. “I’m going to have a bath, too.”

It was good advice. By the time Alannah had settled under the sleeping bag and found a comfortable position on the mattress, Kit already had the shallow pan of water boiling. A few moments later, he took the pan behind the same tree.

Alannah closed her eyes to give him full privacy, but that made it worse. Her imagination went into overdrive. How much of his tanned skin did he expose as he washed? Did he strip completely? He didn’t seem to notice the cold the way she did. What did he look like under the shirt? Were his muscles rounded. She would like to see them flex as he moved...

Stop it! Stop it! Stop!

She sat up and threw the sleeping bag aside, suddenly *too* hot. She faced the fire, hugged her legs to her chest, and worked to calm her breathing. Now was not the time and place for this. She was being pursued by an enemy she barely understood. True, this ability she had discovered to shield herself on the timescape was keeping Iron Grey from finding them, but that didn’t mean she could relax and indulge herself with Kit.

She tested the timescape and felt the same cool umbrella of sensations flow over her. She was still shielded.

Kit returned to the fire. Like her, he carried his thick dark green jacket in one hand, and the pan and cloth in the other. He had shaved. She blinked at that, then realized he'd used his knife.

Her gaze settled on the sharply delineated line of his jaw. The square solidness of it and the movement of the skin over it was he flexed it. She drew her gaze down to his throat. His neck and shoulders were solid with muscle. In the firelight, the open neck of his shirt revealed the bronzed flesh of his upper chest. A shadow shaped the rise of his pecs, before they were hidden by the shirt.

The insane need to trace that shallow valley of flesh with her tongue and lips grabbed her chest and belly and twisted. Alannah's breath hastened once more.

Kit squatted and fed the fire. There were no big, dry branches to be had up this high, which meant the fire had to be fed frequently with the twigs and skinny branches they had collected.

She watched his forearms flexing, the twist of his wrists, as he worked. Took in the shape of his hips and the bunched thighs. He was superbly fit, with little body fat, probably the product of scrambling around mountains after those rabid goats. His job was not a sedentary one.

It was next to impossible to sheer away from the seductive images flooding her mind. She had walked all day, eaten well, bathed and now her body was crying out for the natural release it wanted. She wanted to be fucked. Hard. And she wanted Kit.

She drew her gaze back to his face and realized with a jolt he was watching her, his gaze dark and steady and shadowed by the cast of his cheekbones.

Alannah cleared her throat. The sensible thing to do right now would be to tell him she was going to go to sleep, pull the bag over her head and close her eyes. Pretend she had passed out and that her trembling was from the cold.

But she couldn't move. Not with him watching her as he was.

It felt as though something invisible was reaching across the fire, enveloping her, and growing thicker and heated and unbreakable. Her ache to have him leapt. The images dancing in her brain became pornographic in the extreme. Her breath must surely be telling him everything that was passing through her mind.

But he'd said no. No, he'd said "not now"...and that dangled possibilities for the future that kept her heart thudding heavily.

Lie down. Close your eyes. Don't do this, Alannah! For Kit was right. This might just be the circumstances. Survival instinct pushing her to mate with the nearest male. She could get back home and hate herself for letting her worm brain get out of control. Worse, she would have to look Kit in the eye and know that he knew she was that weak and pathetic.

How could she know what she would feel when she got home? She had never considered Kit in this light before. It had all happened since they'd left his truck behind and struck out into the woods. Only, she had never spent this much concentrated time in his company before, either. Would she have discovered how much she wanted him had she stayed in the front room with her parents when Kit visited in the past?

"Stop looking at me like that," Kit said, his voice very low.

Her heart was beating too heavily to jump, but it did lurch a little. "I can't help it," she said, her own voice hoarse. "I remember what you said, and I'm trying to pack it away, but it's...too powerful."

“Find a way,” he ground out. “I will not do this, not here.”

She tightened her arms around her knees. “Principals. God, that’s...sexy.”

Kit lurched to his feet with a hiss and spun away from the fire, his boots digging furrows in the dirt and leaf litter.

It was out there now. It laid between them. The verboten subject, according to Kit. So Alannah dropped all her hesitation and said, “How do you know there will be anything to...to sort out, when we get back? You say the circumstances distort how we’re feeling. It could be that the circumstances are making us feel this way, and we’ll get back home and...I don’t know. Hate each other.”

Kit lifted his head up to the stars overhead. “Impossible,” he said flatly. “I’ve wanted you too long for this to be a passing thing.”

Alannah held still, while she absorbed that. “What?” she said at last, her voice weak.

He turned back to face her. The fire played strange shadows over his face, making it hard for her to measure emotions. All she could see was that there *were* emotions there. He’d let down the shield. “This is, here, this is not how it was supposed to happen.”

Her breath evaporated, making her suck in another quick breath. “You...planned something else?” Her voice was even weaker.

“A dozen different ways, and none of them were here, now, when you’re afraid and vulnerable and *anyone* will do as a teddy bear.”

Alannah could only stare at him. No words would form to adequately respond to the massive revelations he’d just handed out. He wanted her...had wanted her...for how long? A long time, it seemed.

Yet she had never once caught even a hint of desire emanating from him. He had been Kit, her parents' friend, the warden who kept them supplied in fresh salmon almost year round. The man who most often sat very still and silent and listened to everything everyone said, absorbing it all with his dark eyes and the tiny furrows between his brows.

Finally, she found something to say. It wasn't what she really wanted to say, for that mass of feelings balling in her chest would take time to unravel. "I'm not scared," she said. "I don't need a teddy bear. I've camped solo in places far more remote than this before. Being alone doesn't bother me. But I *do* want you."

"You *are* scared," Kit shot back. "You've been scared before. You've had enemies chase you before. You've grown up with enemies on all sides, so you hide it well. You keep a lid on it, so you can react with good judgement, which just means your family trained you well. But don't tell me you're not scared. You don't know what Iron Grey wants from you. You can guess, but until you know what's really going on, why he really wants you, so that you can respond appropriately, it's gnawing at you, feeding your fear. And your family are all far away and all you have is me." He paused. "You can't help trying to find a way to tie me even closer."

Alannah straightened, stunned. "That's...insulting." Her voice came out flat and hard.

Kit shrugged. "It's survival, Alannah. You think I haven't seen the extremes a human will go to, to survive?"

Her face was flushed and hot. "I'm going to sleep," she said woodenly.

"Yes. Stay warm," he said, his tone remote. "Don't forget...I'll have to sleep beside you. But that's a survival thing, too." Bleakness touched his voice.

Great. Alannah turned around and fought to straighten the sleeping bag from the ball she'd tossed it into, her movements jerky with anger and humiliation. Any lust she'd been feeling sat in a heap of dead cold ashes in the pit of her stomach, making her feel mildly nauseous.

Well, there was no danger of having her feelings run away on her now. Perhaps he'd deliberately riled her just to ensure she wouldn't press the issue. It didn't matter if he had. Perhaps she should even thank him for it. It would stop her from making a fool of herself because her hormones were taking over.

Survival instinct! She writhed mentally as she laid down with her back to the fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ALANNAH ONLY REALIZED SHE HAD fallen asleep when she woke sometime later and found she was still shivering, but this time with cold.

The fire was nearly dead. Only deep orange coals remained from the biggest of the spindly branches, but there was a pile of sticks and twigs between the shelter and the fire that hadn't been there when she'd gone to sleep.

Kit was beside her. He did not touch her anywhere along her length, but she could feel warmth radiating from him. He'd contrived to step over her and lay on the inner side of the shelter without disturbing her, for she had taken the outer edge of the mattress, closer to the fire.

Alannah brought her arm out from under the sleeping bag quilt and reached for the branches. They were close enough that she barely had to lean out to grab them and toss them on the coals. She put her hand on the ground and lifted herself up, then picked up and threw *all* the wood on the fire, everything she could reach. Then she lay back down again, pulled the bag over her and shivered even harder.

The fire took its sluggish time breaking into flame once more and while it did, she could feel the cold creeping in under the edges of the bag.

Kit stirred and his arm came over her. He pulled her up against him, so that his length was lining her own. “Stay warm,” he breathed against her ear and pulled the sleeping bag farther over her so that the air could not slip under it.

Her shivering seemed to intensify against the warmth behind her. Right then, she welcomed his touch purely for the heat it supplied. Gradually, her shivers eased, then halted. By then, the fire was burning merrily once more.

She let out a sigh of relief and pleasure at the simple joy of being warm.

Then, inevitably, the pleasure changed. It became as heated as she, languid, so that it melted her limbs and made her core throb. She shifted under Kit’s arm, very aware of how her ass was pressing into him. She fought not to press backward even more, which would tell him far too much about her state of mind.

The need to roll over and face him—to kiss him!—it sang like a siren song in her mind, so that she couldn’t think of anything else.

But Kit’s ethics held her still, her heart beating way too hard, her body a throbbing mess. *Think this through, Alannah,* she told herself sternly. *If you must do this, do it for the right reasons.*

She steeled herself, trying to drop a shield over the demands of her body so she could think clearly. She knew, deep in her bones, that the next few minutes were critical, that whatever she did, it had to be a *decision*, not a knee jerk reaction. Kit, with his ethics and principals, deserved no less.

Alannah bit her lip, sorting out her thoughts, reaching for a solid decision. When she had it settled in her mind, she turned slowly under his arm until she was facing him. She could tell by his breathing that he was awake, even though his eyes were shut.

Instead of leaping upon him the way she badly wanted to, or fumbling an awkward kiss, she rested her hand on his cheek, her thumb by the corner of his mouth, which turned downward when he wasn't smiling.

His eyes opened. He didn't try to pretend he was dopy with sleep, which pleased her.

"This isn't the way I want it to happen, either," she said. "But it's happening. It's too strong."

He was already motionless. No one could do stillness the way Kit could, not even the many vampire predators she knew. But he seemed to grow even more still. "Not the way *you* want it to happen?"

She shook her head. "For you, I'd much rather take my time. Measure what I'm really feeling, because it's mixed up. You might be right. Maybe I do need to just cling to someone. I won't know, not until we're back home and can get to know each other better, once we've dealt with Iron Grey. But I can't wait that long."

He moved. Slowly. He brushed her hair back from her eyes. "I guess...I can live with that. For now."

Before she could say another word, his fingers slid into her hair and held her head steady while he kissed her.

This kiss was just as good as the first. Better, even. They were in agreement, temporarily at least, and there was no reason to not let the kiss extend for as long as it needed. His lips covered hers, the pressure almost cruel as he thrust his tongue and stroked the inside of her mouth.

Her body responded, tingling, ripening under the pleasure. Alannah sighed into his mouth, delighted.

But Kit didn't stop at just kissing her. His lips explored her face, trailed over her chin and down her throat. His fingers moved ahead of his mouth, stroking and tasting in their own way.

Hazily, she wondered if he would insist they keep their clothes on for warmth, but when he peeled off her jacket, then tugged up the hem of her tunic, pulling the top over her head, she was delighted.

It gave her the freedom to do what she had wanted to do all along. She tackled his clothing, pulling it off with impatient tugs and tossing it aside carelessly. She wanted to see as much of him as possible. She wanted to feel every raw inch, and explore it with her mouth.

Even when they were naked, Kit kept the sleeping bag more or less over the top of them, but that didn't stop her from glimpsing delicious areas of his body, glowing in the firelight, as the bag slipped and slid over them at their frantic movements.

Coherent thought scattered. She became a feeling animal, driven by an overwhelming need to take him into her. Perhaps Kit sensed that. Perhaps he was feeling the same wild urgency himself. For he did not try to slow their movements at all. His mouth fastened onto her nipple, pulling a deep groan from her, as his hand gripped her knee and pulled it up high against his hip.

His gaze met hers as his cock nudged her slick vagina. Then he slammed into her, hot and hard and thick and so very, very good.

They grew still for a few rapid heartbeats. Alannah moaned at the perfection of the moment.

Kit rested his forehead against hers. Just for a moment. She could feel fine quivers rippling through him, which made her muscles tighten and grip him, and her clit to throb against the pressure his pelvis was putting on it.

It felt fundamentally right. Like everything in the world had clicked into place. And deep inside, she knew in a way that she could not yet articulate that this was nothing to do with survival.

He gave a deep groan of his own. “Delicious...” he breathed. Then he thrust into her again. Hard. Slow.

It didn't last. It couldn't. The heat rose between them. She could feel her climax building swiftly and surely. It was going to take the top of her head off. She could feel the power of it, gripping her. Shortening her breath down to tiny sips and pants.

Kit's thick glossy hair brushed her throat and chin as his lips nibbled at the sensitive flesh around her collar bone. Then he threw back his head and his hips shifted faster. He thrust more quickly, and Alannah's body answered. Her climax leapt, searing along her nerves. Her breath hitched and hitched again. The peak of excitement singed her thoughts to nothingness, and held her in a silvered sea of sensory overload, everything brought to stillness by the pure joy of it.

