



# Stolen Mate

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# STOLEN MATE

A SMALL TOWN SHIFTER ROMANCE

MYSTIC RIVER SHIFTERS



DELTA JAMES

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*Dedicated to My Two Best Friends:  
Renee and Chris, without whom none of  
what I do would be possible and to the Girls,  
who bring joy to my life every single day*

# CHAPTER 1



## TESS

### *S*eattle, Washington *Several Months Ago*

There was a weariness in dying that no one ever talked about, much less explained. Tess Dixon's mother had been in hospice care for the past three months. Tess and her younger sister, Lara, had discussed with their mother the best place for her to be. Except for an almost two-year estrangement between Tess and her mother, the three of them had been close—thick as thieves, most said—since her father had passed more than a decade before. The worst part was that Tess couldn't even really remember why she'd been angry enough to not speak to her mother until it was almost too late.

Even when they weren't speaking to each other, Lara had ensured both knew what the other was doing. Tess wasn't sure how she was going to forgive herself for that two-year period of estrangement. Maybe if they'd stayed close like they had been, Tess would have spotted something. Maybe they would have found the brain tumor sooner. Maybe then she wouldn't be arranging her mother's final days.

*"I don't want to be a burden," her mother had said just a short while ago.*

*"You won't be. All we want is for you to be as comfortable as possible," said Tess. "Lara and I were thinking my loft might be best."*



*“I still can’t believe you were able to buy that loft with your little pictures...”*

*Tess took a breath. She was a successful illustrator of children’s books. Her ‘little pictures’ had won numerous awards and had allowed her to purchase her loft on the Seattle waterfront for cash. And now she had romance authors wanting her to draw their covers. It was a dream she’d never have thought would actually come true.*

*“I have that whole wall of windows. They have a kind of finish where you can see out, but no one can see in. You’d get all the light and could see Puget Sound and the stars...”*

*“People really can’t see in?” her mother asked with a wan smile.*

*Lara laughed. “I hope not, Mom. Tess walks around naked all the time.”*

*“You don’t,” her mother said, trying to sound shocked.*

*“I do,” Tess confessed. “Lara has her clinic to keep running, and I work out of the loft. We can set up a bed in the main part and angle it so you can see the television or look out, whichever you want. I have my drawing table and desk in there so I can be right there with you.”*

*“I don’t want you—either of you—to have to take care of me. My insurance will cover a hospice nurse.”*

*“I have a client who is an excellent hospice nurse,” said Lara. “She finished a case a couple of months ago. I asked her if she was available, and she is. You’ll like Cathy.”*

*Her mother closed her eyes and clutched the bed sheets of the bed in the hospital. Tess felt the squeeze around her heart that was becoming all too familiar. The pain must have been bad, because her mother only nodded.*

*“Then it’s decided. I’ll tell the discharge coordinator we’ve made a decision,” said Tess. “She can arrange for transport.”*

*“I’ll call Cathy. She said she can get everything set up today at Tess’s place.”*

*“Sometimes I wonder why the drunk driver that killed your father didn’t kill me, too. It would have been easier, and I miss your father so much. But then I remember all the time I would have missed with you two. You do know I wouldn’t have missed one minute with either of you, right? I love you both so much.”*

*“We know, Mom,” said Lara. “But we also know you love Tess more. After all, you went all the way to Alaska for her. Dad always said you didn’t even want to go to the hospital to have me.”*

It was an old family joke. Tess had been adopted, and her parents had gone to Alaska to get her. As with many other childless couples, two years after bringing Tess home, they’d gotten pregnant with Lara. Lara had been born in a hospital not twenty minutes away from their home.

Their plans settled, Tess left Lara with their mother and sought out the hospital’s discharge coordinator. Once arrangements had been made, Tess took her cell phone out of her purse and looked down to find a text from Cathy, the hospice nurse. Tess texted her back, arranging to meet her at the loft in an hour.

Cathy Holcomb had been a blessing. Explaining that she felt her job was not just taking care of the patient, but the family as well, she helped Tess get everything ordered, pulled some strings to get same day delivery, and stayed to help Tess and then Lara get everything set up. Tess arranged for her to have a pass to the building’s underground parking lot and an extra set of keys to the loft. Cathy agreed to meet them at the hospital and help get their mother home with the least amount of stress.

Closing the door after Cathy left, Tess turned to Lara. “You were right. She is wonderful.”

Lara nodded. “She is. She does wildlife rescue and rehab in her spare time.” Lara faltered. “What are we going to do without her?”

“We’ll do what she would expect us to do—what she taught us to do. We’ll band together even more tightly, we’ll

grieve, and then we'll get on with our lives. We won't be orphans, Lara."

"Won't we?"

"No. Our parents will have left us, but we'll have each other." Tess held up her hand, crooking her finger at her sister. "Pinky promise."

Lara smiled sadly and took her finger with her own. "Pinky promise."

They hugged each other tight—neither wanting to let go. "We can do this, Lara."

Releasing her sister, Lara stepped back and looked into Tess's eyes. "We don't have a choice. I'm just glad you and Mom worked out your differences."

Tess gave a half-hearted laugh. "We were both just being stubborn. I'm sorry we put you in the middle."

"It's okay. I really did understand where both of you were coming from. Just so you know? Being an adult sucks."

Tess laughed, softly. "Sometimes, but sometimes it's a whole lot better than being a kid or even a teenager."

"You're talking about sex, aren't you?" Tess nodded, and Lara made a face. "Eww. You're so bad."

"I know. That's my job. I'm the bad sister; you're the good and virtuous one."

Lara shook her head and headed toward the door. She stopped as she put her hand on the knob but didn't turn around. "I love you, and nobody ever had a better big sister."

She didn't wait for Tess to reply and simply exited the loft. Tess moved to the door, ensuring it was locked and set the security system. Then wrapping her arms around herself, she walked to the expanse of windows and looked out. Closing her eyes, she tried to soothe her frayed nerves. As she had expected, her spirit guide chuffed softly to her in consolation.



## CATHY

Cathy leaned over Mary Dixon. It wouldn't be long now before death came to take her to the next plane of existence.

"You must tell her," she whispered with a sense of urgency.

Her patient shook her head back and forth. "I can't. She'll hate us. She'll hate herself."

"She won't. She has a right to know..."

"You don't understand..."

"I do. I do understand. I understand you made a mistake, one for which you could never have guessed the consequences. I know that you absolutely did the right thing, and you have more than atoned for what happened all those years ago. But she has a right to know."

Recognition dawned. "You know." Mary's fingers moved agitatedly on the covers. "How do you know?"

"Not all of it, but I've been able to piece together what must have happened. I'm part of a group that can help her..."

Mary glanced around the room, and Cathy shook her head. "I'm not with any of the authorities—just a group of women who help other women like Tess. I'll make sure she and Lara both have a safety net."

"Lara isn't like her. Tess is adopted. I gave birth to Lara. I love them both, but..."

Whatever else she might have said was cut short as Tess wandered out of the bedroom.

"She doesn't have long," said Cathy. "She seems to be drifting in and out of lucidity. She wants to be alone with you. I'll be over at your desk. My computer shows me all of her vitals, but if you need me, just call. I'm going to call Lara."

“Thanks, Cathy. I’m not sure what we would have done without you. You’ve been a godsend to all of us.”

“That’s why I’m here.”



## TESS

Cathy quietly left the immediate area and Tess sat down in the chair beside her mother’s bed.

“Tess?” her mother asked softly, seeking her daughter’s hand.

“I’m here, Mama. Everything is going to be all right.”

“I don’t want to leave you. I always thought we’d have time. Your father didn’t want to burden you.”

“What, Mama? What is it?”

This was not the first time her mother had alluded to something that seemed to be a big secret, one that seemed to be upsetting to her. It was only one of the things that they had argued about, resulting in a rift that neither was willing to breach for a couple of years. Tess now bitterly regretted her own foolish, stubborn pride.

At this point, though, did it matter? Tess and her mother had been estranged for a couple of years prior to Tess getting the call that her mother had only weeks to live. Tess had rushed to her mother’s side, and now it seemed her mother might not make it to another sunrise.

“Whatever it is, Mama, it doesn’t matter now. I just want you to know how much I love you, and that I am so sorry that we spent all that time angry with each other.”

“I am too. I just worry about you. I don’t want you and Lara to drift apart...”

“We won’t. I promise.”

Her mother nodded. “You have to know. You can’t live your life not knowing. My diaries... the ones from when we

got you. You have to read them. Promise me. Promise me you'll read them and not judge us too harshly."

"Why would I judge you at all?" Tess asked confused.

"Because we shouldn't have taken you. But you were so small, and the polar bear gave her life to protect you. We... we didn't know."

Tess would always remember her mother's dying request, her desperation, and her deep breath as she closed her eyes and breathed her last.



Several days later, Tess and Lara stood under the canopy at their mother's gravesite—their tears leaking out of their eyes the same way the dark clouds above seemed to be shedding the rain—holding hands. The electronic mechanism slowly lowered the coffin into the ground next to their father's grave. The squeaking noise reminded Tess of a clue in an episode of *Midsomer Murders*.

"We therefore commit the body of Mary Dixon to the ground," droned the priest Lara had insisted be there, even though their mother had never been religious. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

By the time Lara had arrived that final day, their mother was gone. Lara being Lara, she'd gone into full planner mode, arranging for the obituary, the funeral, and a small gathering at their mother's favorite restaurant after the service.

Tess was trying to think of a graceful way to opt out of the celebration of life, as her sister called it. People standing around trying to be joyful instead of mourning her mother was Tess's idea of the seventh ring of hell. She'd never been one to do well in overly emotional settings. And while she was grateful that they had, for the most part, healed their estrangement, it still hurt that she'd made a lot of mistakes and had run out of time. Tess couldn't help but feel there were things that had been left unsaid.

The silence after the mechanism ceased seemed almost deafening. She and Lara stepped forward, each tossing a rose onto the coffin's lid. Tess breathed in, fingering the ancient Celtic knot pendant her mother had given her as a child, trying to focus on the words being said as people squeezed her arm. She closed her eyes and heard the familiar and soothing chuffing of her spirit guide. She seemed to understand better than anyone and right now all Tess wanted to do was go back to her loft, which seemed oddly empty without all of the equipment needed for a person to die in relative comfort. She wanted to pour herself a large glass of Pinot Noir, sink into her antique, Victorian slipper tub, and turn on some angry girl music. Alanis Morrisette should do the trick.

Turning away from her sister and those who surrounded them, Tess made her way from beneath the canopy, opening her umbrella, hoping to escape to the solitude she craved.

“Tess, wait up. Where are you going?” asked Lara as she caught up with her.

“I need to leave. I need a little space to breathe. I'll call you later, okay?”

“No. It's not okay,” said Lara in a quiet, but angry tone. “I made all of these arrangements which you said you were fine with.”

“And I am, and I'm grateful you did it, but I just don't think I can handle it right now.”

“If not now, then when?”

“I understand this is important to you, but you need to understand, we're very different. You've always been better about sharing your feelings and letting other people see you cry. It's just really difficult for me. What with mom being at the loft...”

“You said you wanted her there...”

“You have your clinic; I work from home...”

“I could have brought in another vet or temporarily closed my practice. I didn't think you felt it was a hardship...”

Tess could feel her own anger rising up to the surface. Tamping it back down, she said. “That’s not what I said. I’m grateful you let me have Mom at my place. It allowed me to spend extra time with her.”

The fact was Tess hated feeling vulnerable, hated the way it made her feel exposed. She’d always had a side of her that guarded those things she held most dear. She just needed to be alone for a few hours. Tess knew she needed to make Lara understand. “I just never got to cry, Lara. I need some space —” Her voice broke.

Somewhat mollified, Lara said, “I guess I can understand you wanting to be alone for a little bit, but I don’t want us drifting apart.”

Tess pulled her sister close, hugging her hard. “We won’t. Remember? We pinky promised.” Lara smiled, and Tess continued, her smile watery. “Why don’t we have brunch on Sunday, and we can go over your list of what else we need to do.”

“How do you know I have a list?”

Tess grinned. “Because from the time you could print, you had a list. So, brunch on Sunday?”

Lara nodded, hugged her sister, and then turned back to the small crowd that still remained. Tess walked on, realizing she needed to leave the wrongs of her past with her mother behind her. If she dragged them along, she would never be free of the grief or the guilt.

At the bottom of the hill, she walked to her SUV and opened the door, looking back to her parents’ gravesites at the top where they had a clear line of sight to Puget Sound. She could almost envision her parents standing there, their arms wrapped around each other’s waist. Her mother’s beauty had been restored from the ravages of chemo and the cancer itself. As they turned and walked into the fading light, their figures dissipating into the mist, all Tess could see in her mind’s eye was the parents of her childhood, taking them on grand adventures in the park, in the mountains or out at sea. She



could hear their laughter ringing in her ears, and then the sound of raised voices—both her mother's and her own.

The relationship between mothers and daughters is never easy, none more so than when the daughter's chosen profession doesn't meet her mother's exacting standards. Her mother had worried when she left her job as a paralegal to illustrate children's books that she would regret it. They had argued vehemently about it, which had led to them bringing up all the little hurts over the years. She softly shook her head to rid herself of the angry memories and walked to her SUV, tears clinging to her cheeks.

## CHAPTER 2



## TESS

Tess lay back in her antique Victorian slipper tub. It had been one of her true extravagances when she purchased her loft. It had been an enormous, cavernous space before she'd had one room walled off for her bedroom and ensuite bath. The doors leading into her bedroom and then into the bath had been another splurge. There were two sets of French doors—one from Chicago and the other from New Orleans. The only other walls in the space enclosed a small powder room for guests. Tess figured if she knew someone well enough for them to need her shower, they'd also be sharing her bed. So far, that had not been necessary.

As she loved to cook, the back wall of her loft was her kitchen, which had an island about two-thirds of the loft's total length—all of it looking out the front wall of the specially tinted windows. She had been able to install a double-sided fireplace so that she could have a warm, cozy fire in both the living space and her bedroom. Her so-called office was in the opposite corner and consisted of an antique drafting table that she used for drawing and a beautiful vintage library table she used for a desk.

She loved her home, and she smiled as she thought of how much her mother had seemed to treasure the time they'd spent together while her mother was dying. Mary had loved looking out at the water and marina on Puget Sound. Being able to open skylights and windows to flood the space with fresh sea air had been a bonus.

Cathy had truly been a marvel. Tess had returned home from the funeral expecting to see the paraphernalia left over from her mother's demise. Instead, Cathy had disposed of it and most likely either cleaned it herself or had it cleaned. Cathy had raised the subject of what to do with all of it with Tess and Lara early on, saying it was easier to make clear-headed decisions in the early stages of hospice.

Relief had suffused her system upon seeing her loft restored. There was a lovely bouquet of flowers in what appeared to be a hand-blown vase. Tess assumed it was Cathy's creation. She had shared with Tess that her hobby was glass blowing. The vase contained a gorgeous array of flowers—carnations, chrysanthemums, roses, hydrangeas, and tulips. The card had read simply, *Never doubt that she loved you.*

Tess had poured herself a large glass of Elk Cove Vineyard's Pinot Noir, thought to be one of the best pinots to be produced in the Pacific Northwest. She threw together a cheese and bread board, turned up Alanis Morissette, and stripped off her clothes, tossing them into the walk-in closet that was part of her ensuite bath, a pocket door dividing the closet from the bath itself.

Sinking into the tub, she held her glass in salute to her mother. "I love you, Mom. I promise Lara and I will be okay, and I'll find your diaries and read them." In many ways she was looking forward to it. Only when she'd finished her glass of wine—which was somewhat of a joke as the glass held half the bottle, as well as the cheese and bread—did she realize Alanis was done singing and her fingers were getting pruney. Hoisting herself out of the tub—Tess had a figure that was best described as curvy—she wrapped a towel around herself before using another towel to blot the water from her long, dark hair.

She briefly thought about getting dressed and going to the restaurant for the gathering Lara had arranged, but the idea of getting re-dressed and heading back out into the dreary Seattle weather was too much. Instead, she bent over at the waist, allowing her head to fall forward so she could secure her hair in a high ponytail. She slathered on moisturizer, dried off, and

then slipped into a pair of pajama pants and a tank top—not glamorous, but comfy, and once she pulled on her old, ratty cardigan, she was warm.

There was so much they needed to do to get their mother’s house ready to sell. Lara had spent all her money establishing her clinic and still rented a cheap studio apartment. Tess intended to see if she couldn’t talk Lara into keeping the house for herself. They could spend their joint inheritance fixing it up for Lara. That would allow her sister to pay off her enormous student loans from getting her doctorate in veterinary medicine.

Knowing she was still too keyed up to rest or even watch television, she decided to get some work done. Thanks to Cathy, Tess hadn’t fallen too far behind. She eyed the remainder of the wine and decided that if she planned to work, it was best to save it for another day.

Tess grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and placed the rest of the pinot inside. She knew pinots were supposed to be consumed at room temperature, but Tess didn’t care. She liked her wine—all her beverages, except coffee—cold. Settling down with sketch pens and paper, she began to draw the first concepts for the children’s book she had just landed. It was an imaginative tale about a polar bear who could shift into a human and back again. It was all about the importance of accepting the differences in yourself and having others do the same.

As she sometimes did, Tess got caught up in her drawing and didn’t realize how much time had passed until she looked out the front windows and realized night had fallen. The stars sparkled over the water, twinkling like fairies in the inky sky. The moon was like a ghostly galleon moving through the clouds as if hiding...lying in wait for some unsuspecting passerby.

Tess laughed softly to herself for her fancy and decided it might be time to pack it in for the night.

After closing down her workspace for the night, Tess picked up her phone and saw a text she had missed from her

sister, confirming they would meet for breakfast at nine and then head to her mom's house. Tess acknowledged the text, said she would be there, and told her sister she loved her.

While she'd been working, grief and exhaustion had been held at bay. Now, as she walked into her bedroom and turned back her bed, she realized the enormity of both. Pulling off her clothes and wrapping them around one of the bottom posters of her gothic inspired, iron poster bed, Tess crawled between the sheets.

The next two weeks flew by as she and Lara argued about their mother's house. In the end, Tess won the day. Lara had always loved their parents' small craftsman cottage on Lake Union, and Tess had made a good argument for her taking it, including that it would have pleased their mother. Tess encouraged her sister to make the place her own, including opening it up into a much more open floor plan.

Once that was settled, they began the arduous business of going through their mother's things, deciding what to do with them. They had five piles: keep, toss, sell, donate, and Tess. The plan was to have a garage sale and include everything Lara wanted to get rid of from her current studio.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Lara.

Tess pulled her ponytail playfully. "Yes. You have always loved this house..."

"You did, too..."

"But I have my loft, and trust me, it suits me to a tee. I love it, besides the house is closer to your office."

"Okay, where do we want to start?"

"Let's start in the bedroom and move everything that isn't staying with you into the garage. Then we'll work room-by-room. Remember to keep an eye out for mom's diaries. I thought they'd be easy to spot, but I was wrong. So nothing gets tossed, sold or donated that we haven't checked inside."

"Got it."

Little by little they went through their mother's things—a lifetime of mementos and memories. It was plain their mother hadn't been overly sentimental. There were things that marked the different parts of her life, and most things were special enough that they wanted to keep.

When they found the old photo albums, they had lunch delivered and sat back on the comfy leather sofa and went through them.

“They were quite the duo, weren't they?” asked Lara.

Tess nodded. “Before we came along, they were so adventurous. They went on guided expeditions in the mountains and interior of Alaska. It looks like they also went off on their own and backpacked in some really gnarly places.”

“Makes sense. I remember Dad always saying Mom was a better cook over a campfire than most chefs would ever be. Oh my god, is that mom on the rappel line?”

Tess looked closer. “It sure as hell is, and if I'm not mistaken, that's Denali. That's amazing. I never understood why they did big game hunting up there.”

“Because for all of its rugged appearance, it's a rather delicate balancing act. If they don't keep animal populations under control, it will all get out of whack,” said Lara.

“You're a vet, and you're saying that?” asked Tess, genuinely surprised.

“I'm pragmatic. With man encroaching on wildlife habitats, there's less and less space for them. If we don't ensure that species are monitored and permits limited to what needs to be culled, we could lose them all. Personally, I don't hunt or fish for anything I won't eat, but some of the apex predators need to be controlled as well. It isn't ideal, but it is a necessary evil. Better they have a clean death than die of starvation or disease.”

They continued to eat their lunch and look through their mother's photographs.

“We should take these to a professional to have them preserved, both in their physical state as well as digitally.”

“Yes, because both of us have so much spare time,” laughed Lara.

There had been tears over the past couple of weeks, but there had been far more smiles and laughter. Cherished times memorialized in photographs.

“I have a client who will take our photographs, preserve them, and put them in special albums,” said Lara. “She’ll also make a digital copy of all of the photos to put in a computer display. I’ll just get them to her.”

“I think that would be great,” said Tess as they boxed up the lifetime of memories.

Lara headed into the bedroom and dragged out a small, carved chest. It looked to be old, hand-done, and if Tess wasn’t mistaken, of Inuit design.

“Wow, this must be from some of their Alaskan trips,” said Lara as she opened the lid and grinned at Tess, holding up something that had been wrapped in worn leather. “Unless I miss my guess, we just found Mom’s diaries.”

Tess got up from the sofa and kneeled down beside her sister, taking the proffered bundle. She untied the jute cord, peeling back the folded leather that was butter soft. Tears sprang anew. She had them. She had her mother’s diaries.

“Do you want to read them together?” asked Tess.

“No. Just the way you know Mom would have wanted me to have this house, we both know she wanted you to have the diaries. I think you should read them first, by yourself, and then you can decide what you want to do. If the house is mine, then the diaries are yours.”

They finished out the day with Lara calling the client who specialized in the preservation of family photos and another who had a business doing estate sales and arranging for both to meet her at the house tomorrow.

Hugging her sister, Lara said, “Thank you for this.”



“For what? The house?” asked Tess, stowing the carved chest in her SUV.

“That, too, but I mean taking care of Mom and going through all her things with me. I wasn’t sure I could get through it. At first it was hard, but you made me see this is just another passage in our lives—another memory we will always share. I can’t imagine anyone having a better sister.”

Tess grinned. “Ditto. Now don’t get all sloppy on me and get snot on my sweater.”

Lara rolled her eyes. “You’re impossible.”

“Nope,” Tess said, getting into her SUV. “I’m the big sister, which means I’m always right.”

“And full of bullshit.”

“That too,” quipped Tess as she started up her vehicle and pulled out into the street, waving at Lara. Lara looked so right standing in the driveway in front of the little cottage that she would make over in her own style.

Later that evening, she poured herself another large glass of pinot, put together another bread and cheese tray, lit the fire in her fireplace, and curled up on her sofa to read whatever it was that her mother had been so insistent she read. She had to admit, she was more than just a bit intrigued. She felt she knew her mother better now than she had ever known her. It was probably best they had found the diaries last.

Tess went through the box, organizing the diaries in chronological order, and then opened the first one. Still racked in her private moments by grief and guilt, she held her mother’s diary from the year of her birth, tracing the hand-carved leather cover and lifting it to her nose to smell the fragrant perfume of leather, old paper, and fine ink. Smiling, settled in and began to read...

# CHAPTER 3



## TESS

Journal Entry, September 28th

Oh good god! I cannot believe people come up to 'the rugged beauty of Alaska,'—their words, not mine—and expect to find the kind of amenities in the bush that they'd have at a five-star resort or an Alaskan cruise! What the proverbial fuck! It's the Alaskan wilderness! Don't they know anything?

These idiots come in here saying they have experience, blah, blah, blah but are so unprepared it isn't even funny. And I'm their guide for fuck's sake, not their pack mule. I'm also not their personal janitor. They leave trash everywhere. What are they thinking?

And they wander off—just take a stroll while my back is turned. I keep telling them they have to be safe. Kodiak Island is bear country—Kodiak bear country. But do they pay attention? No. Well, Mr.-and-Mrs.-I-Know-What-I'm-Doing-In-the-Bush are about to get a big surprise when they turn in for the night. I'm going to shift. That ought to scare the shit out of them.

I'll bet they've never seen a polar bear outside the zoo.

Tess stared at the diary entry dated shortly after she was born. When she'd first opened the journal, she'd noticed it wasn't in her adoptive mother's beautiful, elegant handwriting. This was more casual, more rustic. So, was this the woman they'd hired to guide them? She didn't sound very nice. Surely no one would describe her parents as unprepared and uncaring.

They were the exact opposite of that. They were so concerned with the environment and the footprint they left on their adventures. Even after their father died, her mother had stressed the importance of caring for the Earth and all its creatures. Hell, her parents had installed solar panels long before it was trendy. That was one of the things she'd urged Lara to do with the house—upgrade the solar panels and systems.

There were a lot of things about the journal entry that didn't make sense. Tess had always known her parents had adopted her from Alaska and she'd known they'd taken a vacation right around the same time. Her mother had always

called it their last great adventure before embarking upon the greatest adventure of their lives—raising children. Tess didn't know they'd ever visited Kodiak Island. But if they were in Kodiak bear country, they had to have been there.

She'd always assumed she'd been adopted from one of the bigger cities, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, et cetera. Well, maybe they'd vacationed on Kodiak and then gone back to the mainland and completed the adoption before returning to their new lives as parents in Seattle.

Curiously, her parents had always tried to dissuade her from visiting Alaska, to the point that when she and Lara had booked a cruise to Alaska for her mother's birthday, their mother had insisted that they take one to the Mexican Riviera instead. As it was their mother's birthday, the girls had acceded to her wishes, but given their mother's fascination with the aurora borealis, it had seemed odd. Tess smiled with bittersweet remembrance as she remembered that cruise; it was to be the last one they took as a family.

Even more interesting was why had her mother insisted she read these journals that were clearly not her own? Tess had expected to find insights into her mother's life before she had children, perhaps even before she got married. She wanted to better know the woman who had been her mother.

How had her mother come to have journals by the woman who had been their guide? Surely the woman wouldn't have just given them to her mother. That made no sense at all. But the other alternative was that her mother had stolen the diaries. But why would her mother do that? It made even less sense than the guide having given them to her mother.