Then she seemed to come down to earth, her breath gone, every inch of her tingling and her toes curling as the aftermath of her climax rippled through her in deeply pleasurable waves. Her clit throbbed in time.

Kit strained and grew still and she felt his cock quiver inside her, as his own climax seemed to grip him with the same breath-robbing intensity. Then he relaxed against her, almost-but-not-quite sagging. He didn't allow his weight to rest on her too heavily, even though she could feel his arms trembling. *All* of him trembled.

When she thought she had the breath to speak, she cleared her throat. "Wow..." she breathed. She still sounded breathless.

In answer, his lips touched hers. Then the tip of her nose. Then her forehead. Back to her lips.

It was endearing. It was lovely.

But it also felt a lot like he was wrapping things up.

Alannah pushed at his shoulder. He was heavy, but he obligingly rolled onto his back. It dislodged his cock, but that would be easily correctable. Alannah straddled his hips, feeling herself spread open above him and loving the wickedness of it. Her arms trembled, too, as she leaned over him, her mouth only a few inches above his. "More," she said firmly.

He arranged the sleeping bag over her. Smoothed his hand down her back, and cupped her ass through the bag. "Yes," he said simply, making her heart soar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ONCE HE HAD GIVEN INTO Alannah's demands, Kit held nothing back. He seemed tireless, inexhaustible. Alannah didn't let herself wonder about that. She delighted in it, instead, for it suited her mood. She found it easy to reach for him over and over. To find ways to rouse him, to make him want her one more time. And another after that.

She moved her lips down his chest and let herself nibble at the rise of his pecs, just as she had wanted to. Then she moved down farther, trailing over the fine patch of hair on his chest, then onto the flat plane of his stomach and delighted at the way his muscles shifted and clenched under her ministrations.

Then farther still. She settled between his legs and took his cock into her mouth and used every skill she had to make him writhe and groan and beg her in a hoarse voice to don't stop, god, don't stop!

In Hollywood, going down on a man was an expected, sometimes demanded form of foreplay. But now it seemed like the most natural thing in the world, a delight to add to the joys they were sharing.

She did stop, just when she thought his control was on the verge of breaking. Then she spread her legs over him once more and slid him inside her. His fingers gripped her hips with almost painful strength, guiding her as she rode him to the short, sweet conclusion.

This time, Kit flipped her on her back. The furrow had returned between his brows and she touched it. It smoothed away at her touch. "Two can play at that," he told her, taking two breaths to get it out.

She shivered in delight as his mouth settled between her breasts, following the path she had taken on him. She wasn't cold, even though the sleeping bag had fallen aside and had been forgotten some time ago.

Kit spread her legs with deliberate slow speed, teasing and taking his time. When his mouth fastened on her vulva, her hands jerked up to squeeze his shoulders. "Oh, god..." she whispered, echoing him, but with none of the strength he had mustered.

Kit didn't spare her at all. She shuddered through three climaxes, the last making her scream, the sound tearing at her throat. Then he lifted himself up over her and slid inside her yet again.

His kiss seared her lips even as his cock heated her insides. He was a furnace against her.

Alannah sighed into his mouth.

This is right, she repeated to herself. *This is the way it should be. Out here, in his world.*



THE APPROACH OF DAWN WAS turning the sky a beautiful shade of deep indigo tinged with rose red when Alannah thought that perhaps she might be able to relax. Just for a while.

Kit seemed to reach the same place at the same time, for he pulled her up against him, the sleeping bag over the two of them, tucked it in over her, and wrapped his arm over her. This time, though, his hand eased under her breast and his thumb rested against the underside. It wasn't meant to arouse, she knew that. She didn't think she had the capacity to be aroused right now, anyway.

Now her body was quiet, her mind seemed to roar to life. All the questions, doubts and concerns that her physical needs had been shunting aside once more demanded answers.

Kit's breath was slow and easy, but she didn't think he was asleep. Close to it, perhaps.

"How long have you wanted me?" she asked, her voice soft. If he was asleep, she didn't want to wake him.

His breath didn't change. His body didn't shift, signaling wariness. "Does it matter?" His voice was just as soft.

"Why *me*?" The question forced its way out. "Of anyone in our family, Marit is the brilliant one, the fiery redhead..."

He did stir then. His lips pressed against the back of her shoulder. "You're not inadequate," he said softly.

She jumped. "I never said I was..."

His thumb stroked. Softly. Reassuringly. “Your family is astonishing. Unique. Powerful. Veris by himself is overwhelming. But the sum total of everyone in your family who is considered family... It’s enough to make anyone feel small and insignificant. I felt that way for more than year. You’ve grown up with it, so the impact has been deeper for you.” He paused. “For me, too, with my family.”

She wanted to turn to look at him. But instinct told her to lay still, that *not* looking at him was allowing him to talk. So she said with a near casual tone; “Your family is powerful, too?”

“Influential, especially across Alberta. Politicians litter my family. Obscenely successful businessmen, too. There are no poor reservation bums living off government handouts. I don’t think there’s a one of them would have the first clue how to go about doing nothing. It’s just not in the genes.”

“None of them live on the reservation?” she asked softly, marveling at how much that small speech revealed about Kit’s family...and Kit himself.

“Oh, they live on the reservation. Sometimes. My father has three houses there, to go along with the houses in Red Deer and Edmonton and Calgary. And Canmore. And Jasper, if he hasn’t sold that one yet. But that’s just geography, not a state of mind.”

“You’re not a politician. Or a businessman. Well, not the same as your family are businesspeople,” Alannah said. “Did that...bother them?”

“Oh, yes...” He let the confession out in a long, low sigh. “They were horrified when I said I was joining the Army. Becoming a warden at least put me back in the family arena, but wardens aren’t well paid....”

She could almost hear the pain in his voice. It was deep. Well hidden. But it was a pain that hadn’t gone away in years.

So she held still once more, and stayed silent, because she wasn't sure how to address such an old pain.

“You're different from your family,” Kit said. “Like me.”

Ah... Alannah let out a long slow breath. “Yes,” she admitted. “I always have been.”

“Like knows like.” His voice was even softer, heavy with sleep.

She could feel her own sleep slipping over her, like a heavy blanket, making her limbs heavy and her eyes to close.

Like knows like.

She almost jerked back to full wakefulness by a startling thought, and lay watching the sky grow even lighter, turning the idea over in her mind.

If this was Kit's world, out here, was there any reason it couldn't be *her* world, too?



SLEEP LINGERED OUT OF REACH for Kit for a good long while after Alannah's breath had slowed and deepened.

Had he been a colossal fool, giving into her like this? Had he ruined any chance at... anything at all, after this?

He stirred, his discomfort making him uneasy, but then forced himself to stillness, lest he wake her. Instead he looked down at her face, so pale in the growing daylight. The strongly arched brows framed her features and her lips with the classic bow were the highlights. Her face was so pale, so perfect, so pure.

She was breath-robbingly beautiful, but would never accept that was true. She measured herself harshly against everyone

else she admired and thought well of, including him. Although why she thought well of him was as much of a mystery to him as his high regard of her seemed to be a puzzlement to Alannah.

It had shocked him to realize she liked him. Enough to turn to him in this way.

Could he accept just this much of her?

Did he have to, though? For the first time in many years, hope edged into his mind and his heart. Hope was a glorious thing. Just a drop of it could sustain a man forever.

He'd be a fool, he decided. He'd be a fool and let himself hope, if it meant keeping her in his arms for just a bit longer.

And he'd deal with whatever happened when they got back home, even if it wasn't the outcome his hope was painting for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



THEY SLEPT UNTIL THE SUN was well up over the mountains. Alannah was startled to wakefulness when Kit climbed over her, still gloriously naked, and giving her for the first time, a full view of his body as he moved around the fire adding wood. He was exactly as muscled, lean and long as she had guessed...and explored, last night.

Alannah threw off the sleeping bag and swiftly dressed, for it *was* cold.

“Coffee for both of us, first,” Kit told her. “Can you take care of that?”

“Absolutely,” she said, tying her boot laces and getting to her feet.

“Then breakfast. Oatmeal with jam for the energy. Lots of it.”

“I could eat a bison. All of it,” Alannah confessed.

“You can have some of that, too, if you want.” He paused. “You’re just standing there.”

She put her hands on her hips. “If you actually want me to make coffee, then you’d better get dressed.”

His smile was slow to form, but full of heat that made his black eyes glow. “It’s only the thought of civilization, hot showers and a flushing toilet that is making me get dressed,” he told her, as he moved toward the shelter and where she stood, which made her heart flutter. “Otherwise, I’d be happy to stay out here for a whole month, with just you and the fire.” He kissed her, his fingertips stroking her cheek as he did.

“And the mosquitos. And the gourmet standard diet,” she said, when he released her. Her legs were unsteady now, not just her heart. “And don’t you...I don’t know...shouldn’t you report to your office or something? What day of the week is it, anyway? I’ve lost track.”

“I sent them an email. They know I’m out of reach for a while.” He dressed rapidly. He had to be feeling the cold, even though he didn’t seem to be nearly as sensitive to it as she was. She wondered if that was a learned thing. Constant exposure to the cold had to de-sensitize one. She’d been living in torrid California for years, while Canadians would faint if the thermometers hit eighty-five.

Alannah turned to look towards the east, the direction they were travelling. “Will we make it out today?” she asked.

“Late today, if we don’t linger anywhere.”

“I can eat meat as I walk.”

“And do without coffee?” The corner of his mouth quirked upward as he pulled on his coat.

“Well...” She grimaced. “It does help offset the cold,” she confessed.

“We’ll stop for coffee,” he assured her. “And a hot meal. There’s one more dehydrated meal in the pack.” He frowned. “I’ll have to add more, I think. Two days’ worth isn’t enough.”

“You’re feeding two. Next time, I could bring my own pack and my own rations.” And she closed her mouth with a snap, realizing how he might interpret, and perhaps resent, the assumption it sounded as though she was making.

Kit’s eyes narrowed.

“That was a joke,” she said awkwardly.

“Okay,” he said evenly.

She drew in a breath and collected the pan to boil water for coffee.

Forty minutes later, they left the fire behind, doused with sand and the damp oatmeal remains. Kit stopped at the lake and refilled his water containers, dropped purifiers into them, sealed them and put them back in his pack. The pack looked a lot heavier with the water topped up, but the weight didn’t seem to bother him.

Alannah knew from experience that if the pack straps were properly adjusted and the pack a good design, it was possible to carry a *lot* of weight with relative comfort. But when she was competing, she still went as light as she could, because speed was more critical than being comfortable overnight.

For that reason, she preferred the one-day competitions, or the competitions where the competitors’ gear was loaded in a truck and carried to the overnight station for them. She went full-luxury for those competitions, because being comfortable

also meant being well rested the next morning, which gave her an edge for the competition.

This walk across the mountains was teaching her a lot about how much she could do without, comfort-wise.

She didn't know when, exactly, they hit the peak of the pass, but she did spot the moment they began to climb down, instead of up. They were following the lake, still, which Alannah was beginning to suspect was a section of river, perhaps cut off from the main stream.

The mountains on either side of them were just as close and vertical as they had been for most of yesterday. Then, almost as though they had rounded a corner, the pass widened and the view opened up.

Far below, the prairies of Alberta spread out beneath them like a pale patchy blanket. The prairies had received more snow than the mountains. Tree lines separated the white sheets. There were thick clusters of trees directly below, but farther out, Alannah could see where farmland took over, and the separating tree lines grew straighter and more regular.

Evidence of people.

Kit stopped to look at the view, too. "We're making good time," he told her. "Stopping for lunch won't be an issue at all."

"Lunch...and dessert?" she suggested, shading her eyes against the strong sunlight.

Kit's smile was sudden, as if she had caught him by surprise, and as if he liked the suggestion. "We'll see," he prevaricated and hitched the pack back into place.

She would *run* all the way, if it meant a longer lunch break and the delights that break could deliver, but Kit was carrying the pack, so she had to let him dictate the pace.

He did seem to be walking faster, though.

Downhill sounded easier to the untrained, but it taxed the quads and calf muscles in a way that increased lactic acid and could leave her legs trembling. Plus, the downslope didn't end. There was no relief, except to stop, which was unacceptable in a race.

But they weren't racing now, except to beat the internal clock Kit had set up. He clearly wanted to finish the walk out of the pass by tonight, so they wouldn't have to camp once more. That made sense, if there was only the one meal pack left. But there was bison, and they could live on that for a day or two without issue, if they had to. The water was no longer an issue, and the coffee container was a big one....

Perhaps he just wanted to be out and free of her. Except, no, he hadn't looked offended by her suggestion about dessert.

Then he wanted to reach civilization, where he could reach out safely and get news. He was a trained soldier. Those instincts didn't go away. Jesse still quartered any room she entered, logging exits and the most dangerous person in the room.

In a tactical situation, the side with the most accurate information had a distinct advantage. Kit had to be itching for news, because Alannah was. She didn't know if the shield she held over herself on the timescape would be disrupted if she looked for others there. And besides, she wasn't Jesse. She couldn't communicate with anyone there unless she'd brought them onto the timescape herself and they were mentally connected to her.