Tess turned back to the diary:

*I'm going to shift. That ought to scare the shit out of them.*

What the hell did that mean? *I'm going to shift?* What the hell was 'shift?' Could the woman have been in such a hurry

that she'd meant to write something other than 'shift?' Maybe she meant shit—which not only made no sense but was gross. Maybe, swift, which made even less sense than the other two. The entry didn't seem to be rushed or stressed. The woman appeared to be pissed at Tess's parents, but not in any distress. *Shift*. What the hell was that supposed to be and what did it have to do with seeing polar bears?

One of those curious facts you learn as a child, but never thought you'd have a use for: were polar bears even on Kodiak Island? As she recalled they weren't and were only seen in the northern reaches of Alaska. So why would an experienced guide not know that? For that matter, why would a guide who is being paid to show someone a great experience want to A—scare the shit out of them; B— not know that there were no polar bears on Kodiak Island; and C— entice a polar bear—or any bear—close enough that her parents would be able to see it and be frightened?

None of this made any sense at all. First and foremost, the woman couldn't possibly mean 'shift' as in change into a polar bear like the people in the paranormal romances her sister loved to read and the book she was illustrating. Tess thought they were silly, but had to admit she'd been intrigued by the entire concept when Lara had insisted they listen to an audiobook when they'd gone camping the year before at Mt. Rainier.

If that was the case, Tess couldn't decide whether the woman thinking she could shift into a polar bear was ludicrous or frightening. The woman would have to be seriously unbalanced to believe that, right? But why would she write something humorous in her journal entry and present it as fact? The whole thing was silly, wasn't it?

She took another rather big gulp of her pinot and read the journal entry again. She'd meant to read the next entry but had become fascinated with trying to puzzle out the first one. None of it made any sense.

Why had her mother insisted she read the diaries of a woman who clearly didn't like her? How had her mother come by them? Had something happened to the other woman, and

she'd bequeathed her journals to Tess's mother...but if that were the case, again, why? Who was this woman and what had her relationship been with Tess's mother? Did she know that Tess's mother had passed? If not, would she care? Was she even alive?

Had the woman known they were adopting Tess? Might she have had anything to do with it? Tess's parents had always been very open that Tess was adopted. It was kind of obvious. Tess was dark haired, tall, and curvy. Lara was blonde and petite—petite in everything—and there had been a long time when Tess had longed to be Lara and fit into all the trendy clothes. She had to admit that once she'd accepted she was never going to look like Lara and had accepted her own body and adopted her own style, the relationship between the two sisters had improved. Jealousy was an ugly bitch and had made her life less than it could have been.

Now, she and Lara were best friends as well as sisters. They embraced and celebrated their uniqueness from each other. For as much as their physical differences were apparent, the differences in their temperament were just as obvious. Lara was most like their mother after she'd had children—calm, kind, patient, and nurturing. Tess, on the other hand, liked to think of herself as most like her mother before her last trip into the Alaskan bush—wild, adventurous, kind, and ambitious. They always saw each other as Lara's yin to Tess's yang.

There were way too many questions with no way to resolve them. Her mother had asked her to start the journals that began around the time of her adoption, but there were many journals written before that time. Maybe she should go back and read those as well.

What had her mother said? 'Because we shouldn't have taken you. But you were so small, and the polar bear gave her life to protect you. We... we didn't know.' What the hell did that mean? What had her mother meant by saying they shouldn't have taken her? Of course, they should have. After all they had legally adopted her, right? But what if they hadn't? What if that was what her mother was trying to tell

her? What if there was no legal adoption? What if that was the reason she hadn't wanted to take the Alaskan cruise?

No, she thought as she set the journal on the antique factory trolley that served as her coffee table, pushing the book away as if she could unsee what she'd read and eradicate the questions it had raised. None of what she read could be true. Well, if she was interpreting what she'd read correctly.

But then, how else could it be construed?

It had to be a fairy tale or the delusions of a madwoman. No one can shift between some kind of animal and a human being. She understood the concept of a spirit guide. After all, hers had made herself known from shortly before she hit puberty. Many a time being able to see the female polar bear lurking in the corners of her mind gave her great comfort, strength, and courage. But it wasn't like she could just somehow manifest some kind of shift between her and the bear.

And the idea of her parents participating in an illegal adoption was ludicrous... or was it? She remembered a case in the newspaper from a few years ago about a teacher who had watched a child in her class being abused while the authorities did nothing. One day the teacher took the child and ran. They changed their names and made a new life for themselves. It wasn't until the daughter was a grown woman and needed a life-saving donation from a blood relative that the truth had come out.

Was that what happened? Had her parents found her as an abused baby and rescued her?

Oh god, her vivid imagination was really running amok tonight. There was no evidence whatsoever that either of her parents had ever done anything illegal. Not so much as a parking ticket, much less stealing a baby or having anything to do with an illegal adoption. How would they even know how to find someone to sell them a baby?

Staring at the journal as if it were a time bomb waiting to explode, Tess shook her head. No. She was not going to be thinking this. Her parents loved her, and they were good



people. She raised herself off the couch and headed over to her kitchen area to make dinner. Opening the fridge, she was assailed by the less than delectable aromas that emanated from it. She'd lied to both Cathy and Lara when they'd asked if she'd been eating properly.

Closing the door to the fridge, she moved her trash can over and reopened the door. She began to remove the offending items—leftover Chinese from right after her mom died, pizza that was growing some pale green kind of fuzz, something that looked vaguely Italian—the cover of which she was not going to open—and various and sundry other things. At first, she looked at expiration dates or tried to figure out when she'd purchased it, but in the end decided it might all be tainted and dumped the lot. Tess tied up the trash bag—thankfully one of the scented ones—and took it out into the hall, depositing it in the chute that took it down to the building's trash bin in the underground parking lot.

Moving back into the loft, she disinfected her entire fridge and made a thorough inventory of what she had on hand and what she needed. She picked up her phone and ordered Chinese from her favorite delivery service—pan-fried dumplings and pork lo mein. The irony of doing so after she'd just thrown out a number of containers was not lost on her.

She returned to the couch, sitting at the opposite end from the journal, and stared out at Puget Sound. As she waited for her food, the rain began to fall and behind it, darkness followed. Gloom and grief had become her constant companions. She tried coming to grips with what was a growing belief that she had been illegally adopted. She had been stolen, but stolen from whom? Was there someone in Alaska who mourned her loss?

Stolen. It was not a concept that settled easily within her. Unsure of how she felt, she knew she couldn't tell Lara—not until she knew for certain. After all, if it were true, then had her whole life been a lie? It called everything into question. It made her feel as if the very essence of who she was had been stolen as well.

# CHAPTER 4



## DEREK

Derek Grayson found himself in an all too familiar bedroom. Ever since he'd moved to Mystic River to take Kyra's position as deputy sheriff, he'd had the same dream. It took place in a loft in Seattle. He knew because in some of the dreams, he wasn't just in the bedroom. He could see the entire open loft space with a wall of windows that looked out over Puget Sound.

At first, they'd only been a couple of nights a week, but the longer he stayed in Mystic River, the more often they occurred. They were weird dreams because he knew he was dreaming, and yet in every way he could feel everything that happened as if he were there. He often woke with an aching dick and a profound sense of need and loss. He didn't question that the woman to whom the loft belonged was his fated mate; he just didn't have a clue as to who she was or how to find her. Seattle was a big city.

*Derek gazed on the woman spread out on the bed before him like some fertility goddess of old. He didn't recognize her, but her long dark hair and luscious curves called to him in a way no other ever had.*

*He crawled onto the bed, rumbling at her seductively. He could smell the scent of her arousal increasing, and that knowledge fueled his as well. He worked his way up from the foot of the bed, never taking his eyes off her. When he had covered her body with his own, he parted her thighs, making a place for himself.*

*Bringing his mouth down on hers in a long, sensual kiss, he savored the moment as his tongue tangled with hers and then began to dance with hers. The warmth flowed between them, and he didn't try to keep his weight from her. She moaned in supplication and acceptance as her legs intertwined with his. She knew him to be her fated mate as well as he knew her to be his.*

*Even though his cock was poised at her entrance and all he'd have to do was steady her in order to thrust up into her, he refrained. He was no callow youth who didn't understand his mate's needs. He broke the kiss and began lowering his mouth to her throat, inhaling her intoxicating scent. She smelled of rainfall and the sea. Everything about this woman let him know she was his—not just to fuck, but to protect and cherish.*

*He trailed his lips down her body, giving her nipples the briefest bit of attention as he traveled the path to where her sex called to him like the sirens of old. He placed her thighs over his shoulders as he settled his mouth on her, nuzzling her labia and licking her swollen clit until she gasped in pleasure and sank her fingers into his hair.*

*He lavished her sex with attention until she was wet and ripe and ready for him. Her arousal was enthralling as he feasted on her pussy. Over and over he speared her with his tongue, lapping up all her sweet honey. After all, wasn't that supposed to be a bear's favorite thing?*

*Her hips undulated and she cried out, her body trembling before stiffening and then relaxing completely with a sigh.*

*Derek moved up her body, his hands sliding beneath her to hold her buttocks and tilt her hips so he was in perfect alignment with her pussy. He slid his dick over her clit to increase her arousal and prepare both of them for his penetration. Thrusting up hard inside her, he joined them together.*

*His mate grasped his biceps, clinging to him as he plunged into her, driving in and out and reveling in her response as she writhed beneath him. Her hands moved up to hold him close,*

*her nails digging into his flesh as she nibbled on his collarbone, but it had no effect. Ruthlessly he plundered her body, feeling her pussy as it quivered all along his cock. Driving into her with long, hard strokes, he felt her surrender and relished it.*

*He was only able to combat the frenzied need to fuck her hard and fast by reminding himself that part of his job was to see her well and truly pleased. Derek pounded into her, sending her over the edge into an abyss of ecstasy that caused her to cry out again and again until the sound of her orgasm was a single long, drawn-out note.*

*Derek held her close, not allowing her to move with him as he fucked her with desperation and need. One part of his brain still functioned well enough to remind him that as soon as he finished, as soon as he filled her with his cum, the dream and his mate would evaporate and be gone until the next time he closed his eyes.*

*But none of that mattered; he couldn't hold off the inevitable. The all too familiar sizzle at the base of his spine began to grow as his cock filled with his seed. Just as his own climax seized them both, and she arched up into him, Derek collapsed on top of her, surrounded by her.*

*He kissed her leisurely as her pussy spasmed up and down his length and coaxed the last drops of his cum to spill inside her. He gloried in the unique singularity that encompassed them. Their souls were no longer separate entities; they existed only to complete each other.*

*“Mine,” she rumbled softly, nuzzling and nipping at his neck.*

*Derek's need to remain buried deep within her was profound. His need to remain with her, even greater. The dream began to dissipate, though, and he was left alone once more, knowing that he would not see or have her again until night fell once again on Mystic River.*

*Derek clawed his way to consciousness. There would be no more sleep for him tonight. There never was. She seemed to allow him only so much sleep before she entered his dream*

world. As the dream faded, Derek sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of his bed. What bed? It was a couple of mattresses on the floor. Annie and Sienna—his sister and sister-in-law respectively—had vowed that they were coming over to get his cabin ‘in order.’

Colby Reynolds had offered to let him live in Kyra’s house in town or in the one he’d made for her right outside the borders of Windsong, but Derek preferred to be closer to the water and had found an abandoned cabin, claimed it as his own, and begun the process of renovating it. The structure and systems were now in place. The women in his life had deemed it time to decorate.

But it wasn’t either of those women who were on his mind as he moved from the mattress into the bath with the huge shower, turning it on as he slid the heavy glass door closed. He knew from experience that no amount of freezing cold water was going to make his cock behave. Not a chance.

Every thought in his brain screamed out its need for her. His dick throbbed painfully as his hand closed around it. He could recall in minute detail every detail of her face, every curve of her body, every moan, and the way her pussy would contract all around him as she came all over his cock. He fucked his fist, leaning his forehead against the tile, fantasizing about how it would feel when he finally found her until at last, he spat his cum on the floor and watched it go down the drain.

Switching the water from tepid to hot, he soaped up his body and tried not to imagine what it would be like to have her in here with him as they washed each other clean and got ready to face another day. As he stepped from the shower and began to dry himself, Derek wondered if that was how he would spend the rest of his life—dreaming of her and waking up alone.

It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t. Surely fate would not have revealed her existence to him only to never allow them to be together. Was she in Seattle, dreaming the same dreams? Would she recognize him when she saw him, and know they were meant to be?

Derek snorted. She-bears were notoriously independent and cantankerous when it came to accepting they had a fated mate, and he feared his would be no different. Maybe he should go to Seattle to try and find her. All the dreams took place there, and he was certain he would know her loft from the outside because he'd recognize the view. He knew for damn sure he'd recognize her.

He had some time saved up, and Jax would give him a few days—probably more if he told him he was on a quest to find his fated mate. But Derek didn't want to tell anyone about her—not the dreams, not the certainty that she was his fated mate, and certainly not that he had an almost unquenchable thirst to find her.