Besides, the timescape only told her where and when everyone was. It didn't tell her what they were doing, or if they were in danger.

Getting home was the only way she could check up on everyone.

And on Iron Grey.

The descent continued. There was a path of sorts, which was probably a broad goat track, made wider by hikers. The path followed the least dangerous route, winding around rocks and outcrops and descending in big steps and slopes. The trees grew thicker and the temperature perceptibly warmer.

Alannah began to feel the drain of a long night short on sleep and high on activity. There was no need to watch too carefully where she put her feet, for the path was quite clear. She simply followed Kit and let her thoughts wander.

She longed to stop, just to pause long enough to let the ache in her legs subside and to regather some energy. She didn't realize she was nearly asleep on her feet until she rammed into the back of Kit's pack. He'd stopped in the middle of the path, and was looking through the trees to his right, up the slope.

"What?" she asked, her heart zooming.

"Looks like a good place to stop for lunch." He nodded at the upslope.

She spotted big rocks through the trees, bathed in sunlight. "Sure," she said. Her stomach rumbled loudly.

Kit grinned and picked his way through the trees. There was a faint path he followed that said others had thought the location a good one to check out, too.

They broke out into sunlight and Alannah raised her face up to the sun. "Nice," she breathed.

"Yes," Kit said, lowering the backpack and leaning it against one of the bigger rocks, which came up to his thighs. It was flattened on the top, and would make a good table. Or seat.

The idea of sitting sounded marvelous.

He dug into the pack and pulled out the rolled up rubber sheet that they had slept on, and spread it over the top of the rock.

Alannah stared at it, puzzled. “Tablecloth?” she asked.

Kit put his hands on her waist and drew her to him and kissed her. It was not a tentative kiss at all. It held heat and intention. And it roused her from her tiredness with greater efficiency than an entire pot of coffee.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him back with equal fervor. *This* was exercise she was quite happy to do.

Kit lifted her and put her on the rock, so that she was sitting with him between her knees.

“I see,” she said, as his hands slipped up under her tunic. He cupped her breasts, and toyed with the nipples and she drew in a shuddering breath, as pure wanting exploded along her veins and nerves, turning her middle into a throbbing core.

“Dessert first,” Kit muttered, raising her tunic and exposing her breasts. He feasted on them, making her crazy with need and fizzing excitement. Then he calmly stripped her of her boots and leggings and spread her knees even further.

“Oh....” She sighed and clutched at him as he gripped her hips and placed her at the front edge of the rock, her ass on the edge of the sheet. Then he unzipped his jeans, pulled out his cock and slid into her. She was more than ready and his quick thrust was delicious.

His thrusts grew deeper and harder, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and let herself sink into the pleasure and let it build. Their movements grew more frantic. Alannah didn’t think she would climax, not after a night of intense pleasure, but the electric current caught at her, picked her up like a leaf on an ionized stream. Her climax hit, good and strong, mere seconds before Kit shuddered through his own.

Kit groaned and rested his head on her shoulder. “I’ve been unable to think of anything else since you mentioned dessert,” he said roughly. Then he straightened and slid out of her and fastened his jeans. “But I did hear your stomach protesting, too. Let’s get a fire going. I will eat any meat you don’t. I’m starving like I haven’t eaten for a week.”

Alannah dressed and went in search of firewood. At these lower levels, wood was in good supply. Kit found a spot for a fire, one that had been used by other hikers, for a convenient ring of rocks marked the spot, and old ashes and soot covered them.

The last meal was another pasta dish, with Cajun chicken pieces. They both ate hungrily. Alannah tossed some of the bison into the pan when they were done, to soak up the sauce and the spices. They ate it with their fingers, tearing it apart with their teeth.

Then the promised coffee, which tasted even better today than it had the last two days, despite being instant and initially bitter.

Alannah took the cup to the rock where the sheet was still spread out, climbed up onto it, and stretched out with a sigh, the cup on her stomach. “Perfection,” she decided. Then she propped herself up on her elbows and finished the coffee.

Kit stayed sitting on the low rock by the fire, watching her with a small smile.

“You could join me,” she suggested, raising a brow.

“In a minute, maybe.” He hesitated. “You do a lot of orienteering?”

“Not as much as I would prefer to in the last few years. But for a while, I was doing a contest nearly every week. Why?”

“I was wondering...were you ever tempted to cheat? To jump ahead, maybe?”

She smiled and shook her head. “That would defeat the point.”

“The point being?”

“Orienteering is nearly the exact opposite of what I do when I jump around the timescape.”

He frowned. “You jump from point to point on the timescape, but orienteering... you have to traverse the whole distance yourself?”

“Exactly. And I’ve got to see some amazing landscapes up close and personal, that I might have missed otherwise. Makes you appreciate the true size of the planet.” She laughed. “Especially when you look on a large scale map and realize that the distance you jogged over the last two days looks like an ant’s step compared to the miles on the map.”

“Some might say the same thing about driving from place to place instead of flying there.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but yes, it’s something like that. I think.” She laughed again. “I don’t fly or drive anywhere, so how would I know?” She finished the coffee, put the cup aside and laid down again. The sun was warming the ambient air quite nicely.

She closed her eyes, then shivered and opened them again.

The sun was all wrong. It was too far west and all the warmth had gone out of it.

And Kit was beside her on the rock, fast asleep, his chest rising and falling slowly.

“Oh shit,” she breathed, sitting up. “Kit!” The sun was almost touching the tops of the mountain chain to the west. They’d slept away most of the afternoon. “Kit!” She shook him.

Kit came awake with the snap-to-it alertness of a wild animal. He sat up, looked around, then let out a deep breath. “Damn,” he muttered.

“How bad is it, that we’ve slept this long?” she said. “You wanted to be out of the mountains by late afternoon, and we’re not even close to the plains, yet.”

“I wanted to be somewhere by tonight,” he said. He grimaced. “There’s a house. A place. I wanted to get there. Check in. Talk to a few people.”

Communications. News. Her guess had been right.

Alannah pushed herself off the rock, and moved over to where she could see through the trees to the prairies. They were closer than the last time she had studied them, but still a few hundred feet below where she and Kit stood. “Where is this house you want to get to?” she asked Kit. “Can you see it from here?”

“I’ve got good eyesight, but I think an eagle would have trouble seeing it from here.” He moved over to her side, scrubbing at his hair and stretching. Then he shifted, peering through the trees. “No, not from here. I can see all the landmarks, but not the house.”

“What’s the closest landmark to the house that you can see?”

He glanced at her. “You have something in mind?”

“I can jump to what I can see,” she explained. “If you have binoculars in that kitchen sink you’re carrying, that will make a difference. I can study the details.”

“I thought you just jumped to...bookmarks, you called them.”

“That’s if I jump by accessing the timescape. And there’s no guarantee the bookmark will be there, anyway. And...” She

rubbed at the back of her neck. “I don’t know if the shield that’s hiding me will strip away if I go onto the timescape. So a simple jump from point to visual point seems safest to me. I just have to be able to see where I’m jumping to. I have to know the place where I will land.”

“Like your house above Canmore?”

She nodded. “There’s a basement—no one knows about it. But *Far* and Mom set it up so any jumpers could jump there, to the exact moment they wanted. There’s an atomic clock...I could jump us there, with complete certainty.”

Kit thought about it, then shook his head. “We don’t know the conditions we’ll be jumping into. Iron Grey knows way too much about you. He knows the house. He might know about the basement. Until we get more information, we need to be wary about returning to the house.”

“So we jump to this house you’re aiming for, to get information,” she concluded.

“It’s my uncle’s house. Right on the north edge of the reservation. He’s got an old landline phone.” He moved over to his pack, rooted through it, and pulled out a black box and tipped a small pair of folding binoculars out and held them out to her. “They’re not powerful, but you could pick up the details you need.” He turned her so she was facing the correct direction and pointed. “See the glint of the river, down there, and the triangle of trees to the south?”

She looked and nodded. “Got it.” It was a long way away. She could understand why Kit had been concerned about making good time.

“Follow the river to the east a ways. You’ll see a tributary coming off it, and an old wooden bridge crossing it. No sides to the bridge—it’s on private land. Dirt road.”

“Sounds like our bridge across the gully,” she murmured and lifted the glasses. She found the river beside the triangular lot of trees and traced it east. She found the bridge. The dirt road to either side of it was covered in snow, with double tire tracks cutting through it. “Someone’s been across it the last day or so,” she murmured. “The tracks look fresh.”

“Uncle Joe has a few businesses in Calgary and Airdrie. He heads in every day,” Kit said.

Politicians litter my family. Obscenely successful businessmen, too.

Alannah lowered the glasses. “I can jump us there. To the bridge. Only, it’s pretty open, Kit. Anyone might see us arrive there. How far is it from the house?”

“The house is among trees, about three kilometers on from the bridge, and in the valley made by the river the bridge crosses.”

“And you thought we’d get all the way there by tonight?”

“With your long-legged stride? Easy.” He smiled. “I just didn’t account for falling asleep in the sun. Stupid newbie hiker move.”

“It was a busy night,” Alannah said, holding the glasses out to him.

Kit fumbled taking the glasses back. He drew in a breath, clutching them firmly, and took them back to the pack.

Had she embarrassed him?

His face was held in its usual neutral expression when he rose and moved over to the rock to roll up the sheet.

Alannah helped him pack up the rest of the gear they’d used to cook lunch, then stood back as he shouldered the pack.

“Do you need to be looking at the place where you’re jumping to?” he asked.

“Only in my head.” She held out her arm. “Arm over my shoulder,” she told him.

“I remember.”

She slid her arm around his waist. This time it felt easy. Comfortable. She looked up at him. “Bend your knees.”

He bent. So did she. She rebuilt the image of the bridge, the double tracks, the snow. The trees and valley three kilometers further east... “One, two, three,” she counted and jumped.

CHAPTER THIRTY



THE BRIDGE WAS SOLID UNDER their feet.

“Right on the money,” Kit said, his tone one of approval.

“Aran’s the *real* jumper.”

“Don’t do that,” Kit snapped.

“Do what?”

“Compare yourself to everyone else, and run yourself down. What you do is...*literally* out of this world. You landed us here after looking at the specs with a pair of eight by twenty-five glasses. Don’t tell me you’re not a real jumper, because you are.”

Alannah drew in her breath, ready to argue. Then she let it out. “Okay,” she said awkwardly. “It’s just...that’s not how I feel.”

“We’ll change that,” he said flatly. “This imposter syndrome of yours just has to go.”

“Speak for yourself, big guy,” she tossed back.

Kit straightened with a snap, surprise skittering over his face. Then he nodded. “Yeah. I guess I got it too, in a way.”

“In all ways. ‘I’m *just* a warden’.”

He grimaced, and looked around. “Light is fading.”

“And the wind is picking up.”

“No mountains to shield us,” he pointed out. “Walk behind me. I’ll cut the wind down a bit.”

She opened her mouth to protest at the overly male-protector sentiment.

“I have the heavier coat,” he reminded her. “And I’m used to the cold.”

Alannah nodded and fell in behind him. They followed the right hand track through the snow, as it wound in a slow curve heading for the copse of trees that marked the house.

They had been walking only a few minutes when flickering lights at the corner of her vision caught Alannah’s attention. She looked over her shoulder. A big white truck, possibly a Ford or a RAM 1500, was travelling along the road they were on. It was yet to reach the bridge, but it would overtake them in a minute or two.

Alannah caught Kit’s arm and pulled him around. He studied the truck for a moment, then grinned. “That’s Joe,” he said. “He’s traded in the Chevrolet since I saw him last.”

He stepped off the track and into the ankle-high snow and put the pack on the ground. Alannah moved up beside him.

The truck stopped next to them and the passenger side window wound down. A man with swarthy bronze-fleshed features and the same glossy black hair as Kit, only shot with grey at the sides, leaned sideways to peer through the window. “Kisecawchuck.”

“Uncle Joe,” Kit acknowledged.

“Figured you’d be around in the next day or two, after all the mystery messages Maryann has been fielding. Climb in.”

The doors unlocked. Kit opened the back door and slid his pack onto the big seat and over, then stepped back and indicated Alannah should climb in. She hoisted herself up to the seat and Kit closed the door and climbed up into the passenger seat next to his uncle.

When all the doors were closed, warmth bathed Alannah and she sat back with a sigh, enjoying the first artificial heat in days.

Joe got the truck moving again. “Miss,” he said to Alannah, his gaze on her in the rear view mirror.

“Alannah,” she told him.

“Pretty name for a pretty lady.” He glanced at Kit. “You two come over the Orient Point Pass?”

“Good guess. Or did someone rat me out?” Kit asked.

“All Maryann heard was you’d gone off grid for security reasons. Some asshole chasing you in Canmore. Hard to make out the details from the fragments Maryann collected. You’ll be able to fill in the gaps, I’m guessing.” His gaze came back to Alannah in the back seat. “Something to do with you, Miss Alannah?”

“Something like that,” she admitted.

“There are some real bastards in the world,” Joe said, his tone neutral. “The two of you look in need of a shower and food.”

“And heat. I’ve got my toes up against the heater vent and can’t feel anything yet,” Kit admitted.

“Heat comes with the other two,” Joe said. “Phone Maryann, tell her to put the kettle on.” They were drawing close to the trees now.

Kit pulled out his phone. The screen was dark, the phone powered off. He hesitated, his thumb on the power button. “We can wait until we’re at the house,” he said, putting his phone away again.

“*That* sort of trouble. ‘kay,” Joe said. “Good to know you’ve got friends running around for you in Canmore.”

“It’s not a family thing,” Kit said, his tone apologetic.

“It’s the lady’s thing,” Joe said, his tone one of agreement. “Should we be alerting anyone in the family, anyway. Your father, maybe?”

Alannah could feel Kit stiffen, even though she could see nothing much more than his left shoulder. “No need for that yet,” he said.

Joe just laughed. “You haven’t changed all *that* much, then.” He steered the big truck in among the trees, going slower on the slope down the valley. A big house with white walls and balconies on all the front windows seemed to beckon like a lighthouse in the darkening day. All the lights were on, including outside lights that illuminated a well-ploughed driveway that circled a flowerbed that was a series of humps beneath snow, with a birdbath that dripped icicles in the center.

“I’ll park the truck later,” Joe said, halting beside the house. “Let’s get you two settled and comfortable first.”

Inside the house, more warmth bathed Alannah's cheeks. Joe led them through the foyer, straight into a kitchen/living/dining room combination. Delicious cooking smells washed over them—a soup, Alannah guessed, and roasting meat.

A middle-aged woman with long black hair tied in a French braid was working at the range, stirring a stock pot. She put the long spoon down and smiled at Joe, then at Alannah and Kit. She had dark eyes and a high forehead.

“Kit, my goodness, you've been keeping me awake a couple nights now!” she said, coming over to him.

Kit put the pack down quickly and hugged her. “Not intentional, Aunt Mary. But you guys have a landline still, and you're closest to the pass.”

“You came over Orient Point?” she asked. “That's a hike and a half.”

“Three very solid days,” Kit said with feeling. “And we were light on everything, too. We left in a hurry.”

“Your truck was found, by the way,” Maryann told him. “We had it towed back to Canmore. It's in Clay's garage. He said he'd fix the gas tank for you while he was waiting to hear the rest of the story.”

“Thanks,” Kit said with feeling.

“Hold your questions for now, Maryann,” Joe said. “These two need food and a shower. And fresh clothes, too, I'm guessing by the smell.” He laughed loudly.

Alannah could feel her cheeks heating.

Maryann smiled at her. “You look about my daughter's size and she left a lot of her stuff behind when she went to college. And Joe has jeans he'll never fit into again that you're welcome to, Kit. I'll get them out for you. You can use our

ensuite, and Alannah can use the guest bathroom. Then you don't have to wait, either of you. Come along."

In the next thirty minutes, Maryanne efficiently shepherded them both to their respective bathrooms, dug up the promised clothes and added them to the fresh towels and wash cloths she'd already supplied, added soap, shampoo and conditioner, and after eying Alannah's hair, a clean hair brush and comb. "I'm guessing you don't have a lipstick or powder on you, either," Maryann said. "There's deodorant in the medicine chest besides other bits and pieces. Help yourself to whatever you need."

"Thank you," Alannah said with deep gratitude. "This will feel *so* good."

Maryann just smiled and shut the bathroom door.

Alannah wallowed in the hot water and fresh-scented soap and shampoo. It was such a relief not to feel *cold*. She hadn't realize how much it was eating into her psyche, until now when she was able to feel warm again.

She dressed and found her way back down to the kitchen area. Kit was there before her in jeans that didn't look too oversized and a tartan wool shirt that he'd rolled up to his elbows. His feet were bare.

So were Alannah's. She would have to beg for a pair of socks before they left. There was no way she was putting the dirty ones back on.

She sat at the table beside Kit. He had an old style landline phone in front of him, one of the ones with the push buttons on the front, and a receiver sitting over the base.

He was holding the receiver to his ear, nodding, and taking notes on a notepad with *Clay's Canmore Autos* and a phone number at the top. Above the pad were a bunch of pink, blue, yellow and green Post It notes with scribbled notes on them,

stuck together in a haphazard fashion. They had to be Maryann's messages.

Maryann was back at the stove, stirring the soup. Alannah got to her feet again and went over to her. "Can I help?"

Maryann smiled at her, her dark eyes twinkling. "What and mess up my system? I'm too used to doing this myself. You just sit and relax. If you did Orient Point Pass in three days from where Kit left his truck, then you need to do a bit more sitting for a while."

Alannah didn't argue the point. She went back to the chair. Kit smiled at her briefly when he hung up the phone, then reached for the next Post It, read it, and dialed again. "Let me catch up with everyone, first," he told her. "Then I'll know where we stand."

Alannah nodded. She wanted that information herself.

Maryann brought over a bowl of steaming soup, which she put in front of Alannah, and held out a spoon. "Kit and Joe aren't going to sit still for a formal meal tonight. They've got business to sort out. So we'll just eat around them." She brought a second bowl over to the table, sat opposite Alannah and began to eat.

That let Alannah eat without guilt, too. It was some kind of fish soup, hot and rich. Shrimp floated to the surface, and she gobbled them up. There was a spiciness that added a nice secondary flavor to the shrimp. Rice was at the bottom of the bowl and vegetables and bits of chopped up fish that might be salmon, in among them.

Kit got through two phone calls while she was eating the soup. He didn't say much himself, beyond "Hi, it's Kit. I got your message. What's happened since?"

Joe came in from the back of the house, wearing socks only on his feet, and rubbing his hands. "Gonna be a cold one

tonight,” he observed. “Truck’s tucked away. What’s happening with Kit?”

Maryann silently filled another soup bowl and put it at the head of the table.

“I don’t know yet,” Alannah told Joe, as she wasn’t sure who he had meant the question for, and Maryann wasn’t rushing to answer. “Kit is mostly listening so it’s hard to tell.”

Joe ate three quick spoonfuls of soup, hissing at the heat. “Listening’s good,” he said, and went back to eating.

Maryann came back to the table, carrying a loaded plate that she put in front of Alannah. Roast beef, gravy, roast potatoes, peas, and Yorkshire pudding. Alannah’s mouth watered.

Maryann placed a fork and steak knife on either side of the plate. “Go on, eat.”

Alannah didn’t need any more encouragement. She had almost finished the meal when Kit pushed the phone away from him and sat back with a sigh. “I can’t stand it. I gotta eat before I do another call. Don’t get up, Aunt Mary. I’ll see to myself.”

“I have to get Joe’s beef, anyway,” Maryann said, shooing him away. She served Kit a large bowl of the soup and put another roast dinner in front of Joe. She had a smaller plate of roast for herself, that she ate neatly and quickly. “Can you explain anything to us yet, Kit?”

Joe looked up, his attention caught, and studied Kit with an expectant expression.

Kit rubbed at his damp hair.

“Let’s start first with a sit rep,” Joe said. “That’s what you call it, right?”

“That’s what the Americans call it on television, Joe,” Maryann said chidingly.

“It’ll do for now,” Kit said easily. “There’s a guy, we’re calling him Iron Grey, who snatched Alannah right out of her house, three days ago. Her folk’s house, actually. She’s house sitting while they’re in Europe. We figure he learned she was there alone and thought she was easy pickings.”

“A trafficker, then?” Joe said. “Long way from an easy exit port.”

“He might have acted on impulse. Learned she was alone and taken the chance. A strong sedative would keep her contained until he got her to Vancouver and whatever ship they’re using.”

Maryann shuddered. “I had no idea it was something like this. Oh, dear...!”

“I’m fine,” Alannah assured her. “Thanks to Kit.”

“I just happened to be in the right place at almost the right time,” Kit said. “I stopped by with a leg of bison and found she was missing. Tracked her to the hotel where Iron Grey was keeping her. I suppose until he could arrange to transport her to a ship heading to the Middle East or wherever the destination of choice is for these a-hats these days.” He plopped the soup spoon into the empty bowl with a sigh of satisfaction.

Maryann immediately got to her feet, picked up the bowl and took it back to the kitchen side of the room.

Joe scratched under his chin. “You snatched her back, went running, but holed your gas tank and went on, on foot?”

“Iron Grey followed us,” Kit said. “I had to shake him off. Heading into the hills was the obvious choice. The guy is *not* a woodsman.”

“Most white folk ain’t,” Joe said easily. “Most tribe folk ain’t either, not anymore.” He laughed at his own joke and slapped Kit on the shoulder. “Excepting you.”

“This Iron Grey seems a bit...persistent,” Maryann said, placing a very loaded plate of roast beef and fixings in front of Kit. She held out a knife and fork toward him. “I don’t know much about human traffickers but it seems to me they would want to avoid trouble. As soon as someone seemed like too much effort to pick up, I would think they would lose interest very quickly and move on. But he chased you halfway to Banff.”

Maryann was far too perceptive.

“He knew a bit about me,” Alannah said carefully. “Our house is out of the way, but he knew I was there. So he’d done his homework. Maybe he spotted me in Canmore and made enquiries. Maybe he didn’t want to lose all that work.”

“Or maybe he thought someone like you would sell at a high enough price to make a bit of effort worth it,” Joe said.

Alannah could feel herself blushing. The heat travelled down her throat.

“Joe, stop flustering her with your heavy handed jocularity,” Maryann said.

Kit just grinned and ate another piece of Yorkshire pudding dripping with gravy. “I ran into Becky Redstone at the hotel. She helped me get to Iron Grey. I asked her to phone a few friends of mine, and ask them to watch out for the guy, get a line on who he was and where he came from.”

“Don’t you have friends in the RCMP?” Joe asked. “Why not ask them? Let them take over and protect Alannah. Why take it on yourself?”

Kit didn’t blink. “There wasn’t time. I sprung Alannah, and we had to run as Iron Grey was on our tails. Then the truck ran

out of gas. So we hoofed it.” He shrugged.

Joe didn’t look convinced.

“Why would the RCMP do a better job than Kit, Joe?” Maryann said. “He’s ex JTF2—”

“Aunt Mary,” Kit snapped.

She looked uncertain and bit her lip. “Sorry,” she said softly and sat back.

Alannah stared at her. What was JTF2?

“Anyway, you got her out,” Joe said, his tone jolly. “Now what?”

“Iron Grey headed back to Canmore once he lost us. His real name—or the name he was using at the hotel, at least—was Gore Mixon. His passport was Armenian. As far as the hotel staff could determine, it was genuine, although they’d never seen an Armenian passport before, so they had no real way of telling.”

He rubbed his hair, glancing at the notes on the pad beside his plate. “Mixon was spotted the day after we ran, hanging around the Save-On.”

Alannah jumped. “That’s my grocery store.”

“Likely where he first spotted you,” Kit said. “He was trying to reacquire you.”

She shuddered.

“My friends kept an eye out for him, but no one saw him again after that first day. They also watched the road up to your house, but nothing moved on it, not for the three days they’ve been watching. They think Mixon has left town. He didn’t pay his hotel bill, but his room was cleaned out. The Mustang he was using was a rental and that was turned into the Calgary airport yesterday.”

“He gave up,” Maryann said, sounding relieved.

“Sounds like it’s safe for you to go home, Alannah,” Joe added.

She nodded, trying to look pleased.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



AFTER DINNER, JOE AND KIT headed somewhere outside. Alannah guessed they wanted to talk privately. Checking the barns to make sure the cows were okay was merely an excuse.

Alannah insisted on helping Maryann with the dishes. She refused to sit on her ass and watch the woman tackle the small mountain of dirty dishes their meal had generated.

Maryann accepted gratefully, leaned back against the counter to relax for a moment, then pulled a scotch bottle from a high cupboard and shook it in Alannah's direction. "Call it a night cap."

"Oh, we can't stay the night!" Alannah exclaimed.

“Canmore is a good two hours away by road, sweetheart,” Maryann said. “And Joe has put the truck away for the night. You planning on walking home?” She raised a brow.

If she had been intending to go home at all, Alannah would have jumped there. But she still had to have that conversation with Kit. Instead, she grimaced. “I see.”

Maryann poured two thick fingers into two scotch glasses and put one on the back of the sink where Alannah was working. “To fuzzy and sweet dreams,” she said and moved back to the counter.

Alannah began loading the dishwasher. “What is JTF2, Maryann? Why did Kit tell you to shut up?”

Maryann sighed. “Can I ask a personal question first?”

“Oh. Um...yes?” Alannah said cautiously.

“Do I have to make up two beds tonight, or will the queen sized in the spare bedroom be enough?”

Alannah could feel her cheeks burning again, and kept her gaze on the suds in the sink. “I...um...just the one bed is enough.” She bent over the dishwasher again.