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he walked back into the main space of the cabin. The only walls were those around his bath. Even a bear liked some privacy from time to time. He grinned, thinking of the location of his place. He didn't have a commanding view of the ocean like Wolf Run or Windsong or even his brother's place. Instead, what he had was a cabin that sat with its back to the river. He could literally fish off his own dock, where he kept a speed boat tied. There were times in the performance of his duties when having a boat in addition to his Jeep was helpful. He had quiet and solitude and privacy to spare. He could well imagine fucking his mate on their dock, in the forest that surrounded him on three sides, or flung over the front porch railing.

His musings might have aroused him once again, but that was dampened by the sound of a vehicle as it came crashing down the drive. No need to go look at who it might be. Only his sister drove like a maniac. Derek wasted no time in pulling on his socks, jeans, a sweater, and boots. He supposed as Mystic River's deputy, he ought to have a uniform, but Jax, his boss, wasn't big on them. He figured if they dressed like everybody else, people would be more at ease and more willing to trust them. Their only nod to being officers of the law were the ballcaps they wore emblazoned with 'Mystic River Sheriff's Department.'

Derek glanced at his watch; he had a little bit of time. He only hoped he could get Annie and Sienna to take it easy on civilizing his cabin—although they might have a point about the bed. He wouldn't mind having some nice masculine bed made of iron—one that he could tie his mate to when she was misbehaving and have his way with her. Yeah, that had a lot of appeal. He'd make sure a proper bed was on their agenda.

Annie barely had the truck they were driving—he hadn't a clue as to whose it might be as both women lived in Otter Cove and so had to have come to Mystic River by boat—stopped before she was jumping out of the door. In the passenger seat, Sienna took a moment to release her grip on the dash. Riding in any vehicle with Annie driving was not for the faint of heart.

“Yo, little brother, have you missed me?” she asked, flinging her arms around him.

Ever since Zach's return and the final break with their father's clan, she, Derek, and Zach had been closer than most siblings. And their little group of three had expanded by two: Sienna, who had married his brother, and Deke, who had claimed Annie for his own and all but dragged her down the aisle. It didn't matter that Annie was no longer a polar bear. Cave lion or not, she was still his big sister.

“More than you know,” he replied, knowing it was the truth. “Does the big bad know you're out terrorizing the people of Mystic River?”

Sienna joined them. “Did you know she drives like that?”

“Yeah. She behaves in Otter Cove because if she doesn't, she has to deal with Deke. Even if he's off being 'The Finder,' Zach will tell him when he gets home.”

“I am an excellent driver,” asserted Annie.

“You are,” agreed Derek, “which is why it's so scary that you drive the way you do.”

Annie snorted. “We brought paint, dishes, groceries, and other stuff we thought you might like. I know you said you couldn't spend the day helping us, but if you could just help us



move the bed inside and put it where you want, we can figure out the rest of the furniture placement when it arrives.”

“And when might that be?” he asked suspiciously.

“In a couple of hours. Come along, little brother. You have to get to work, and I don’t think we can move this sucker by ourselves.”

“Where did you get it?” he asked as he followed her to the back of the truck.

“Dash says he acquired it, but Annie is convinced Colby is behind it.”

Knowing Colby, the mysterious lynx-shifter, Derek felt Sienna was probably right. Even though Colby was kind of a gangster and a shady character—although Derek wondered how true that was—he kind of liked him. Derek was convinced that the façade that Colby showed the world was not the man he truly was, or at least not the entire man.

When he saw the bed, he grinned. It was easy to imagine his mate in this bed. An ornate iron sleigh bed with heavy, filigreed sides and feet. As he lifted out the footboard, he groaned. Annie was right—no way she and Sienna would have moved this thing.

“Do you need help?” asked Sienna.

“No, I’ve got it,” Derek said, hoping he didn’t give himself a hernia.

“Good. Then we’ll unload the rest of the stuff. When you bring that piece in, let’s discuss if you want your bed where you have your mattress.”

Derek knew from her tone of voice that Annie had other ideas.

Knowing when to bow to feminine opinion, he grinned and said, “Why don’t we put it where you think it goes.” He shrugged his shoulders. “If I don’t like it, I can move it later.”

“That’s probably best,” said Annie enthusiastically. “We know what else is coming.”

Inwardly groaning, Derek hefted the heavy iron footboard and carried it into the house. The headboard was at least half again as heavy, and the iron railings weren't light either.

The girls directed him to place the bed much closer to the bath and the smaller fireplace, which made some sense. He just hadn't gotten around to moving it.

"Isn't it time for you to go?" asked Annie, pointedly looking at her watch.

He shook his head. His big sister was up to no good, but she and Sienna did have excellent taste. He only hoped he'd recognize the place when they were done.

"Right you are," he said, pulling on his baseball cap and giving both women a kiss on the cheek. "Try to remember I'm a bachelor polar bear..."

"Which is what you'll remain if we don't get this place looking good. You need to have a cabin or a den or a whatever that makes her know you're a grown ass man, not some hoodlum teenager."

"I was never a hoodlum," he said. Annie arched her eyebrows, and Derek relented. "Okay, but only the one time. I love you both. Just try to remember I have balls."

He left them laughing as he got in the Jeep and headed into town. He had just enough time to hit The Workshop for breakfast.

# CHAPTER 5



## TESS

Journal Entry, January 1st

Today is the day. I will wrest my destiny back from those who stole it from me. There is now no doubt that I am pregnant. I will not have my child born within the walls of this compound or subject to the laws of the tyrant who rules here. God forbid I give birth to a girl. How could I raise her knowing she would have little more choice than I have had? Will she be born a shifter, or will she have to suffer the transition only to be considered an outcast?

I have no idea what will happen. I was not born this way, and that is not my fault. I was given no choice in any of this. A stupid one-

night stand, and the next thing I know, I wake up in Otter Cove as the mate to a bear-shifter. Will the baby have teeth and claws? Will it rip itself from my body? Is this why the taking of human females is condoned here?

I have no answers. I am terrified, and there is no one here I trust. I should be planning to run away and terminate the pregnancy. I'll admit I was tempted, but there is a part of me that understands that the life I carry within me is part of me. He or she is my child, and I will protect him or her to the best of my ability, even if that means I must give up my life to do so. I will not allow my fear to make me falter; I will risk everything for my baby.

If you ever read this, little one, know that your mother loved you enough to gamble her own life so that you could be free. Although you were forced on my body, you will be born and raised in love—I promise.

After reading the journal entry that her mother had directed her to start with, Tess found there were journals that predated it. Choosing the journal dated immediately before the one she started with, she began to read. The entry she read first had unsettled her and had brought up so many questions that seemed to have no easy answers.

Taken at face value, the entry was hard to read. Forget the fact that the woman seemed to believe she had been kidnapped or taken by some non-humans, she believed that she had been forced to carry a child she clearly didn't want. Although it seemed the process of writing down her thoughts allowed the woman to clarify her own feelings. If nothing else, she was unflinchingly honest about those feelings.

The journal was a mixture of unanswered questions, fantastical beliefs, and sheer desperation. That was the real takeaway. Her mother, whoever she might have been and whatever she truly believed, had been terrified—not just for herself but for her unborn child.

Not only didn't this entry answer any of the previous questions, but it also raised even more. Taken from where to where? It seemed the answer to the latter was some place named Otter Cove. A simple Google search revealed there were a lot of places named Otter Cove. But given her mother had always told her she was from Alaska, Tess decided googling Otter Cove, Alaska, might refine that search... but what exactly was she searching for?

Tess had never been one of those adopted kids who wanted to know her birth parents. For Tess, the mother and father who raised her were her mom and dad. She'd been grateful to those people who had given her life, but the only parents she'd known had been those who had brought her home, raised her, and given her the life she loved.

Her fingers hovered over the keys to her laptop. She paused, forcing her fingers to refrain from typing anything. What was she afraid of? Regardless of what Google showed her, knowing there was an Otter Cove, Alaska didn't commit her to anything and would only answer the question about whether or not it even existed. Haltingly, she typed in O-T-T-

E-R C-O-V-E A-L-A-S-K-A. She stared at the screen for the longest time, not sure if she hit <enter> some dark portal wouldn't open up and suck her into another reality.

Hesitantly, she hit <enter> and waited. Finally, her body urged her to release the breath she hadn't known she was holding. Nothing happened. That wasn't true. Google pulled up Otter Cove on the Alaskan Peninsula. But nothing bad—like being swallowed up by a vortex-bad—happened. Just pictures of a pretty little town that was established back before the first gold rushes or the Hudson Bay Company first entered the fur trade.

She clicked on the Wikipedia link and was directed to an article that told her the population, the geo coordinates, and little else. There was no effort put in to try and promote the place, which if they really did condone kidnapping, would be smart. Going back to the search results, she found an array of photos showing a small, picturesque town, a lighthouse, and pristine wilderness.

Tess glanced at the clock. Where had the morning gone? She'd thought to only read a journal entry or two before getting back to work. She'd taken more time away from her work than she had intended. The journal had once again raised questions and thoughts that were uncomfortable, and she'd gone down a rabbit hole trying to research Otter Cove and bear-shifters. As she'd suspected it would, the only result on Google for bear-shifters was for romance books about bear-shifters and non-fiction books about writing bear-shifter romance books. Not exactly a ringing endorsement of her biological mother's mental stability.

She questioned why she even bothered with the journals. They were doing nothing to help her get to know the mother who had just died—her real mother, the one who raised her—and only provoked dark and brooding thoughts about the other. Perhaps this morning's little foray into alternative thinking and beliefs should be her last.

Tess had deadlines, some of which were looming. She left her comfortable couch behind and made her way over to her office area. Firing up her main computer, she began to

embrace her illustrating, hoping it would help her re-establish a routine, settle herself, and perhaps lift her out of the well of sorrow that watching her mother die and then burying her had cast her into.

The only problem was that it neither settled nor lifted her mood. Instead, as she tried to escape into her drawing, her mind wandered back to what she'd read. When she tried to focus on her work, instead of finding drawings of a polar bear, she found rugged coastlines and distorted pictures of bears surrounded by some kind of maelstrom.

Enough of that shit. If she wasn't going to get the work that paid the bills done, she might as well go about getting her loft cleaned up—thoroughly cleaned, the sheets changed and laundry caught up. All the little things that had sort of fallen to the wayside or gotten a spit and a polish for the past few months. She'd made her fridge toxin-free, so it was time to check the pantry for expiration dates. Tess wondered if this was what her life had fallen to—would there ever come a time again when she felt the wind in her hair and as if she was one with the universe?

After going through the pantry, she made a comprehensive inventory of what was needed. She considered one of the delivery services for a lot of the mundane, run-of-the-mill groceries and supplies, but decided to go to Pike Place Market for produce, cheese, meat, fish, and wine—lots of wine.

Heading from the kitchen to her bedroom, she passed by the coffee table with the journal, stopping to stare at it. It was just a leather-bound book filled with pages of the scribblings of a mad woman. The woman had to be crazy, right? The strange things contained within those pages were nuts—and yet they seemed to resonate with her.

Who was this stranger her dying mother deemed so important that she had spent her final words, her final moments on this earth imploring Tess to read her journals? And why did her mother think she needed forgiveness? *Maybe I need to talk to someone; maybe I need grief counseling.* But what she was feeling wasn't grief—there was a relief that



came when a loved one's suffering had ended, and that's what Tess was feeling.

Tess felt a deep need to figure out why her mother had seemed obsessed with the journal and the woman who wrote it. Maybe she did need to talk to someone to make some sense of it. But who could she talk to without them thinking her mother—the woman who raised her—was nuts? She could continue to talk to herself, both out loud and in her head, but feared it made her look and feel just a little bit crazy.

*Otter Cove.* Was that where her people were from?

All of her internal musings and confusion were interrupted when her cell phone rang. It was Lara. She knew by both the ringtone and the fact that the sky was beginning to lighten, the first rays of the sun creeping out to play over the surface of the Sound. Damn, she'd been up all night.

“What are you doing?” her sister asked cheerfully.

“What makes you think you're not waking me up?”

“Because I'm down on the street and I can see your lights are on.”

“What are you doing here at this hour?”

“I was thinking you probably weren't sleeping well either, so I thought I'd drive by and if I was right, we could run up to Snoqualmie Falls and grab some breakfast at that little place Mom always liked.”

“The one with the terrible food?”

“That's the one, but Mom liked it.”

Tess smiled. Her sister knew her too well. “Let me pull on clothes I can be seen in.”

After doing just that, she ran downstairs and hugged her sister. “You know it's obscenely early.”

“I know. I may even be a little late to work, but I just wanted to do something we used to do with mom; I don't have surgery today and don't see patients until later. Come on.”

Tess joined Lara in her truck and the two headed east over the bridge to Snoqualmie Falls.

“So, have you looked into those journals? It didn’t look like Mom’s handwriting.”

“It isn’t. I think they may have belonged to my birth mother.”

“When I saw Mom hadn’t written them, I wondered if that might be it.”

“Do you think there’s any chance that my adoption was illegal?” Tess asked, carefully observing her sister’s face in the growing light of the morning.

“Yeah, I do. I wondered about it when I needed a copy of your birth certificate, and she got really funny about it.”

“I have one, and it’s from Alaska.”

“I know, but there was something about it that struck me as odd, and when I asked, she got all flustered.”