“Figured,” Maryann said with a pleased tone. “Guess that means I can be indiscreet for a bit longer and tell you what JTF2 is. You’re American, Kit said.”

“I was born in L.A, but I’m seriously thinking about immigrating here, the way my parents did.” She replayed what she had just said in her head and felt a touch of surprise...but not a lot of it.

“Because of Kit?”

Alannah cleared her throat. “I think...because my life in L.A. is pretty much at a dead end.”

Maryann moved around Alannah and leaned against the counter with one hip, facing her. “It’s no big secret that Joint

Task Force 2 is the Canadian equivalent of your Navy SEALs. It's just a fairly close secret who serves with them."

"Kit served with them..." Then Alannah remembered what she was supposed to be doing and bent to stack more dishes in the bottom rack of the machine. "I knew he was a good soldier. It shows. My sister in law was a US Ranger and a hero, so I know the signs. But I didn't know he was *that* good." She rinsed out the gravy pot and slipped it between the rows of dishes. "Kit is the first in the family to join the Army? He said the family was...well, shocked, when he joined up." She glanced at Maryann, to catch her reaction.

Maryann grimaced, peering at the bottom of her glass. Then she drank a deep mouthful and grimaced again. "Kit fought family history to get his way. Ever heard of Kalysta Marlow?"

Alannah nodded. "Yes! She was a British model and actress, a minor player in Hollywood in the 80s. Everyone says she could have gone on to be an A-lister—she was turning a lot of heads. Then there was..." She frowned, digging up the details. "A messy affair of some sort. An actor..." She straightened. "A *Canadian* actor." She did what Maryann had done to her, and raised her brow.

Maryann smiled. "So far, so good. Know who Robert Mahihkan McDonald is?"

Alannah pressed her lips together. "No. But given the last name, I'm going to guess it's a relative of Kit's. His father?"

"Good guess. But that's probably not taking it near far enough. Rob McDonald made his first million before he was twenty-two. He stacked on quite a few more million after that." Maryann shrugged. "It's a family trait, acquiring money. I didn't know that when I married Joe, though I've learned a lot since then. Joe is a laggard, compared to the rest of the family. He was twenty-nine before he reached his first

million.” Then she laughed. “He’s made up for it since then. But Rob is the all-star champ.”

Alannah realized she was standing still, her hands in soapy water. She didn’t want to miss a word.

“In 1988, Calgary hosted the Winter Olympics. Rob was invited as one of the VIP guests. So was William McMenzies, the Canadian actor whose name you were trying to remember. He took Kalysta Marlow with him.”

Alannah connected it together with a near-audible click in her mind. “Kalysta met Rob McDonald there?”

“And married him less than a year later. That’s the mess that ended her affair with William McMenzies.”

Kalysta Marlow was Kit’s mother.

“Kalysta died the year Kit turned eighteen,” Maryann added.

Alannah jumped a little. “Oh...!” she breathed.

“Yes, indeed. ‘Oh’. I’m not saying that’s what did it for Kit, but I think it might have been the last straw for him. He always felt like an oddity in the family. Rob was the oldest of twelve children, and seven survived to adulthood and had passels of kids of their own. We had four of them, ourselves, and we were conservative, at that.” Maryann grinned and drained her glass.

Alannah smiled and pressed her lips together to stop herself from laughing.

“Kit was an only child,” Maryann added. “He was surrounded by cousins and second cousins and all of them were full blood.”

“Oh...” Alannah repeated inadequately.

“No one cared,” Maryann said, waving her hand dismissively. “But Kit did. I think he felt like he didn’t belong.

When his mother died, he was the only non-full-blood in the family and he felt alone. Then, suddenly, he announced he was joining the Army for the education grant. Oh my god, was Rob pissed about that! Like this family couldn't pay for Kit's education!"

Alannah turned and got the dishwasher running. "He thought Kit was running away?"

"Kit probably was. But then he turned out to be a damned fine soldier, after all. I'll let you tackle Kit about his career. If you're sharing the same bed, he might open up a bit and give you the details. I know he was pulled into Joint Task Force 2 very quickly and he spent most of his time there, rushing around the middle east and all the hot spots. But it ate at him, you know. The destruction and violence. He looked a lot older than he was, every time he came home. And he got quieter and quieter."

Alannah gripped the front edge of the big sink. "So he became a park warden, instead, where all you can hear is the wind in the tree tops."

Maryann lifted the corner of her mouth. "Interesting way of putting it. Sounds about right, too."

Alannah explored the water, looking for dishes beneath the suds. "Thank you for telling me this. It helps. A lot."

"Yeah, I figured Kit probably wouldn't volunteer the information. But now you can prod him into details, if you want. And you can blame me for slipping and mentioning JTF2."



ALANNAH HELPED MARYANN MAKE UP the queen sized bed she had spoken of, and after that, Maryann bid her a good night.

Perhaps she sensed the exhaustion that was dogging Alannah. The pillowtop mattress beckoned and despite their afternoon snooze, Alannah could feel sleep pulling at her.

She undressed and slid into the clean sheets with a deep sigh of contentment. She left the bedside lamp on for Kit, and intended to wait for him to arrive.

Instead she was woken by his lips upon her neck, and his arm over her waist, sliding up to her breast. Alannah stretched, every tendon popping and every nerve instantly coming online.

Her movements pushed her breast into Kit's hand, and he gave a small growl of appreciation.

Alannah turned over to face him. He was as naked as she.

Kit glanced around the room and back to her. "Did you ask for the bed, or did Aunt Mary just assume?" His black eyes were narrowed, but there was amusement in them.

"She asked. Nicely."

He patted the mattress. "Far softer than the rubber sheet."

"And wider, too."

"Let's take advantage of that," he said, pulling her to him.

"Oh, you're all cold from the outside," she exclaimed, feeling the patches of chilled skin on his chest and arms.

"Let's take care of that, too."



THEIR BREATHING HAD SLOWED, BUT the heat between them was good. Alannah snuggled up against Kit's back, rested her head against his shoulder. She aimed for a casual tone, and said, "I

was thinking. We should head back out again. Into the mountains. Only, pack more supplies this time.”

Kit didn't shift or stiffen. He didn't react at all, and for a long moment, Alannah thought he might actually have fallen asleep already.

Then he said, “You don't want to go home?”

Her heart jumped. “I want....” She sighed. Why was it so hard to say what she was feeling?

“I thought you'd be glad to go home.” His tone was stiff. “Everything gets sorted out once you're back there. You don't want to sort things out?”

She held still, her heart hammering. She knew what he was not quite saying. He had insisted all along that the situation between them would be resolved, once she was home and they could react normally, without the stress of enemies coming at them.

“No, that's not what I meant,” Alannah said inadequately. “I meant...” What *did* she mean? “Iron Grey—Mixon—is all over me. He knows me too well.”

“He's left town.” Kit's tone was cold. Flat.

“I don't think he has.”

Kit rolled over to face her. His eyes, in the dark, were black pits, hiding everything. “You can see him on the timescape? Here?”

“I don't want to look around the timescape,” she said quickly. “This shield, whatever it is I'm doing to hide myself there...I don't know if it will hold if I access the timescape in that way.”

Again, the heavy beat of her heart filled his silence.

“Then you're guessing,” he said, at last.

“It’s a good guess,” she protested.

“He turned in the Mustang. He wouldn’t deprive himself of transport.”

“Maybe he has different transport now,” Alannah said. “Maybe it wasn’t even him who turned the car in.”

“Allies?” Kit shook his head, denting the pillow. “He was alone at the hotel. You’re scared and reaching, Alannah. That’s understandable—”

“*I don’t want to go home!*” She did her best to keep her voice down, but it came out strained and hoarse, instead. “You don’t know how ruthless enemies can be....” She bit her lip.

“I don’t?” Kit seemed amused.

“I mean...no, of course you do. That’s not what I mean, either. You don’t know...I grew up watching my parents fighting to defeat Tira, who kept coming back at them, over and over. Uncle Rafe killed her, in the end, but that doesn’t mean she can’t return, because she can *use time*. Before Rafe killed her, she might have jumped ahead to this time, or some time in our future, and kills us all. You don’t know how time can twist on you. You can’t know, you haven’t grown up with it the way I have.”

She stopped, because her voice was trembling and she knew she was on the verge of tears. The last thing she wanted was for Kit to see her cry. It would confirm his opinion that she was saying all this just because she was scared.

Kit let out a slow breath. “If I properly followed all that, then I have to point out that if Tira does pop up in your future somewhere and kills you all, then she has no reason to later turn up at the time point where Rafe killed her.”

Alannah sat up. “You’re laughing at me.”

Kit propped his head on his hand. “Not even close to what I’m doing.”

Alannah twisted the sheet into a tight knot in her hand. “I want to stay out in the mountains longer.” She knew she sounded petulant. “I want to stay out there with you.”

“This afternoon, you offered to jump us both directly to your secret basement,” he said slowly. “What has changed?”

Alannah squeezed the cotton in her hand. “I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “But when Joe said I was free to go home, something...jumped in me. And I...” She ruffled her hair, feeling heat prickling along her neck. “I *am* scared,” she said. “And...”

“And...?”

“And...and...once I go back, then I have to...we have to...” She swallowed. “We have to explain us. To my family. And I’m not even sure if there *is* an us.”

“I see,” Kit said. He laid down.

Her heart fluttered in weak, sickly way. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means I see,” Kit said, his tone cool. “Nothing more.”

Alannah cast about, looking for words, for a way to dig deeper, to find out what he really meant. Her fear about going home was eclipsed by an entirely new one. Did his dismissal, his ending the conversation mean that he agreed with her? That he’d come to the conclusion that they had no future?

She already knew that Kit could not be bullied or prodded into speaking about anything if he wasn’t good and ready.

Alannah’s heart shuddered. Her breath was uneven. But all she could do was lie down and pretend to sleep.

Kit was going to insist she jump them to the house tomorrow, and everything she feared might come to pass.

Including, now, this new fear that Kit no longer wanted her. He'd seen how pathetic she could be.

Had she ruined everything by revealing too much of herself?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



THE NEXT MORNING, JOE BROUGHT the truck around to the front of the house. “I’ll take you to Canmore. Then I can swing by the offices in Calgary on the way back,” he said.

Alannah couldn’t think of a way to tell him that driving them there wasn’t necessary. She glanced at Kit, who didn’t look at her as he wiped up the last of the egg on his plate with a piece of toast, and said, “Thanks, Uncle Joe. If you drop us at Clay’s I can get my truck back.”

Alannah relaxed just a smidgen. Clay’s wasn’t the house, at least. The idea of Joe driving them right up to the house made her deeply uneasy, but she couldn’t pin down why. Everything

was making her jumpy, this morning, including Kit's distant manner with her.

After her second big mug of freshly brewed coffee, Alannah climbed reluctantly into Joe's back seat. Maryann stood on the front porch and waved them off as Joe got the truck moving.

The day was bright and clear, the sky cloudless and pale blue. It seemed too lovely a day to hold the horrible possibilities that had spent the night roiling about in her mind.

There was no road through the mountains that would take them directly to Canmore, which lay just on the other side of the peaks. Instead, they would have to drive nearly all the way to Calgary, then come up north again to Canmore, in a big U around the end of the eastern chain of mountains that formed the valley Canmore was located in.

It was at least a two hour journey, and that put off the moment she was dreading for a while. Alannah tried to relax and watch the land sweep by, and the mountains shift and change color as the day broadened.

They arrived in Canmore shortly after eleven. Joe seemed to know Canmore well, for he steered through the side streets and brought the truck to a halt in front of Clay's garage. The sign over the open garage doors matched the notepad that Kit had been using last night.

Inside the big shed, Alannah could hear the knock of steel on iron, and the unmistakable sound of a compressor-driven bolt driver.

"I'm gonna drop you and head off," Joe said. "Not least because I don't want Clay handing me the bill." He laughed loudly.

Kit slapped Joe's shoulder. "Suits," he said. "Thanks, Joe."

“Just make sure Alannah gets home safe and sound,” Joe said.

Kit didn’t answer, but from the way Joe grinned, Alannah suspected Kit had rolled his eyes.

She was glad to climb out of the truck. She had been walking for three days, and now, two hours of sitting made her feel cramped and stiff. She wanted to shake off the stiffness. The fear was back in her middle, making her feel sick. She wanted to be able to move fast, if she needed to.

Kit stood next to her, the pack between them and leaning against his knee, as they waved Joe off.

Alannah stirred. “I should pay for the repairs to your truck,” she said.

“We’re not getting the truck,” Kit said, picking up the pack. He looked around. The garage was just one of a strip of light industrial businesses on this side of the road. On the other side were small houses that looked quite old. This was clearly one of the oldest sections of Canmore.

“We’re not?” Alannah said, puzzled.

Kit shook his head. “I was thinking about it, on the way here. I don’t like the idea of just driving up to the house. Not now I know about the basement. It seems smarter to arrive without being seen.”

“I figured you thought I was being hysterical about Iron Grey still being in town.”

“Yeah, well...” Kit rubbed the back of his neck. “You’ve got me dancing the paranoid dance now, too.”

“But you’re still going to insist on me jumping us to the house,” she pointed out.

Kit shouldered the pack. “If there’s a situation we’re walking into, then hanging back will just waste time. Let’s

jump there, and find out one way or the other.”

She couldn't dispute the logic, even though she longed to. Her fear was rising like gorge, now Kit had confessed his own instincts were nipping at him.

“There's a lane over there, to the back of the houses,” Kit said, nodding across the road. “We can walk down there, get out of sight.”

Then jump.

Alannah swallowed and nodded.

They crossed the road, which was empty, and walked over to the lane, then down its length for a hundred yards. The other end of the lane looked as close as the opening behind them when Kit stopped, looked in both directions, and nodded. “Here is as good as it gets.” He held up his arm, for Alannah to step under.

She made herself move, her legs and arms sluggish and heavy. “What is the time?” she asked, her voice tight and high. “The exact time?”

Kit pulled out his phone. “If I turn this on, someone could pin point where I am.”

“I need the time to match the clock in the basement,” Alannah told him. “Turn it off straight away. We'll be gone from here right after that.”

He thumbed the phone on, and held out the screen as it booted up. As soon as she spotted the time—11:23 a.m.—she nodded and bent her knees.

“One...two...three.” She jumped.



THE BASEMENT, WITH HER PARENTS' three work benches surrounding the "arrival chamber" formed around them. The atomic clock on the fourth bench, pushed up against the wall, showed the time in a red, squared-off digital read out, each digit four inches high.

"Huh..." Kit said, staring at it. "Smart idea," he added.

How fast he had adapted to the idea of time travel!

Footsteps rattled on the wooden steps in the next room, then the swing door was thrust open. Aran strode into the room and came to a halt at the end of *Far's* workbench. He clutched the corner of it. "You're alive!" he croaked.

More people came into the room behind him. Marit pushed past Aran and wrapped her arms around Alannah and squeezed. "You weren't on the timescape!"

"I know," Alannah said. "I found a way to shield myself."

"Neither of you were on it," Aran said. "Kit disappeared the day before yesterday and I thought..." He turned his head away and pushed a thumb into the corner of one eye.

He'd thought Kit, at least, was dead, which would lead him to believe that Alannah had to be, too.

Alannah pressed her hand to her belly, to control the swirling there. "We're fine, though. Maybe I...extended the shield? Like an umbrella?" There was too much about this she didn't understand, that she would have to explore later.

She looked past Aran. "Jesse. I'm glad you're here."

"Kids, too," Jesse said. "All under one well-protected roof."

"And Rafe and Remi." She smiled at them. "Muscle?" she guessed.

"Aran insisted," Rafe said. "We would have, if he hadn't." He crossed his arms. "This hiding on the timescape

business...”

“Later, Rafe,” Jesse told him. “It’s nearly lunchtime. The kids will get cranky if I don’t feed them, and I don’t want to miss the conversation.”

“I will get cranky if I don’t eat,” Aran added.

“Lunch for all the babies, then,” Marit said, and dug her elbow into Aran’s ribs as she passed him.

“Come upstairs,” Aran told Kit. “You’ve not had the *real* grand tour of the house before.”

Kit nodded, but his gaze was on Rafe and Remi, as they moved out of the room. Alannah could guess why. He was reassessing them, now he knew they were vampires.

“You can park the pack in the next room, if you like,” Aran told Kit. “It’s secure, down here.”

“Hidden entrance?” Kit guessed.

“You never spotted it all the times you were here.”

“Wasn’t looking for it,” Kit said.

Alannah followed the two of them out of the room. Kit put the pack on the end of one of the old sofas taking up the corners of the casual room, and they moved up the stairs and through the closet into the house proper.

Kit turned back to watch Aran swing the door shut at the back of the closet. He just raised his brow.

Alannah could hear everyone in the kitchen, talking softly, interspersed with laughter. She didn’t feel like laughing, herself. The sick feeling in her belly and the tightness in her chest was increasing. It felt like someone was squeezing her throat, slowly cutting off her air.

“Come and get something to eat,” Aran told Kit, his hand on Kit’s shoulder. “Most meals are forage-as-you-need-it,

here.”

“When you aren’t all pretending to be human?” Kit asked. His tone was tight.

“I *am* human. Alannah must have glossed over that point.”

Kit turned his head, questing. His gaze shifted to the doorway into the front sitting room. “She didn’t say much at all,” he said absently. “She knows how to keep a secret.”

“Glad to hear it,” Aran said. “I would still like to know why she spilled what she did, though.”

Alannah felt as though she should protest over Aran’s dictatorial attitude, but Kit’s alert posture and the way he was turning his head, trying to take in everything, made her put it aside. “What’s wrong?” she asked Kit, moving closer to him.

He shook his head. “I don’t know...” he muttered. “Something.” He moved toward the door to the front room, very slowly, as if he was being pulled there.

At the same time, the conversation in the kitchen halted, as if a switch had been thrown.

Aran glanced at Alannah. “What is it?” he said quietly.

“Can’t you feel it?” Alannah asked. She felt as jumpy as a hare, her nerves skittering. She followed Kit into the front room. Kit stood near the window, but not directly in front of it. He stared out at the open space between the trees and the edge of the verandah, his gaze moving restlessly over it.

Remi stepped passed Alannah, utterly silent. He stopped beside Kit and looked out the window, too. “Someone is out there,” he said softly.

“More than one,” Kit breathed. “Mixon has allies.”

“Mixon?” Remi repeated.

From upstairs, one of the children screamed. Two began to cry.

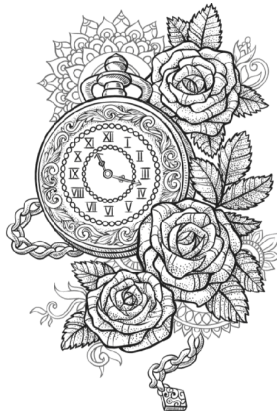
“The children!” Jesse shouted from the kitchen. Alannah heard her running steps as she sprinted for the stairs.

“They took one of the kids!” Remi cried and threw himself toward the front door.

Alannah clapped her hand over her mouth, to hold in any sound she made, as terror seemed to swamp her thoughts and turn them to mush.

Mixon hadn't caught her. So he'd turned to even easier prey—the children of the *real* traveler in the family.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



REMI MOVED SO FAST THAT the air cracked, separated violently by his speed and slamming back together behind him.

Alannah dropped her hand. He wouldn't be fast enough. She could see Iron Grey through the window as he stepped out from the trees around the chopping block. Another man stood beside him, holding one of the twins in his arms. The man's face was absolutely passive, even though the baby was screaming and kicking.

Mixon was pulling the man to him, dropping his arm over the man's shoulder.

They were going to jump.

Alannah didn't think about it. She flexed her knees by the smallest amount necessary and jumped. She landed right in front of the two of them.

Her sudden appearance startled both of them enough that she could pluck the baby out of the traveler's arms without resistance. She held Maggie tightly and jumped again.

The verandah formed around her. She had made sure that she landed well clear of the front door.

Remi bulleted past her, heading for Mixon.

Then Kit slammed through the door. He had his knife out, his gaze upon the traveler and Mixon, but he halted at the very top of the steps. "Back to Jesse," he told Alannah. "Protect the children."

Alannah opened her mouth to protest.

Six more people stepped out from among the trees. They were armed, and the weapons they carried looked like no weapons Alannah had ever seen before.

They were from the future, too.

Their faces were hard, uncaring.

Alannah clutched Maggie to her and jumped again. The upstairs reading nook formed around her. She had chosen the corner behind the sectional, where the chances that one of the children might be was minimal.

Jesse spun, one of the triplets in her arms. "Oh, thank god!" she cried, hurrying over to Alannah.

Alannah put Maggie on the sofa. "Can you watch them by yourself?" she said quickly.

Jesse shifted the baby in her arm, to reveal the Glock strapped to her hip. "Let them try again," she said grimly.

Alannah nodded. “They might, Jesse. I’m going back to help the others.”

Jesse just nodded.

Alannah jumped back to the far end of the verandah. As she landed, she heard Jesse in her mind, screaming across the timescape. *Come to me! Enemies around us, attacking. Come now!*

In addition to the verbal scream came fragments of images. The view of the yard in front of the house from the upstairs window that Jesse must be standing next to right now, and the assailants who were moving closer, drawing inward.

Kit and Remi and Rafe stood between them and the house. Kit held his knife. Rafe was bare handed. Remi had a crooked branch in one hand, that looked pathetically short and spindly.

Alannah clutched at the verandah rail, her heart in her mouth. There were too many of them confronting the three. She had to join them. She had to bolster their numbers. Only, she had never fought like this. Not a standing fight.

And she hesitated, while railing at herself for being weak and cowardly.

But then she saw that two of the assailants were angling toward Kit, the only human out there.

Alannah jumped, again without thought. She found herself next to Kit. She raised her hands. Also without thought. Her upper lip curled.

Kit glanced at her. “Don’t let them corner you. Jump away if you need to.”

No ‘go back and be safe’. No protests that she shouldn’t be there.

She nodded.

The assailants' steady pace toward them faltered. Alannah thought for a moment that her sudden appearance had given them pause.

"We're right behind you," came another voice. Alexander's.

"All of us," Neven said.

Alannah heard the sound of a gun being cocked. "And we're armed," Sydney added.

"So are we," Mixon called from the tree line, where he had remained. "And ours are far superior to yours. Demonstrate, Pascal."

One of them, a woman with blue hair, swung the muzzle of her long gun to one side, and triggered it.

The huge chopping block, that was actually the remains of a fallen tree and still deeply rooted in the ground, exploded into burning wood chips. The earth around it grew black, then glowed, as the sand itself melted and turned to glass.

"That was full power," Mixon called. "We don't need nearly that much power to kill you all. Humans *and* vampires."

"Kill us, and you don't get your pet traveler," Kit said.

Mixon peered down at his fingernails. "What makes you think we want any of you?"

"You just stole one of the babies!" Alannah screamed, fury making her voice loud and penetrating.

"Which you took back," Mixon replied. "So now, this hunt has become an extermination. We're clearing out a troublesome nest." He looked up and nodded.

Sydney's rifle fired first. "Take cover!" she screamed, as Mixon clutched at his belly and bowed over.

Alannah saw the branch that Remi had been holding whizz through the air at a speed that made it hard to track. It buried itself in the throat of the traveler who had taken Maggie. The traveler gurgled and clawed at the branch, as his knees buckled.

Then Kit slammed into Alannah, taking her off her feet. They sprawled in the cold dirt, and the skin on the heels of her hands tore. Over her head, she felt heat pass in an invisible stream.

Kit was still moving, still rolling. He pulled her along as he scrambled to his knees, then his feet. He hauled her to hers. “Around the side of the house,” he yelled at her. “We need cover.”

She staggered into a run, following him.

More heat streams skimmed either side of her, making the skin between her shoulder-blades crawl and giving her speed.

They rounded the corner of the house and Alannah slammed into the logs, breathing hard. Kit crowded up behind her and they both peered around the corner. “No weapons,” Kit said breathlessly. “We have to pick our moment.”

“Can you throw that?” Alannah asked him, indicating the knife in his hand.

“I can, but that’s a one-time use, and leaves it out there for someone else to pick up. Better to keep it right here.” He hefted the blade.

Alannah glanced around her feet. She couldn’t throw things like Remi, but a heavy enough stone thrown at a head could distract someone long enough for one of those with weapons to take them out.

A flicker of light and color pulled her attention around to the verandah. More people were appearing there. A long line of them...and they were all armed.

As they appeared, they raised their weapons.

“Nyara!” Alannah breathed, spotting the red-headed woman. And C  el, beside her. Kieren...and even more people she didn’t know.

The volley of futuristic weapons grew louder and continuous. Bits of the verandah railing blew up, splintered. One rail cracked and sagged.

The corner of the house splintered and turned to charcoal right next to Alannah’s eye and she threw herself backward, ramming into Kit.

“They’re too busy to aim properly,” he told her, squeezing her shoulder. “They’re out in the open and if Nyara’s people are smart, they’ll jump behind them and catch them in cross-fire...and look.”

Alannah looked. Behind where the chopping block had been, where now there was a meter deep glass hole, a dozen more people stepped out into the open behind Mixon’s crew, who were hugging the ground for whatever cover it gave them.

“Where’s Mixon?” Alannah cried, scanning the people that Nyara’s crew were picking off.

“Shit!” Kit yelled. His hand dropped from her shoulder.

At the same time, in her head, came a compulsively, almost primordial scream.

Aran!!!

It was Jesse’s voice, filled with terror and fury.

Alannah jumped, again without thought. She landed in the same corner of the reading nook, and looked around wildly, trying to absorb everything all at once. Aran appeared at the top of the stairs almost at the same time she did, flickering into view as her own vision cleared.