“Mom didn’t get flustered,” observed Tess.

“She did if she didn’t want you to know something—like where she hid presents or when she was getting diagnosed...”

Tess reached over to squeeze her sister’s arm. “It’s okay, Lara. I think she didn’t want us to worry until she knew for sure.”

For the rest of the way they drove with the radio turned up, singing to songs on their shared Pandora playlist. They both had respectable voices and tended to naturally harmonize with one another.

Once they were inside the little diner with the dreadful food, were seated, and had ordered, Tess said, “I was a little surprised that my birth mother seems to be from Otter Cove over on the mainland. Their last trip was to Kodiak Island.”

“Yeah, I think I knew that.”

“And didn’t tell me?”

Lara looked genuinely surprised at the somewhat accusatory tone in Tess's voice. "I can't remember how I found out about Otter Cove." She drummed her fingers on the table. "Oh, right. I was reading an article about little hidden gems in Alaska, and it talked about a charming little village on the peninsula called Otter Cove. Mom got all agitated, and when I asked her about it, she admitted that's where your birth mother was from."

"And again, you didn't tell me?" Tess asked, leaning forward.

"You were never interested in your birth parents or anything about them. Ever. Maybe given the journals, you might want to go up there and see if you have family."

Tess sat back. "I have all the family I need, and she's sitting right across from me."

Lara grinned. "I rest my case. But seriously, I don't think it would hurt anything to see what you could find out about them." It was Lara's turn to lean forward and place her hand over Tess's. "It will not in any way disrespect or make less of your relationship with me or Mom and Dad. I don't think it would hurt to discover your roots and at least get some medical information so if we ever need it, we already have it."

"I guess that makes some sense."

"I think you should."

"Hmm. I was going to do a big run to Pike Place, but maybe I should wait. I could be caught up with my work in a day or two..."

"Just buy what you need. I need to stock up at the house. I've never had so much storage space. When you get back, we'll make a day of it. We can shop, eat, maybe even go drink at one of the pubs, and just find some normalcy again."

"That sounds like a plan."

They finished their breakfast and drove back into the city. Lara dropped her off and headed for her clinic. Tess went back inside her loft and set about getting the work that had upcoming deadlines put to bed.

Tess stretched at the end of a long day, she walked toward her bedroom, stopping in the doorway to google places to stay in Mystic River. There was only one—a lovely bed and breakfast known as The Refuge. She called and spoke to the owner, whose name was Trudy and who had the loveliest Australian-ish accent, and she booked a room for the following evening. Tess then called and booked a round-trip flight with an open-ended return.

Stripping off her clothes, she grabbed another of the journals as she crawled into bed and began to read...

# CHAPTER 6



## TESS

### Journal Entry, January 3rd

This is all fucked up. Someone was supposed to be waiting for me, but they weren't. I had no choice but to leave and hope I can escape on my own. I've burned my bridges. My fear if I am caught is that they will keep me alive until this baby is born, and then who knows what they will do. Capture is not an option.

I managed to steal a boat. I thought about trying to head south towards the tip of the peninsula and out into the Bering Sea or north up the coast to Anchorage. Both have their pitfalls—there's not much to the south and across the Bering Sea is Russia. Anchorage would provide more

opportunities to get away, but I wasn't able to steal much of anything, including money, and Anchorage is expensive. I would have to buy everything.

But Kodiak Island is about halfway between Otter Cove and Anchorage. There is plenty of food, and I can live off the land, off the grid, and I can make a place for myself—maybe even do a little guide work out of Kodiak or Mystic River.

I think I'll navigate up Mystic River and see what there is to see. The sooner I'm off the open water and can hide this boat, the better. I have no doubt they are after me.

Tess was finding reading more than one journal entry at a time to be difficult. They were fraught with the woman's fear and anxiety. What had happened to her—not only when her ordeal had started but when she'd found herself alone with some cult in Alaska was bone-chilling to think about. To think the woman might have been her birth mother was frightening. Had she been found? Was she dead? Why did her mother seem to know about polar bears? And why had her mother thought the polar bear was protecting her? What the hell had happened?

She'd been dozing. Tess was not the best flyer. She tended to think of airplanes as overgrown tin cans with wings. What was she even doing here? She was flying toward a destination

she wasn't even sure she wanted to go. She could handle the cruising at altitude as long as they didn't hit a lot of turbulence but take-offs and landings were the worst. And why did everything have to be so crowded? The man sitting next to her was sick. He kept hacking, coughing, and blowing his nose. Tess thought to herself that the only thing worse than sitting next to a sick person on a plane was being the actual sick person.

"Excuse me, miss?" asked the flight attendant.

"Yes?" Tess answered, wondering if she was going to tell her that she would have to do without their complimentary peanuts.

"Can I have you come with me?"

"Uh, sure," Tess said, sliding out between the sick gentleman and the seat in front of him.

She followed the flight attendant forward into first class, where the flight attendant showed her to a lovely seat by the window with no one next to her.

"First class was supposed to be full. I think both you and Mr. Hastings, the man sitting next to you, would be happier if he could be miserable by himself."

Being an artist, Tess tended to notice things, storing them away to use in the future. Hastings had been wearing a tailored suit and carrying an expensive briefcase. She'd wondered why he'd been sitting in the main cabin in the first place.

"I can't afford an upgrade," Tess started.

"That's been taken care of. Mr. Hastings is a frequent flier with us and is part of our rewards program. He used one of his upgrade rewards to move you up to first class."

"Why didn't he move himself?"

The flight attendant grinned. "He's a nervous flier and that's his seat. He feels more comfortable there than any place else on the plane. But if you'd rather not fly up here—"

"Oh no. No. This is more than fine. Please give Mr. Hastings my thanks. If you could make him a hot toddy and



get him to drink it, I'd be happy to pay for it. It might help with his cough and make him feel better."

"Do you know what's in it?"

Tess nodded. "Whiskey, honey, hot tea, a little bit of lemon juice and a cinnamon stick if you have it."

"I don't have a cough, but that sounds delicious."

"I'm from Seattle, but my mom was really into homeopathic recipes, and we used them all the time. I'm not sure if it actually cures anything or works because if you drink enough whiskey, you don't care."

"I'll see what I can put together for him. Please make yourself comfortable. We'll be another three hours to Kodiak. Business or pleasure?"

"I'm not sure yet. I figured I'd get there and play it by ear."

The flight attendant leaned against the seat in front of her. "I can tell you Kodiak is a whole different animal than Seattle, and the island itself... well, it even makes Anchorage look large and cosmopolitan by comparison. I don't mean to be insulting, but Seattle is a large, vibrant city, and Kodiak, which is the largest city on the island, isn't."

"I was born and raised in Seattle. My parents spent their last vacation on the island."

"I think you'll love Kodiak Island."

"I hope so. I just need some time and space to figure a few things out."

The flight attendant went back to her duties and left Tess to contemplate her next move. But before she could do that, she discovered another difference between economy and first class—the food. Passengers in first class were served actual food. Tess chose a ginger marinated beef wrap in a sun-dried tomato tortilla with a long-neck bottle of Full Sail's amber ale. She had to admit; it was wonderfully peaceful cruising along through the clear blue skies with nothing but fluffy white clouds below and the sun shining through the windows.

She closed her eyes for what she thought was just a moment and was awakened by the flight attendant who had returned, a worried frown creasing her forehead. “Ms. Dixon? We’re preparing to land. Please put on your seatbelt, bring your seat into the upright position, and secure your tray table.”

“Thank you and thank Mr. Hastings again. I may see about upgrading for my return trip.”

The flight attendant smiled and then moved down the aisle to help other passengers. The plane made a smooth turn and came in straight onto the landing strip. Even landings were nicer in first class.

The flight had been long, even arduous but was made less so by her upgrade. When she’d booked her stay with The Refuge, Trudy had told her if she wanted, it was faster to travel by boat and the bed and breakfast had a couple of ATVs and snowmobiles for guests to use. Trudy arranged for someone to pick her up at the airport and take her to the marina, where she and her luggage would be transported upriver.

The man who picked her up was a little older than she was and had a lean, sleek musculature that reminded her of many of the men in Seattle. He introduced himself as Dash Samuels and said he owned the local pub, The Workshop.

“What brings you to our little corner of the world?” he asked congenially.

“What makes you think I’m not just passing through?”

He chuckled in a deep, melodic way. “Nobody passes through Mystic River. We are an entity and destination unto ourselves. It’s none of my business...”

Tess knew she didn’t want anyone to know the real reason for her trip so had decided to make it about her work. That would give her an excuse to ask questions and snoop around, hopefully without raising any suspicions. It had occurred to her as she made her way to Alaska that those who had meant to hurt her birth mother might have an axe to grind with her as well.

“Oh no, it’s not that, and I probably sounded far more defensive than I meant to be. It’s been a long flight. I’m a children’s book illustrator and am thinking of expanding my business into book covers. The Alaskan wilderness seems to be really popular right now, and as I’ve never been, I thought I might come up and soak in some of the atmosphere.”

Dash nodded. Tess wasn’t sure if he was buying her reason or not.

“I’ve had a nasty headache developing ever since we landed, so I guess I’m not at my best. I do hope you can overlook that. Your pub sounds amazing.”

He grinned. “I like it, and thankfully, so do a lot of other people. If you decide to stay long-term, I’m looking for a manager for the pub, and could make one of the four studio apartments above it part of your compensation.”

“Thanks, but my life is in Seattle. The children’s illustration business is going well, and as beautiful as Mystic River is, you’ll never convince me I’ll get a better view than the one I have overlooking the Sound.”

“If you have a place overlooking Puget Sound, your business is doing better than ‘well.’”

They spent the next several hours traveling up the river with Dash pointing out various and sundry sights, flora, and fauna. She hadn’t been lying when she called the area beautiful. He was a great tour guide, and had he been older she might have wondered if he’d known or worked with her mother.

Finally, they came to a public marina alongside a small, quaint village. Dash expertly guided the boat up next to the dock and helped her off the boat, carrying her luggage with him as he joined her.

“Trudy’s at the end of town. She left us a golf cart.”

“She really knows how to take care of her guests.”

“We may be remote, but we’re friendly.”

Dash helped her into the golf cart, securing her bags in the back, and drove them to the end of town where a large lodge made of enormous logs sat surrounded by a rustic fence and a gorgeous native garden. A lovely woman, who Tess recognized as Trudy from her picture on her website, came out smiling.

“Hey, Dash,” she said in her charming accent. “And you must be Tess. I looked up some of the books you illustrated on Amazon. Your illustrations are gorgeous. Welcome.”

“Thank you. The accent—it’s not quite Australian, not quite New Zealand...”

“You have a good ear. It’s Tasmanian, but it’s been a while since I was there. I call Mystic River home these days.”

“When will Hamish be back?” asked Dash.

“He hopes by the end of the week. I don’t think Colby is thrilled with the idea of Hamish becoming his right-hand man.”

“I don’t think it has a thing to do with Hamish. I think Colby just misses Winter. They were friends. Hamish is a good man, though. He’ll do a great job for them out of Windsong, and there are very few people I’d rather have in a fight.”

“You must be tired,” Trudy said, extending her hand. “Come on in. We’ll get your bags up to the room. The big suite at the end of the hall is free, and I thought you might enjoy it. Your information sheet indicated no food allergies, but also no mushrooms, broccoli, cauliflower, or olives.”

Tess grinned. “But I eat kale.”

Trudy laughed. “Well, that balances it out. Seriously you like that?”

“Only as part of salad greens and then with lots of dressing.”

“Well, come on, let’s get you settled.”

“I can take Tess’s bags up if you like,” said Dash.

“Thanks; that would be great.”

When Trudy opened the double doors, Tess gasped. “This is gorgeous.”

Dash entered the room before them and set her bags down on the bed. “Ladies. Tess, if you’re looking for the best burger in Alaska, come on over to The Workshop. First meal is on the house.” He tipped his hat to both of them and left them alone.

The room was large and airy with numerous windows and a set of French doors leading out onto a balcony that overlooked the horizon. It had a large bath with a clawfoot tub and a separate shower that looked as if you could hold a party—it was huge, the tile was gorgeous, and it had multiple shower heads. The bed seemed larger than a king and was a more ornate version of a four-poster than the one she had back home. It had a real ‘cabin’ vibe, but it was an elegant, refined one. Trudy had obviously spent a lot of time and money on the cabin, making it into a true retreat. Thus, Tess supposed, the reason for the name.

“I’m so glad you like it. I don’t normally fix dinner...”

“I don’t want to impose. Besides, the idea of a burger sounds great.”

“Trust me, he isn’t boasting. His cook, Mrs. Wiggins, is a wonder. It’s like a fine-dining experience in a casual pub setting, and his beer, wine, and whiskey selection is second to none. I haven’t been to The Workshop in weeks.”

“If you’d like to join me, I’d love the company.”

Trudy seemed to stop for a minute. “I think I’ll take you up on that. Why don’t you let yourself decompress and just rest for a bit. We can head over in a couple of hours.”

“That sounds great.”

Trudy left her alone, and Tess was going to take a quick shower and maybe a nap, but something about the forest in the distance called to her. She liked to travel in leggings, a sweater, and cute shoes, although not high heels. Tess stripped out of her clothes, donning a pair of jeans, a warmer sweater, and hiking boots. She grabbed her puffy down vest and headed down the stairs, running into Trudy as she did.

“I can’t resist the beauty. I’m going to go for a quick walk, but I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“Catch,” Trudy said tossing her a geo-tracker from a basket on the front desk. “The Refuge is pre-programmed in there. If you get lost, it’ll get you home. And the other end is bear spray. The bears don’t come too close to Mystic River, but we do get the occasional one. Spray first, ask questions later.”

Tess found herself warming to Trudy just as she had with Dash. With the latter she hadn’t felt anything particularly arousing but just that he’d be a good friend to have. Same with Trudy. She followed the path out of town and headed towards a stand of trees that seemed to run up the coast and to the river.

The forest was amazing—like something primeval—with its tall, ancient trees and the scent of the wind blowing through them with just a hint of sea air. It wasn’t like anything in the Pacific Northwest where she had hiked extensively, but it was almost as if she had some genetic memory of the place that had left an impression on her psyche from long ago.

She could feel her spirit guide rumbling happily as if she, too, were glad to be home. Home? Odd that she should think of it that way. Ever since they’d started up Mystic River, she’d felt as though she was experiencing a homecoming. Even though the headache had worsened and was now accompanied by nausea, she was happy to be home. There it was, that word again—home.

Suddenly her stomach seized and the pain in her head exploded, dropping Tess to her knees. There was a fire racing through her blood, and the buzzing of bees that had been just an uncomfortable hum roared to the forefront of her brain. The spirit bear inside her head roared in defiance and rage, and then everything went black as if someone had rung the curtain down.

# CHAPTER 7



## COLBY

“Colby? It’s Dash,” he said into his cell, walking back from Trudy’s to the pub.

“How is my favorite reindeer-shifter this fine evening?” asked Colby, taking a long draw on his favorite brew as he put his feet up on his desk.

Many people didn’t know, but Dash was far more involved in the resistance against the Shadow League than they thought. They’d picked up a number of tips that had panned out.

“I’m fine. Remember that story you told me about that girl one of old Henry’s crew had snatched off the streets in Anchorage?”

“Teresa Travers?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. She got away from old Henry and ended up here in Mystic River? Almost started a war?”

Colby nodded, even though there was no one to see. “That’s been close to thirty years ago. Why do you ask?”

“That picture you had of her—the one by the campfire.”

“Yes, a member of the clan took it. I was still a child.”

“It stayed with me. She was a real beauty.”

“That she was, and I liked the composition of the picture. Henry was frantic when they discovered her gone. She was pregnant. As I recall, the story went she was guiding a couple on a photography hunt. She’d given birth and the sire of the child came to take the baby from her. There was a fight and



they both ended up dead. The child was never found. Why bring that up?”

“Because I think that child just came looking for her family.”

Colby’s feet hit the floor with a thump as he came forward in his chair. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be without a DNA test. When she walked out of the airport at Kodiak, I thought I was seeing a ghost. She’s staying at Trudy’s. I think they’re coming by the pub tonight. I thought you’d want to know.”

“You thought right. I’ll head down your way. I wanted to talk to you about something anyway.”

Colby ended the call. Damn Sean Campbell. If he hadn’t turned up as Winter’s fated mate, she’d still be in Mystic River. This was just the kind of thing she was good at. He didn’t doubt Hamish’s abilities as a beta, especially in a time of war, but the man had all the subtlety of a jackhammer. Draining the last of his beer, Colby called down to the garage to have them bring up an SUV. He was heading into town.



## DEREK

Derek had been more than halfway home when he received a call from Trudy at The Refuge. He’d had his tunes cranked up and was singing along with Garth, sipping a sweet tea. Trudy wouldn’t have used his cell if she wasn’t concerned about something. Hamish had asked Derek to keep an eye on Trudy for him while he was away. Away doing what, he wasn’t at liberty to say.

“Derek? Did I catch you at a bad time? Or before you left the office?”

“No, you’re good. I was just headed out of town.” It was a total lie; he was almost home.

“I have a new guest and she went out for a walk about two and a half hours ago. We were going to go to The Workshop for a burger, but she hasn’t come back. I called her cell and there’s no answer.”

“Did she have the geo-tracker with her?”

“She did, but I don’t know if she turned it on. She’s a really nice lady...”

“No problem. Do you know where she was headed?”

“The path that cuts down from my place onto the meadow and that stand of old-growth trees that runs along the river. She was dressed for the weather and her hiking boots were of good quality and not new.”

“Okay. I’ll go see if I can’t find her.”

“Derek, she’s a shifter.”

“So?”

“I don’t think she knows.”

Derek looked at his phone. “What do you mean she doesn’t know?”

“Sometimes things happen, and people don’t know until their shifted form takes over to save their life or something. She seemed blithely unaware. I didn’t have a chance to talk to Dash, but I’m pretty sure he felt the same vibe.”

“That’s not good. If I can’t identify the tracks where she went down the path, I’ll come back and get some more information. If it starts getting dark, I’ll call in volunteers and Jax. If that happens, we’re going to want to use your place as a base.”

“That won’t be an issue. I’ll be ready to go if and when you give the word.”

“Thanks, Trudy.”

Turning his SUV around, Derek made his way to the spot where the path from The Refuge emptied out onto the meadow that bordered Mystic River and headed into the deep woods. Derek hated to admit it, but this was the kind of stuff he loved.

He understood why his older brother, Zak, and the sheriff, Jax, loved boring. It meant everyone under their protection, for the most part, was safe. When you were in law enforcement, boring was good.

Derek did appreciate the simplicity and clarity of his position. If it was wrong today, it had been wrong yesterday, and it would be wrong tomorrow. Get out of line and you'd spend a night or two in jail. Need help carrying your packages? The sheriff and his deputy were there to lend a helping hand.

The only real problem was that the job could be boring. When the town's sheriff was a Kodiak bear-shifter, and the deputy sheriff was a polar bear-shifter, well, not too many people wanted to take them on. His brother had dubbed them, much to Jax's distaste, the 'dynamic duo.' Derek kind of liked that, as well.

He loved when there was a fight to break up, or when they had to run down some petty vandalism. Jax always appreciated that Derek didn't overreact and he didn't seek to intimidate people; he just liked it when something was going on. Zak had told him as he got more mature and grew into his job, he'd begin to like boring, as well. His boss had told him more than once he was turning into an excellent second-in-command, and more and more he let Derek take on increased responsibility.

The time away from Otter Cove and his father's clan—even his older brother's—had done him a world of good. He'd never been one to give anyone but his father any trouble. Okay, there had been that one bout of mating lust when he'd thought to take a human female to mate, turning her as he bred her. He'd even been stupid enough to take on Jax in a fight.

The Kodiak bear-shifter had kicked his ass, but Derek had learned from that. There wasn't a day that went by that he wasn't grateful to Jax for stopping him, and even more grateful that Autumn—the woman he'd thought to turn without her consent and who turned out to be Jax's fated mate—had seen it in her heart to forgive him. Derek had needed to get away from Otter Cove, and Zak had suggested since Jax

needed a deputy that he hire Derek. Much to everyone's surprise, Jax had agreed.

Derek wasn't so sure Jax could kick his ass anymore. He'd honed his fighting skills with Jax's instruction, and he'd put in the work in the gym, getting more fit and packing on the muscle. Things that used to be difficult were now easy, and he loved that he could eat more and still give the she-bears something to dream about.

The only problem as he saw it was that he no longer dreamed about other she-bears. He dreamed about, and usually had sex in those dreams, with his fated mate. A gorgeous she-bear who called to every protective instinct in him. She was his future, and he knew he'd know her the instant he laid eyes on her.

He chuckled to himself. Most days being deputy sheriff in Mystic River were about as exciting as watching paint dry, but that day was not today. Right now, there was a damsel in distress. She'd probably only gotten lost or twisted her ankle or something mundane, but for now he could let all those alpha protective instincts come to the fore. Someone was missing or lost in his jurisdiction. They wouldn't stay that way—not on his watch.

Parking his vehicle by the path that led from Trudy's, Derek got out and had to shake off the buzzing that had been growing increasingly loud and annoying the closer he came to this spot. Derek searched the ground leading into the meadow. Sure enough, he could see new prints heading into the meadow. He recognized the tread of the boots. Trudy was right; they were expensive, and their soles said they'd seen some rugged terrain.

Up in the distance, he could see a shape on the ground, close to the trees. Derek scented the air—it was a female bear-shifter, most likely Trudy's guest. He broke into a run, heading straight for the unmoving creature. As he got close, the buzzing almost blinded and deafened him. The one thing he could make out of the shape was that she was a polar bear. An angry she-bear. She didn't know who Derek was, or maybe she did, but she wanted nothing to do with him.

She gave an angry roar—part warning and part challenge. She stood up on her hind legs, batting her paws with their razor-sharp claws at him, telling him to back off. Suddenly, the buzzing and headache made all the sense in the world. There was only one thing that could cause that—the presence of his fated mate. *Damn. The last thing I expected was to find her in a field in her shifted form.*

“Take it easy, sweetheart,” Derek crooned, spreading his arms wide with his palms up. “Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

The she-bear dropped to all fours and charged. She wasn’t messing around. She wanted him to back the fuck up, and he was going to, but only until he could get his clothes off and answer her challenge—bear to bear. When he’d maneuvered out of the space she was protecting, he quickly stripped out of his clothes, never taking his eyes off the she-bear as she paced back and forth, growling threateningly.

Calling forth his polar bear, he was surrounded by the powerful maelstrom of a shifting mist. Normally it wasn’t this strong, or this charged with energy, light, color, and sound. Apparently, his bear meant to put on a display for their mate. He had just enough time when the chaos of the shift dissipated to jump out of the way of his she-bear’s charge.

Time to take matters in hand. Cognizant of the fact that he was facing off against his fated mate, a couple of thoughts registered. One, she was his fated mate and he didn’t want to do her permanent injury. Two, if Dash and Trudy were right, her human self had no idea what was going on, and if she was awake inside the bear, she had to be terrified. And three, he needed to quit pondering all this shit and get his mate under control and back into her human self.

As the she-bear rounded on him, Derek waited and then stepped aside—only this time he brought his paw down powerfully across her buttocks, making her roar and scamper forward. Derek gave chase. Some instinct in the she-bear must have known she’d bitten off more than she could chew. Derek caught her within several strides, grabbing her by the scruff of the neck and flinging her several feet away. When she got back up, he smacked her down again. She snarled and

snapped, almost catching his foreleg in her powerful jaws. He brought the other paw up to smack her behind again.

Before she could mount another attack, Derek flipped her over on her back, grabbing her throat and shaking her. The message was clear—yield and shift. The she-bear tried to use all four of her legs to toss him off, but she wasn't fast enough or strong enough. Again, he shook her, this time a bit more vigorously, and growled a warning of his own: submit; shift.

She tried to swipe at his head but was in the wrong position. Grudgingly she went still beneath him. With her throat still in his mouth, he growled low and then chuffed at her. She needed to know he was the victor, but he would treat her gently if she did what he bid her to do. He could feel her shift as it started to materialize and envelop her. Stepping back, he waited until the she-bear had retreated, leaving behind an unconscious, naked woman. He checked her vital signs. They were strong.

Derek quickly galloped back towards his SUV and opened the back hatch, which had been modified so that he and Jax could use it in either form, and grabbed a blanket. He turned back toward the spot he had left her, grateful she was still in a pile. He charged back to the spot, stopping to shift and redress before wrapping her in the blanket, scooping her up and heading back to his vehicle.

He made her as comfortable a bed as he could in the back of the SUV and reminded his inner bear that they were not going to claim and mate with her when she was unconscious, although the instinct to do so was riding him hard. She was gorgeous. She had long, dark hair with a slight wave, the face of an angel, and the body of a siren. He locked her in, knowing in this area of the SUV, she was trapped and could neither get away nor hurt him or anyone else.

This was going to be a fine kettle of fish and both his brother and Jax were going to have a field day at his expense. He'd given both of them a ration of shit over the way they had claimed their own mates with little regard to what either of them thought. Derek didn't know the first damn thing about her, but maybe Trudy could fill in some of the blanks. But

even if she couldn't, it didn't matter. The woman in the back of his SUV was his fated mate.

It would seem that things were about to get real interesting and exciting. He hit the return call feature on his vehicle. He knew he should take her back to Trudy's but that wasn't happening. She was his mate, and he was taking her home.

"Trudy? It's Derek."

"Did you find her?"

"I did. She's all right. You were right; she's a bear-shifter."

"Did she know?"

"I haven't a clue. We have yet to talk. She's passed out in the back of my SUV."

"I'll get her room ready."

"That won't be necessary. I'm taking her to my cabin."

"Do you know her?" Trudy asked.

"In almost every sense of the word. She's my fated mate."

He didn't wait for Trudy to respond, nor did he answer her call when she called him back. He would get his mate home, call Jax and let him know what had happened, and deal with whatever consequences came from that decision. He knew he should be concerned, or angry, or worried, but he wasn't. Quite the opposite; he had his fated mate and like his ancestors, was taking her home to his cave—only his cave was actually a nice cabin he'd renovated and that his sister and sister-in-law had just finished redecorating.