Jesse had the gun up. The babies at her feet were all crying.

The powerful Glock bellowed. Jesse was pointing it between the railings, at the head of one of the two men standing halfway up the stairs. The top of the man's head came off, splattering blood and brains across the wall behind him.

The second one glanced at his dead companion and gave a scream that sounded as pain and fear-filled as Jesse's had been. He raised the long weapon in his hand at Jesse.

"No!" Alannah screamed, terror gripping her throat.

Aran threw himself forward, in front of Jesse.

The weapon fired.

Aran was tossed back through the air like a puppet. He slammed into Jesse, and they both fell backwards. Alannah watched, frozen, as Jesse managed to lift her feet to avoid kicking the children around her. Her arms came up around Aran, cradling him.

They both sprawled backwards, landing up against the corner of the sectional, and lay still.

Jesse gave a soft sigh. Her eyes closed.

The man who had fired the weapon gave a soft grunting sound, pulling her gaze back to him.

The point of a long knife was jutting from the front of his throat.

Then, with a jerk, it was removed.

The man dropped out of sight and Kit bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He rounded the newel post and leapt over the kiddie gate. The knife in his hand was bloody.

Alannah leapt over the sofa, using her arm as a fulcrum. She landed right next to Jess and Aran and dropped down beside them.

Kit squatted next to her.

“We need Alexander!” Alannah cried. She didn’t look at the state of Aran’s body. She kept her gaze on his face. Jesse, beneath him, was just as still, her face just as white.

Kit put his hand out, against Aran’s neck. He held still for long seconds, then shook his head.

“No!” Alannah screamed. “No! He’s *not dead!* Neither of them are!”

“Alannah...” Kit said gently.

She shook her head.

“Alannah!” Marit cried from right behind her. Marit grabbed Alannah’s shoulders. “Let me see.”

“No,” Kit said. “Get Alexander. The fight is over down there. Alannah, help me with the children.”

Alannah shook her head. She wanted to pat Aran, to shake him awake, stir him to life, but she was afraid to touch him. She was afraid to move, in case anything she did changed things for the worse.

“Alannah,” Kit said, his hand sliding under her arm. He lifted her up. “The children. They’re afraid. Help me.”

Footsteps, heavy and fast, sounded on the stairs. Many of them. Alannah turned to check who was coming. Relief touched her when she saw Alexander appear at the top of the stairs. Remi and Rafe were right behind him. London, then Sydney. Then Nyara.

They pushed into the reading nook, and Alannah scooped up one of the triplets to get them out of the way of the many adult feet squeezing in around Aran and Jesse.

“Veris’ surgery,” Alexander directed. “Quickly!”

Alannah put the baby on the sofa and bent and picked up another. Then another. Kit propped Maggie next to them. He had India under his other arm and settled her beside her sister and soothed them both with gentle hands on their heads.

Aran and Jesse were picked up and carried away. *Far* had a compact but well equipped surgery at the other end of the landing. She watched her brother and his wife taken in there.

She felt numb. She tried to soothe the babies as Kit was doing, but her own heart was skittering around as wildly as theirs and all she could wordlessly communicate was panic.

She got to her feet. "I can't...I must..." She waved helplessly toward the surgery door.

Kit nodded. "I've got this. Go." His black eyes were calm.

She almost ran to the surgery and staggered inside, her heart screaming.

Alexander stood at the head of Jesse's bed, a stethoscope against her chest.

Sydney and Rafe were by Aran's bed. Kieren had crowded in at the head of the bed and stood looking down at Aran, a small furrow between his brows, while Sydney and Rafe watched him closely.

He lifted his head and shook it.

Sydney sighed.

Alannah clutched at the doorframe. Her heart, everything in her middle, seemed to drop and shatter. Coldness took its place. "No..." It was a whisper, when she really wanted to scream it aloud in protest. "Not Aran. Not Jesse..."

Sydney glanced at her. "It comes to all of us, eventually, Alannah."

"He wanted to jump. To keep jumping. He loved time travel...."

Rafe rolled up his sleeve. “He might still yet have that privilege. Sydney, the long syringe there.”

Alannah knew immediately what he intended. She wanted to cry. Aran might yet live, but his days of being human were over. “Jesse, too,” she said, her voice choked. “He won’t want this, if Jesse isn’t part of it.”

Sydney nodded, handed Rafe the syringe, picked up a second one and turned to face the other bed. Alexander was already rolling up his sleeve. The stethoscope hung about his neck.

“Give me the syringe,” came the command from just behind Alannah.

She twisted. *Far* stood in the doorway, dressed in sixth century clothing that included tartan and sandals and a great sword strapped to his side. *Athair* was right behind him. “Jesse for me,” *Athair* said flatly. “Aran for you.” He pushed *Far* into the room and strode over to Alexander and plucked the syringe out of his hand. “Thanks, Alex, but this is for us to take care of.”

Taylor stepped into the room behind them. She wore the same authentic clothing as Veris and Brody, but hers was the feminine version of a sixth century British Celt. She wore a sword, too.

She bent over Aran, her chin working. Veris eased her out of the way, the syringe in his hand already loaded with his blood.

“How did you know?” Sydney asked quietly.

Taylor looked up. “We heard Jesse. It pulled us here.” She soothed Aran’s brow. “We had no choice.”

“Neither did we,” Sydney said softly.

“Nor us,” Kieren added. “But we were already on our way.”

“We’re cleaning up the mess,” Nyara added, also speaking softly. “As it seems this might have been our mess all along. But first, let us save these two.”

Veris plunged the long syringe into Aran’s heart, and injected the blood. Then he tossed it away and began CPR, to make the heart pump and drive the symbiont-loaded blood Veris had injected around Aran’s ruined body.

Alannah turned away, slid around the doorframe and put her back to the wall. She was trembling. She had no doubt that her father and Alexander would save Jesse and Aran. They would be vampires, but they would live once more.

She rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes, to stop her tears from escaping.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



IT COULD TAKE ANYWHERE FROM three days to a week for a newly created vampire to claw together a sense of their old identity, enough to be able to distinguish friends from foe...or food. During that transition time, Alannah's family had learned to keep the new vampire isolated, and to control their first feeding.

Nyara and her people volunteered to provide Aran's and Jesse's first feeding, but Veris refused. "You have symbionts in your blood. In stasis, but who the hell knows what they might do if they're ingested? The symbionts are driven to survive by any means necessary. If two of them are in the same host, do they fight each other to the death? And what happens to the host? Thank you, but no, Nyara. I know you feel responsible,

and we'll discuss that by and by, but we'll find normal humans for this."

Alannah had immediately volunteered. So did Kit, which brought the entire room to a short, still silence.

He shrugged. "You're short on humans right now, if I'm counting properly. Marit can barely open her eyes thanks to her migraine. It has to be me and Alannah."

"You do understand what you're agreeing to, yes?" Brody said gently.

"More or less," Kit said. "I've seen the movies."

Rafe snorted. "Don't let Veris hear you say that."

"I'm wrong?" Kit asked.

"You'll find out," Brody said, standing up. "Thank you, Kit. We accept."

While they waited for the appropriate time for the feedings, everyone lingered in or near the house. Nyara's people quartered the area, looking for more of Mixon's mob. Kit borrowed Taylor's truck and went into Canmore to look for signs of them. He took Remi with him, and when they returned late in the day, Remi shook his head. "Friends and family everywhere, that man has. His army is embedded across the town. They say Mixon is gone. For certain, this time. I believe them."

"So he got away," Veris said, his voice rumbling. He glanced at Nyara.

She nodded. "An explanation is waiting for you, whenever you're ready."

Veris settled in the big chair in the corner. "Someone haul Rafe out of the kitchen. We have time. Let's hear it now."

"This should be interesting," Alannah heard Kit murmur from his corner.



EVERYONE ASSEMBLED IN THE FRONT room. Most of Nyara's people emerged from the kitchen, swallowing hasty mouthfuls of food, for it was supper time. Rafe came in wiping his hands on a kitchen towel.

Alannah had no appetite at all and hadn't responded to Rafe's suggestion that she come and eat, and bring Kit with her.

Kit had not spoken to her directly since telling her to go and see Aran and Jesse in the surgery. He had stayed at the house, just as everyone was, making the house overcrowded and privacy minimal. He had not come to her room to sleep, either. Marit had shared Alannah's bed instead, giving up her own room for some of Nyara's people. Alannah had no idea where Kit slept. Possibly, he had dosed down on the straw in the shed, as some of the others had done. His pack was in the basement, along with the minimal supplies he needed to stay warm, dry and comfortable through a long night in the open.

Alannah didn't have the courage or the energy to seek him out and try to speak to him. Her heart was heavy with dread and sadness. Even though Aran and Jesse would live on, she mourned the loss of their humanity. And she wondered how Aran would cope with not being able to time travel anymore. Male travelers couldn't jump through time once they were turned. Neven had been a superior traveler, once, but he had lost the ability when he had become a vampire.

Aran was the real traveler in the family. He *had* been the real jumper. He would hate not being able to travel anymore.

But he would still get to live, and Jesse would be alive with him. Alannah hoped that would be compensation enough for him.

The room grew quiet as it filled with people. They squeezed in. Some sat on the floor. Many more settled on the window seats, crowding around Alannah. Her mother and Brody shared the armchair, Brody settling on the arm and holding Taylor's hand.

David Pallas stood by the door to the mud room, one shoulder against the wall, his hands in the pockets of his trousers. Even though he was as close to imperial royalty among the vampires as one could get, he was not grandstanding or demanding attention. The few times Alannah had glimpsed his face here in the house, he had been wearing a worried, pinched expression.

The only person missing was Marit. Even Jesse and Aran's children were in the room, each sitting on the lap of an adult, perfectly content to receive one-on-one endless attention and cuddles and care.

Nyara stood in front of the fireplace, which wasn't burning right now, for the weather had turned sunny and warm. She held up her hand for silence, even though the room was already quiet.

"Go ahead," Veris told her. "We're listening."

Nyara gave him a strained smile. "Let's start with you, Veris. The events that sent you jumping back to sixth century Britain to find Rufus Shore were a ruse."

Alannah could feel her jaw slacken, but her father just nodded. "We were there for eight months. We chased ghosts of Rufus Shore in all directions, but nothing panned out. Where *did* he go?"

"We don't know," Nyara said. "But we have a strong suspicion that he is dead and turned to ashes, somewhere back in time."

Veris raised a brow. "This Gore Mixon arranged it."

“We think so.” Nyara held up her hand. “We were putting this all together and preparing to jump back here when Jesse’s call pulled us here. We are fairly certain we’re right, but some of what we think we know is unproven. Once we return to our own time and can investigate further, we will obtain the proof we need.”

Veris crossed his arms. “We are listening,” he repeated.

Nyara nodded. “Thank you.” She looked around the room. “Those of you who belong to this time are unique in history. I’ve told you this before. Taylor’s generation and your offspring are the first DNA-developed natural jumpers, and through superior survival skills, some of you live long enough to see *my* time.”

Sydney nodded. So did Brody.

“What you may not have correlated from that is that there are hundreds of versions of you, across every timeline. Thousands, for each separation point creates new versions of you. This is a cross-over point in history, right here and now. Man has evolved enough to grasp time and use it. Only, the gene that makes you time travelers is recessive.”

Alexander leaned forward. “And there’s too few of us to pass it on...” he said.

Nyara nodded. “The gene self-corrects and disappears, a few generations from now. You might find it interesting to know that we think the gene mutated and became the gene that defines natural psi-filers like Kieren. He and his cohort are direct descendants of yours.”

No one reacted, not even Kieren.

“We at the Agency have become deeply interested in monitoring you and your times,” Nyara said. “Not least because of the role you play in *our* future. It is vital to us that

you survive. What we didn't realize was that we were not the only group who had spotted the significance of this time."

"Mixon," Alannah said.

Nyara nodded. "He was not a lone operator. The group that he brought with him, that we took care of two days ago...they are just a small unit of a much larger group. We *think*. This is where we are still investigating." She cleared her throat. "The *Multaj Lunoj* became known to us only a short while ago. The name is Esperanto."

"Many Moons," Alexander, the linguist, interpreted.

"Yes. The Many Moons Cult," Nyara confirmed. "They are a group of...well, slavers, essentially. Neven..."

Neven drew in a deep breath and let it out. "They enslave travelers," he said, his tone bleak. "Like me."

"We think that what Tira and Georges did to you is what gave Mixon the idea."

"He's the head of this group?" Veris said sharply.

"We believe so," Nyara replied. "I'm going to trip over tenses and time in order to explain this. In our time, the group is well established—we think. But the Gore Mixon who came back here to abduct Alannah...we believe this was his first venture. His trial run."

"Who is this guy, apart from the leader of a sick cult?" Neven demanded. He looked ill.

"A very rich vampire with endless resources at his disposal, who has lived long enough to develop...exotic tastes," Nyara said.

"It's not just time that warps a vampire," Cael said sharply, reminding Alannah of the way Kit had corrected her about being a real time traveler. "You've lived for millennia, Nyara, and you haven't lost your humanity and decency. Mixon was

warped to begin with. Now he has the means to indulge his tastes. That is all.”

Nyara inclined her head, acknowledging her mate’s correction. Then she faced the room once more. “Gore Mixon is known to the Agency. He tried to become a traveler, once.”

“Tried and failed?” Rafe asked, his tone curious.

“Yes,” Nyara replied. “Not all vampires manage to learn the psionic abilities needed to time travel. Mixon was one of those who could not. It embittered him, I’m sure. Especially now we know he had a private agenda of his own that was driving his need to travel. So, if he could not jump for himself, he would find someone who he could *make* jump for him.”

“Why not just pay the agency to take him on his vacations?” Alannah asked. “That’s what you do, isn’t it? Time travel vacations for the rich?”

“That’s a small part of what we do,” Nyara replied. “But what Mixon wants out of time, we would not have given him. We would have refused. He and his people have learned to milk time. For profit, to steal what they can sell in the future for great profit. They take advantage of moments in time to grow rich.”

Alannah’s middle jumped for that sounded a lot like what Aran did. Had done.

Nyara’s gaze settled on Alannah. “Aran did not scrape time without regard for the souls and people he dealt with. There is a wide gap between Aran’s wheeling and dealing and what Mixon does. Mixon and his people have no regard for the past. They are condescending, and believe they are smarter and better than anyone who has come before them.”

“They didn’t read Veris, book, clearly,” Taylor said.

“Actually, we think they did,” Nyara said. “That’s why Mixon learned of this time period, rich with natural jumpers.

His cult have learned how to abduct travelers from this time. They fit them with temporary restraints that make them biddable, then take them back to our time. There, the travelers are surgically implanted with governors that control them, and make them compliant slaves that will jump the cult members wherever and whenever they want to go.”

Alannah drew in a calming breath, recalling the hedgehog row of fine needles on the back of the box that Mixon had been preparing to put against her neck. “He was going to take me to your time?”

“Yes,” Nyara said. “You were the test case. The surgery to implant the governor is high risk and they were going to test it out on you.”

Alannah shuddered.

“They failed, this time, but they have been operating for years in my time, and they tested the surgery on another traveler after you. It was successful, and they have been enslaving travelers ever since.”

David spoke up in his deep voice. “Marit has seen other versions of herself disappearing on the timescape. Other travelers, too.”

“And you haven’t seen this?” Veris demanded.

David didn’t twitch at Veris’ sharp tone. “After so much time, I have learned how to switch off the input of multiple worlds and millions of people. Marit is still learning how. So no, I did not notice the voices growing silent.”

“But *why* enslave travelers?” Taylor asked. “Natural travelers? Us?”

“Travelers of my agency can’t linger in the past,” Nyara said. “Stasis poisoning limits our time in the past. You, though, can stay in the past as long as you want. And...I am guessing, but I suspect that Mixon, with his disregard for the intelligence

of those living in the past, thought that you and your people would be...”

“Easy pickings,” Alannah finished.

Nyara nodded. “You must understand the predilections of these people. They go on sightseeing trips to the worst moments of human history. The Plague years, revolutions, wars. Genocide. Natural disasters and man-made ones. Any deeply disturbing event that stirs their deadened emotions.”

“And they use slave travelers to get there because they can’t travel for themselves,” Brody finished, sounding disgusted.

“Yes,” Nyara said flatly.

Kit raised his hand. “Ummm...?”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Nyara, you remember Kit?” Taylor said.

“Yes, but I didn’t think...” Nyara gave Kit a small smile. “I didn’t realize you were a full member of the family, Kit. My apologies.”

“I’m not,” Kit said easily. “I’m just learning all this stuff. Circumstances forced Alannah’s hand. Now I know.”

“There was more to it than that,” Remi said firmly. “I think if Kit hadn’t been around, Mixon’s experiment would have been successful.”

“*That* makes you a full member of the family,” Rafe said. “Long may you live to regret it.”

Chuckles ran around the room.

Kit rubbed his jaw. “I think I’ve been following most of this, although I have a few thousand questions I’ll be asking later. But this one I think only you can answer. If your time is

in our future, then why didn't you know about Alannah's abduction ahead of time and warn us?"

Nyara and Kieren exchanged glances.

"We learned about the abduction only a few hours before we jumped here....were pulled here," Nyara said. "Mixon and his people are muddying time, Kit. They're changing history with their untrained travels. They've been setting up time waves and mini ripple effects that have had my Agency chasing its tail for weeks, trying to learn the source. When we tried to trace it back, we found dozens of different points of origin. And when we jumped back to investigate directly, often the past had been changed again by the time we got there. We were chasing ghosts. It was hard to know what to believe. But..."

She looked around the room. "You are all important to us, and not just because of what you do in our time. We have come to know you and like you. In a way, you are already a part of our time. So when we found evidence that suggested Alannah had been abducted and was possibly Mixon's first attempt, we prepared immediately to jump here. What we didn't know was that you, Kit, were involved. That changed everything."

Kit rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay..." he said, sounding awkward.

Nyara smiled at him. "Time can get very complicated," she said, her tone sympathetic. Then she glanced around the room once more. "That is as much as we know. Mixon and his cult are from our time, but are raiding *this* time for their slave travelers. By great good fortune, thanks to an unexpected ally, Alannah avoided the fate so many travelers have met. But now you can go back to your lives, while we deal with the cult in our time."

Veris got to his feet. “That isn’t good enough,” he said flatly. “There is nothing to stop these people from coming back at us, over and over. They have the advantage of knowing our history. They know what we will do, where we will be.”

“But *you* have the advantage of a natural shield,” Kieren said, his tone deep and rumbling.

Veris frowned. “What?”

“Alannah will explain it to you,” Kieren said. “The shield you have sought to build for so long has been with you all the time.”

Her father’s gaze swung to settle on her. His very blue eyes narrowed.

Alannah could feel her innards sinking even deeper.

You will know what to show them, when they are ready to learn. Kieren’s voice in her mind was as deep and assured as it was when he was actually speaking.

Alannah glanced at her father’s scowling features and wondered if Kieren was right.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



THE HOUSE RAPIDLY EMPTIED AFTER that. Nyara and her people jumped back to their own time. Remi, Neven and London returned to Brittany. Alexander stayed to supervise and help with Aran's and Jesse's first feedings, but Sydney and Rafe went back to Spain.

In the rapid exodus, Alannah lost track of Kit. She didn't know if he had been taken back to Canmore as part of the multiple jumps everyone was doing to return people to their own place and time.

Rafael had left a big pot of jambalaya warming on the stove, and the smell pulled Alannah into the kitchen. She

scooped up a half-bowlful of the delicious concoction and ate it too fast and burned her mouth.

She still felt sick, afterwards. It wasn't hunger making her feel this way.

She rinsed the bowl dispiritedly.

"Hey," her father said behind her.

Alannah jumped and turned. Both her fathers stood at the door, Veris a step inside, Brody leaning against the doorframe.

"Where's Mum?" Alannah asked.

"Watching Aran and Jesse," Brody said. "I'm heading back up there myself. Just wanted to stop by a minute." He straightened up, moved around Veris and folded her into a hug, his arms warm and firm. "You did good, 'lannah," he breathed.

"Really?" she whispered back. "It didn't feel like it. I told Kit...everything."

"It was a good call," Brody said. "He couldn't have helped if you hadn't."

She let out a deep breath. Something relaxed inside her.

Brody let her go. He gave her a warm smile and with a jolt, Alannah saw that he and Aran could be twins. They looked so much alike, now.

"Gotta go," he told her, and spun and left.

Veris unfolded his arms. "Step outside a minute with me."

"I..." She couldn't think of a reason not to. "Let me get a coat." She moved out to the mud room and picked the first coat she came to and slid it on. Then she followed Veris out through the front room and onto the verandah. It was fully dark outside, with only the lights of Canmore twinkling in the valley below. There was no moon tonight.

The verandah was in dire need of carpentry work. The railings were shattered and burned.

“Watch your step,” Veris said, warning her that the floorboards had fared no better.

She headed for the steps, but Veris caught her arm and turned her so that she was facing the far end of the verandah.

A silhouette sat between the broken bits of railing. A very still, wide shouldered silhouette.

“He won’t go home. And he won’t come in,” Veris told her. “I think you might know what to tell him that will bring him into the house.”

Alannah’s breath caught.

Her father’s hand settled on her shoulder, not heavily. Then he turned and moved silently back inside.

Alannah moved down the length of the verandah. Kit must surely be able to hear her footsteps—he had phenomenal hearing for a human—but he didn’t stir.

She settled herself beside him. “I don’t know how long I will last out here,” she warned him. “It’s cold, this coat is thin, and the mosquitos seem to prefer my blood over yours.”

“And I’m all out of sage,” Kit said. “There’s none of it anywhere near the house.”

“You looked, already?”

He didn’t answer.

“*Far* says you won’t come in.”

“I heard.”

“*Is* there anything I can say that will get you off this verandah?” she asked.

“I’ve been sitting here hoping there is.” His voice was low.

Her heart pattered. *Hope*. Such a small word, yet so heavy with potential.

Kit turned on the boards so he was facing her. His knee settled on the verandah. The new angle let the starlight fall on his face but his eyes were still shadowed. “Technically, things are back to normal, now.”

She sighed.

“But things never go back to the old normal,” he said. “There’s only a new normal. We all have to keep figuring out what that normal is.”

She nodded. “Like a normal where my brother and sister in law are vampires now,” she said softly.

“Like that.” He shook his head. “My measure of normal has been turned on its head, the last few days.”

Alannah sighed again. “I can imagine.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” he said.

“It isn’t?” Her hope stirred once more.

Again, the minute shake of his head. “Thing is, the way my normal was before...that normal stretches back a long way. Too long, I think. You’ve changed that.”

“Me and my strange family,” she whispered.

“No, just you.”

Her heart jumped.

Kit picked up her hand. “I kept waiting,” he said. “Now, there’s no point.”

Her heart plummeted.

His hand tightened on hers. “I’ve loved you for...forever, Alannah. Since the day we met.”

Her breath evaporated.

“And I kept waiting. For you to see me, for you to maybe look at me with the warmth in your eyes that you have when you look at people you love.”

“Oh, Kit,” she breathed. “So long...!”

He shook his head again. “I know I said we should wait to sort things out when they’re back to normal, but we’re never going to have that normal again. All we have is now. Thanks to you, it’s all different now. So I’m not waiting any more, Alannah. I *can’t* wait. I have to know. Is there anything...am I anything more than a teddy bear?”

She felt tears building in her chest, behind her eyes, making them hurt. “Everything *is* different. *So* different, it makes my head spin. And it has happened so fast.”

“You need time,” he said, his hand loosening.

She caught his hand with her other, and held it still. “No, that’s not it,” she said quickly. “That’s not what I meant. I meant... Oh, Kit, I watched Aran *die*. Jesse, too. Right in front of me.”

“I know.” His voice was heavy with knowledge. He had seen death himself. More than she had.

“But...that’s when I knew,” she added, her voice growing weak.

“Knew...?”

“That I loved you.”

Kit let out an unsteady breath.

“I saw *you* on the floor, Kit. And it...terrified me.” She gripped his hand even tighter. “You faded away, when you served in the army. All that death, the chance that you might not go home yourself. Maryann said you grew older than you were, every year until you got out. But Kit...that’s what this family is. You’ve had a small taste of it, just these last few

days. It never goes away. You'll be back to fighting, just like before."

He drew in a slow breath and let it out. "*Not* like before," he said softly. "That's what I meant about you've changed my normal. I could go back to the army tomorrow, Alannah, and not sweat a day of it. You know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because I would be doing it for *you*. To protect you, to come home to you. And that makes all the difference in the world. This family—" He waved his arm toward the house. "They don't scare me, the way you think they should. Not them or the mixed up history they bring with them, or the troubles that follow along because of it. They don't scare me, because you're part of them."

"But you won't come inside," she whispered.

"Not until you ask me to," he breathed.

Alannah leaned forward and kissed him. The kiss was perfect. Languid, sweet and rich with emotion. It was just like their first kiss, when she should have noticed the real feelings behind it.

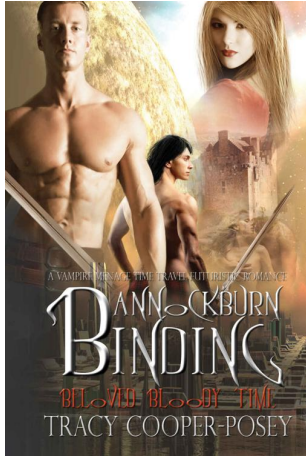
Her tears flowed. She didn't bother wiping them. "Please come inside, Kit. Come in with me."

He wiped her cheeks, and kissed her once more, lightly. "At last...yes," he breathed and kissed her once more.

They stayed right where they were until the moon rose.

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