Derek couldn't remember ever being happier.

# CHAPTER 8





## TERESA

### *K*odiak Island Twenty-Odd Years Ago

*Teresa Travers was pissed. She'd been hired by idiots. They wanted to do a kind of photography hunt of the bears and other large game on Kodiak Island. They had assured her they had experience in the bush. What a crock! They were outsiders, born and bred in the lower forty-eight, and they were human as well. What had she been thinking?*

*What she'd been thinking was winter was coming and before too long, there wouldn't be any guide jobs to be had. Teresa was making a good living as a wilderness guide, working through a blacksmith who made climbing equipment. She'd been skeptical, but the money had been too good to refuse. Only a couple more days, and she'd be able to take the baby home.*

*Teresa shook her head ruefully. She had to think of a name. She couldn't just keep calling her 'the baby.' She'd never thought to be a mother and certainly not after that bastard at Akiak snatched her off the streets of Anchorage, turned her, and got her knocked up. Life hadn't been great in Anchorage, but at least she hadn't been forced to become some kind of mutant mate to a polar bear-shifter.*

*The Shadow Sisters were supposed to have helped her. Fat lot of good they'd been. Instead, Teresa had escaped on her*

*own and made her own way to Mystic River—another weird little town filled with all kinds of people who could shift into animals. She had to admit, being a polar bear was kind of fun sometimes. She'd found an abandoned homestead cabin right on the water and had claimed it for her own, fixing it up little by little as she found guide jobs she could take until she was too far along.*

*Word had reached her through the grapevine that her baby's sire was looking for them both, presumably to drag them back to Akiak or at the very least take the baby—which would happen over her dead body. She'd suffered through her pregnancy alone until the town's doctor had found her in labor and rushed her to his clinic. He'd worked tirelessly to save both her and the child. That man was a saint, and he offset every lousy alpha male shifter she'd had the misfortune to cross.*

*The baby was sleeping soundly when Teresa heard movement in the bushes outside of their campground. She stilled her breathing and focused on the sound. Something very large was moving towards them. She scented the air—that something large was most definitely a bear.*

*Checking to ensure that her clients were fast asleep, Teresa moved away from the camp, removed her clothes and called forth her polar bear. She had to admit, it was still a thrill to be able to shift from human to bear and back again, and the sort of controlled, centralized storm that surrounded a shift was like a whirlwind crossed with what she imagined it would feel like to be a part of the aurora borealis.*

*Teresa saw her bear rushing toward her as her body made the miraculous transition from human to bear. She charged toward the spot where she believed the bear would be. It didn't take her long to find him. She'd been right. It was the male bear who had kidnapped her, turned her, and taken her to mate—none of which had occurred with her consent. If that sonofabitch thought he was getting her baby, he'd best think again.*

*She roared a challenge to the imposing polar bear. Teresa knew he had size and muscle on her, but this was her baby and*

*her life, and this bastard didn't get to take them from her. Both of their bodies rippled with muscle, showcasing their strength. Her she-bear's powerful primal and maternal instincts took over, and Teresa knew she would die before she would let the male bear win.*

*Growls and snarls reverberating through the encroaching darkness, the two bears engaged in an intense confrontation where both knew there would only be one victor. What started as posturing soon became a fierce battle for dominance, the baby, and survival. Teresa and her rival swiped with lethal claws and sank teeth into vulnerable flesh, each seeking to overpower the other and emerge victorious.*

*The ground beneath their feet shook from the thunderous movements of each bear. Both got on their rear legs, rising up and slashing at each other with claws and teeth. The snarling, growling, and sheer magnitude of the fight must have awakened her clients as she could see them in her peripheral vision. She had a can of bear spray; he, at least, had a gun. There was an old saying about bringing a knife to a gunfight. It was analogous to the bear fight—you don't bring a can of spray to stop two enraged bears, you bring a gun.*

*The couple's emergence into the clearing distracted Teresa's opponent and gave her the only opening she needed. She lunged forward, sinking her teeth into his throat and ripping it and his jugular open. The scream of rage and pain died as his blood soaked the ground. Teresa turned on the couple, growling at them to make them go scurrying back to camp.*

*With a dawning realization of horror at their intent, she saw the husband slowly raise the 12-gauge shotgun, aim, and pull the trigger. It was almost as if she could see the shot she knew would end her life. She felt the impact as it entered her body. It wasn't nearly as painful as she thought it would be. Crying out, Teresa forced her bear to retreat as she collapsed on the ground in the midst of the shift.*

*"Oh my god," cried Mary. "It's Teresa."*

*Dimly, she could hear them rushing forward. She didn't have the energy to raise her head. They reached her and knelt down.*

*"The baby... my daughter... you must protect her."*

*"We don't understand," said Mary.*

*"I'm not like you," said Teresa, "and neither is she. If the other bears find her, the best they will do is kill her. The same is true of any government. You must protect her. Raise her as your own. Tell no one. Promise me."*

*The words came out in a jumble. Teresa reached for Mary's hand. "Swear to me."*

*"I swear."*

*Teresa nodded. "Then leave me. I will shift back. Take my baby and leave Alaska. Do not ever return."*

*The stunned couple moved away, and Teresa used the last of her life force to shift back so only the corpses of two bears would be found. Teresa believed with all her heart that the couple who had killed her would honor their vow. She had done right by her daughter. She would survive. She could feel her life ebb as the last spark of life deserted her body, and she was welcomed to the great beyond where she could watch over her daughter for all eternity.*



## MARY

*"What just happened?" her husband asked.*

*"I don't know. I don't understand it either, but somehow that bear is also Teresa. Remember that weird picture we saw a long time ago about an ancient group of people that could shift from black leopards to humans and back again? I think Teresa was one of them; only she changed into a polar bear."*

*"That's ridiculous. That can't happen in real life."*

*“And yet, we both just witnessed it. We saw a ferocious polar bear, and when we shot her because we thought she was going to attack us, she shifted to her human form to tell us to care for her child as if it were our own.”*

*“The baby must have relatives of some kind...”*

*“Apparently Teresa believed they would do her harm. We need to pack our gear and leave. Now. Before anyone finds these bears or even begins to look for a baby. We need to slip back into the States and raise the baby. We’ll tell people, and the baby when the time comes, that she is ours.”*

*“She doesn’t even have a name.”*

*“She does now. We’ll call her Tess—for her mother.”*



## TESS

### ***Present Day***

The black shroud that surrounded her brain started to lift like a curtain in an old vaudeville show. Strange images flashed before her mind’s eye of two polar bears fighting. Had she seen that? If so, had she been hurt? Tess didn’t feel any pain, so either she wasn’t hurt, or it had just been some weird dream. Opening her eyes hurt—well, not the act of opening them, but the light, itself. The light hurt. Only it wasn’t all that bright in the room.

She’d been wrong. The more she came to wakefulness, the more pain she had. Everything ached, except her head. Her head just hurt. As she opened her eyes fully, two things became readily apparent: it was dark outside, and there was some gorgeous hunk of man with a ballcap emblazoned with ‘Mystic River Sheriff’s Department’ across the front sitting in a chair across from her, observing her quietly.

Neither of them said a word as she realized she was in a big bed, a really comfortable one with the softest sheets. Someone—perhaps the guy with the ballcap—had tucked her in. She wasn’t dressed in her clothing and couldn’t see it lying

anywhere. Tess lifted up the covers to realize she was completely naked.

The pain in her head was accompanied by the same strange buzzing sensation that had been plaguing her all day. Tess shook her head to try and dispel the sensation. It hadn't worked earlier in the day, and it didn't do so now.

Her memories of what had happened once she left Trudy's place were vague to non-existent. She remembered walking down the path and out into the meadow and then... nothing. She shook her head again, knowing it wouldn't clear the buzzing but seemingly unable to stop herself.

"Annoying, isn't it?" said the hunk.

Tess had almost forgotten he was there. That wasn't necessarily true—he was hard to ignore or forget—but there had been more pressing matters like the pain in her head, the disorientation, and the fact that she was naked in some bed, presumably his, without any recollection of how she'd gotten there.

Believing that taking the offensive was her best tactic, Tess demanded, "Who are you? Where am I? What happened, and how did I get here?"

"Let's see; in answer to your questions: I don't know, my cabin, I don't know, and I wrapped your naked—and might I say beautiful—body in a blanket and brought you here."

"No, you may not. And I didn't ask you who I was, I know that. I asked who you were."

"You first."

"Knock it off," Tess said, annoyed. "My head hurts, and I feel like I'm going to puke."

"You won't. The buzzing makes you feel that way, but I don't recall someone ever saying it made them sick to their stomach."

"You know a lot of people that have a swarm of angry bees buzzing in their heads?"

He shrugged. “Only those who have a fated mate. Since I answered your questions as well as I could...”

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t tell me who you were.”

“My bad. I’m Derek Grayson. I’m the Deputy Sheriff of Mystic River. Now I’ve answered yours, so how about if you answer a couple of mine? Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing in Mystic River? If you were feeling disoriented, why did you go for a walk by yourself?”

“I’m Tess Dixon. I’m from Seattle, and I came up to Mystic River for a little vacation. My mother died a couple of months ago, and I needed a break. And I thought the air might do me good. Being cooped up in an airplane going from Seattle to Kodiak and then making the trip from Kodiak to Mystic River isn’t as easy in reality as it would appear to be on paper.” Derek nodded his head as if accepting her story, so she continued on, “You aren’t in your uniform, why is that?”

“Partly because I’m off duty and partly because my boss isn’t all that big on uniforms. He figures the ballcap is sufficient. I can show you my badge if that’ll make you feel better.”

“What would make me feel better is having my clothes. I don’t see them.”

He crooked his head and looked at her in disbelief. But disbelief in what? She hadn’t lied to him. She might not have told him the whole truth, but none of what she’d said had been untrue.

“Who knows where the clothes go when someone shifts? I’ve always kind of wondered if there was some big closet in the sky and eventually clothes get reincarnated back to another life. It would explain why some of the godawful fashion trends of bygone eras seem to resurface.”

“Shift?” All the alarm bells went off in Tess’s head. “What do you mean shift? And how does that get me naked in your bed?”

“You don’t know, do you?” he said, sitting back. “I’ll be damned.”

*Know? What could she possibly know, or not know? Was there some kind of communal hallucination or common mental disorder that made those on this part of Kodiak Island believe people could shift into other creatures? Or had the world simply gone mad when she wasn't looking?*



# CHAPTER 9



## DEREK

*Holy shit! Could she possibly be that naive or uninformed?*

The woman—she'd said her name was Tess, Tess Dixon—that wasn't a surname with which he was familiar, at least not in Mystic River or Otter Cove. She said she was from Seattle, but Seattle was a huge city, so telling him she was from there didn't narrow it down much.

Derek realized she was being quiet, very quiet. All the color had drained from her face, and she was staring at him as if trying to decide whether he was mad or was trying to figure out if she'd understood him at all.

“Wha... What do you mean by ‘shift?’”

He shook his head. Her confusion was legit. He'd bet every last dime he had, which after Annie and Sienna had finished gentrifying—their term, not his—his cabin, wasn't nearly as much as it had been, that she had little to no clue about shifters.

“You have not been abducted by a crazy man. You can call Trudy if you like; she'll vouch for me. And for the record, I think you're being straight with me.”

“Well, thank you so much for that,” she snarked.

Derek grinned. All he could think of was how Zak had once told him that when Sienna got snarky, he just remembered what that mouth looked like swollen from his kisses or wrapped around his cock, and it got easy to just let it

go. Zak was right. The idea of Tess's lips wrapped around his dick as he slid it in and out of her mouth made snark immaterial. Deke had simply said he gave Annie something better to do with her mouth, which bordered on too much information when Derek thought about his sister.

"If you think I'm lying to you, just return my clothes, and I'll find my way back to Trudy's. Oh shit. Does she know I'm here? We were going to have dinner at Dash's place."

"Are you hungry?"

"Am I... what difference does that make?"

"If you're hungry, I'll fix us something. I'm a pretty decent cook."

"I don't want to have dinner with you. I want to get my clothes back and get out of here."

Derek chuckled. "That's not going to happen. Your clothes don't exist anymore."

"What did you do? Burn them?"

"No. They just went to that big laundry hamper in the sky."

"What are you blathering on about?" she said, her temper rising.

"I'm sorry. You probably don't see this as being humorous at all. Let's start over. Hi, I'm Deputy Derek Grayson. Can you tell me how you ended up naked in a field just outside of Mystic River's city limits?"

"You didn't take my clothes?" she asked.

"Nope. When I found you, you were naked."

That wasn't exactly the truth, but he didn't think telling her he'd found her in her polar bear form, they'd had a brief skirmish, he'd forced her to shift back, and then found her naked was going to get them where they needed to go. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to bring the conversation around to the fact that she was a polar bear-shifter when she obviously had no concept of shifters or that they existed.

"Had I been assaulted? Did you take me to see a doctor?"

“No. You seemed perfectly fine to me, but we have a town doctor. I’m sure Doc Hadley would be happy to see you.”

Maybe he could fob this off on the doctor. Doc had to have more experience with this kind of thing than he did. But there were so many questions: how had she reached the age she was and not known she was a shifter? Derek guessed she was in her late twenties. Had she been turned? Surely, she would know that. And if not turned, then she had to have been born one. Why had her parents kept that from her?

“I need to leave here,” she said, flinging back the covers and then pulling them back as she seemed to remember she was naked. “First I need clothes.”

Derek stood up and approached the bed in what he hoped was a non-threatening manner. “I tell you what, why don’t we give Doc a call...”

“From what I can tell it’s nighttime...”

“Doc keeps kind of odd office hours.” Doc stayed open late a couple of nights a week for those citizens who were nocturnal. Derek glanced down at his watch. “In fact, I’ll bet he hasn’t left for home. How about if I give him a call and see if he can swing by? I don’t really think I have anything to fit you. If you like, I can ask him to swing by Trudy’s and pick up your clothes.”

“I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“You’re not. People in Mystic River take care of each other, and we don’t get a lot of outside visitors. Most of Trudy’s guests are friends or family of residents.”

“I wouldn’t mind having my things, but please tell Trudy I intend to come back so would prefer to keep my room.”

“Do you remember what happened when you went in the meadow?”

“The buzzing and nausea got a whole lot worse. I remember my knees buckling and everything went black. The next thing I know, I woke up here having you ogle me.” She said the last with a hint of humor in her voice.

“Trust me, Tess, if I’d been ogling you, the covers wouldn’t have been hiding you from me.”

She blushed but seemed to relax a little.

“I can give Trudy a call,” he offered. “Let me make you a nice cup of coffee or tea. I have a real nice local blend of tea that I find very soothing, both mentally and physically. How about if I make you a cup with a nice dollop of locally sourced honey?”

She brightened as a small smile began to form. “I love tea with honey. My sister always adds sugar, as did my mom, but I prefer honey.”

Derek turned and walked back to his kitchen area. “Honey it is. Is your sister older or younger?”

“Younger.”

“You said you lost your mom a few months ago. I’m very sorry.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“My mother’s been dead for years. My father and I—to put it politely—are estranged. I have an older brother who’s the sheriff of Otter Cove and an older sister who runs a kind of Gucci grocery and dry goods store. She and my sister-in-law are opening a coffee shop and are expanding it into a small restaurant.”

“You sound like you get along with your siblings. Me, too. Lara is probably my closest friend.”

Derek made her tea and brought it back to her. Her hand brushed his ever so slightly, but he could feel the spark between them connect. That should help with the pounding headache and general feeling of malaise.

“Let me go give Doc a call. Reception is better outside. Why don’t you just sit here and sip your tea. If you want to see if there’s anything in the walk-in closet, feel free to help yourself.”

Tess nodded, and he walked outside. He stepped down off the porch and dialed Doc’s clinic, hoping it would be open.

“Mystic River Clinic. This is Betty, can I help you?”

“Hey, Betty. It’s Derek. Is Doc handy?”

“You just caught him. We’re done with patients for the day, but he hasn’t left yet. Hang on.”

A few minutes passed. “What can I do for the deputy sheriff of Mystic River?” came the familiar, friendly voice.

“I found a young woman in the meadow out past Trudy’s place along the river.”

“The one that checked in this afternoon?”

“That’s the one.”

“If she was hurt, you should have brought her here,” the doctor scolded.

“She wasn’t hurt, and the thing is, Doc, I don’t think she knows she’s a shifter.”

“How can she not know that?”

“I haven’t a clue, but I don’t think she has any idea. And I don’t really know how to tell her. She was in her shifted form...”

“What kind?”

“Same as me, polar bear. But she doesn’t remember anything. She went into the meadow and passed out.”

“Does she know what caused that?”

“She said the buzzing in her head and sick feeling she had in her stomach got worse and she collapsed.”

“Buzzing and nausea? Was anybody around?”

“I was probably closest to her and getting closer all the time as Trudy sent me to look for her.”

There was a long pause. “So, tell me, Derek, how are you feeling?”

“About like you’d expect. My head is killing me. But I gave her a cup of tea. Our hands touched, and the pain and sensation of a swarm of angry bees is waning.”

“So you know.” It wasn’t a question.

“I know. Tess—that’s her name—is my fated mate. Not only doesn’t she know what that is, but like I said...”

“She doesn’t know she’s a shifter.”

“You believe her?”

“I do. She is genuinely confused and a little bit afraid I think, but I kind of expected sobbing and pleading and maybe some cursing. But she’s kind of taking the whole collapsing in a meadow and waking up in a stranger’s bed with remarkable aplomb.”

“Are you worried she’s actually injured, or are you just looking for backup when you try to tell her about shifters?” Doc asked with some amusement in his voice. “Because I have to tell you, it’s probably better coming from you. If there’s more than one of us, she might feel threatened or at least ganged up on. You never know, she might be one of those people who likes reading those romance books with shifters in them. The concept might not seem so foreign.”

“You’re probably right. I’ll try telling her and see how it goes. But any chance someone can go by Trudy’s and get some of her things?”

“Sure. Your place isn’t too far off the beaten track for Betty. I’ll ask her to do it. Derek?”

“Yeah, Doc?”

“Keep in mind that when your fated mate learns about what she is, she may not be as accepting as you’d like. And do me a favor and don’t lead with the fated mate stuff.”

“Well, she is.”

“Yes, but even shifter females don’t always like being told that fate has decided on their mate.”

“You have a point. Thanks, Doc.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck, Derek, and you’ve got my cell phone number if you need it.”

Derek turned and walked back into the house. Tess was curled up in one of his old sweaters in the leather wingback his sister bought for his house. He'd bitched about the amount of money she spent on it, but she'd been right. It was the single most comfortable chair in the world. He could easily imagine sitting in the chair with Tess curled up in his lap.

She looked up to see him in the doorway. "I hope you don't mind. I took you up on your offer and made myself at home. I left the kettle with water on the stove if you want to make a cup of tea for yourself. Does your sister sell this blend?"

"She does," said Derek, making himself a cup and joining her in front of the fireplace.

"I'm sorry. This is probably your favorite chair. I know it would be mine." She started to rise.

He put his hand on her shoulder, liking the way she didn't struggle as he pushed gently down on it. "No, you stay there. You look comfortable. I talked to Doc, and he said he didn't think it was urgent, but his nurse doesn't pass too far by here on her way home. She'll stop and get you some of your things. We can drive in and see Doc in the morning unless you feel a whole lot worse than you look."

"How do I look to you, Deputy?" she asked with a saucy attitude.

"You look just fine to me, Ms. Dixon. In fact, I can't remember a finer sight in my lifetime than you sitting curled up in my favorite chair with a cup of tea and only my sweater on."

She grinned and settled herself. "You're easy to talk to."

Derek shrugged. "Sometimes when you meet someone, it's like you've known them before—like in a past lifetime—and you just need to catch up with what's been going on with them."

"That makes sense. Living in the big city, you get to where you are really wary of strangers. I keep waiting to feel that, but



I just don't. It's like I know deep in my core that I can trust you."

"You can, Tess."

"Why is it I feel like I can tell you about what really brought me here? I haven't even told my sister for fear she'll think I'm nuts."

"Sometimes, it's easier to tell someone that you barely know. I promise that whatever you tell me, I won't make any judgments."

"Okay, then. When my mom was dying, she made me promise I'd read some journals from around the time I was born. I thought they were hers, which did strike me as odd because my mom wasn't a real journal-writing kind of person. I remember some from when I was really little, but I always thought after she had Lara and me—I'm adopted by the way—that having two kids under five years old left no time for introspection."

Derek chuckled. "Probably not." If she was adopted that could explain a lot. He hoped with every fiber of his being that she'd been born a shifter. If not, there would be a lot of anger and resistance.

"Exactly. But when I opened the journal that seemed to be around my birth date, it turned out the journal was by a woman I assume was my birth mother. She didn't think much of my parents."

"How did she meet your parents?"

"She was a wilderness guide up around these parts..."

Derek felt as if someone had just wrapped their hand around his heart and squeezed. "What was her name?" he asked, praying she didn't give him the one answer he dreaded hearing.

"Teresa Travers. I tried searching for her online. I found someone about the right age in Anchorage receiving benefits, but then she just disappeared into thin air."

Not thin air, Derek thought. Teresa Travers had been kidnapped, brought to his father's estate, and turned without her consent. She had never settled as a she-bear, and when she found out she was pregnant she reached out to the Shadow Sisters—the same group his sister had worked with. The 'Sister' they sent to get Teresa out had never arrived, but Teresa had managed to get away and had come to Mystic River. The 'Sister' had stayed behind, been murdered and buried in the ground of Akiak, his father's estate. How did he tell his fated mate that his family was involved with the kidnapping and death of her birth mother?

## CHAPTER 10



*D*erek

“Are you all right?” Tess asked, unfolding her long, shapely legs from where she’d been curled up in the chair to stand and head towards him. “You don’t look well. Maybe you should sit down.”

Derek stepped away from her. Every primal instinct in his being cried out for him to take her, claim her, and make her his own. His inner polar bear didn’t care that her mother had been turned, or that someone who wanted to help her had been murdered, or that in the end her birth mother had been killed because of the man who sired her. All it cared about was that she was his fated mate. His bear did have a point. If he claimed Tess and made her his own, she would be protected from his father’s clan.

Akiak would have no claim on her, even though they might try to assert one. If she was his, claimed and bonded to him, Zak would back his claim. Zak had a splinter clan that he had yet to name. Derek and Annie both felt it was because he still harbored hope that their father would relent and step down, leaving Zak to take over as alpha of the Akiak clan. Derek was the only polar bear-shifter in Mystic River, but he claimed allegiance to his brother’s clan.

But without Tess being formally bonded to Derek, his father’s clan had the stronger claim. Both of her birth parents had been members of Akiak, and the child had been stolen away by her mother before she was born. Derek knew that was not a technicality that Zak would allow to take precedence

over Tess's wishes, but still, having Tess bonded to him was the safer route.

All of which was complete bullshit, and Derek didn't give a damn about any of it. All he knew was that Tess was his fated mate and regardless of her wishes, he wasn't about to give her up.

"No, I'm fine," he said, forcing his body to at least look relaxed.

"You don't look fine. You look like you've seen a ghost."

He shook his head and tried to smile. "Not a ghost *per se*, but an old story around these parts."

"You think you know something about my mother?" asked Tess just as Derek heard a vehicle coming down the driveway, crunching the gravel beneath its tires. *Saved by Betty*. "I'll bet that's Betty. Let me go get what she brought you."

"Okay, thanks," she said, sounding a bit bewildered.

He stepped outside, never more grateful to see anyone than he was at that moment.

"It looked like both bags had clothes, so I grabbed the one that had toiletries."

"Thanks, Betty."

"Is she all right? Do you want me to give her a quick once over to make sure there's no cause for concern?"

"That might not be the worst idea, but she has no idea she's a shifter."

Betty shook her head. "I can't even imagine what that would be like."

"Me, either. Why don't I give you two a little privacy? The cabin is just one big room. I'll introduce you and then head down to the river to catch some fish."

"I've been wanting to take a look at what you did to this place. Annie and Sienna really went to town bringing things in for you."

“Don’t I know it, but I have to say, I really do like what they did.” They walked up the steps and into the cabin. “Tess Dixon, this is Betty. She’s Doc’s nurse. She offered to give you a quick once over so you don’t have to worry about if something is wrong.”

Tess looked embarrassed, but stepped forward, extending her hand. Betty seemed taken aback but recovered quickly. “Nice to meet you, Tess.”

“Same here. Please don’t think Derek’s done anything wrong. Apparently when he found me, I was naked. He loaned me his sweater.”

“Derek’s a good man. He was going to go catch you some dinner. The trout are running. Do you like trout?”

Tess grinned. “Love it. I don’t fish much anymore so it’s hard to find good, fresh trout.”

“Trout it is,” said Derek. “I’ve got some sweet potatoes and green beans I can make as sides.”

“Yum. It beats the hell out of the burger I was planning to have.”

“I don’t know,” said Derek. “Dash’s burgers are damn good.”

Betty rolled her eyes, “And his fries are addictive. He uses some special secret seasoning on them.”

“That sounds great, but literally it’s been years since I had trout.”

Derek reached behind the door and grabbed his fishing rod and tackle basket. Most days he just shifted, walked into the river, and caught what he wanted. But today was not most days. He left them with Tess telling Betty what she remembered and how she’d felt, knowing his mate was in good hands.

As he walked down to the dock, he reached into his back pocket for his phone and called Zak.

“What?” snarled Zak into the phone.

He could hear Sienna giggle in the background. Apparently big brother had been enjoying the delights of his mate.

“I’ll make this quick. Do you remember the stories about Teresa Travers?”

“The woman who got snatched in Anchorage but got away? Don’t I remember one of the Shadow Sisters got killed?”

“How awful,” he heard Sienna say in the background.

“It was a long time ago, baby. Why bring her up?”

“Because I think her daughter is here.”

“Shit. That whole episode is still a thorn in Henry’s side.”

“What happened?” asked Sienna.

“Her mate found out where she was and tried to take her back. There was a fight and she killed him, and then a couple of tourists who didn’t know what they were dealing with killed her. There was always a question of whether or not there had been a baby, and if so, what happened to it.”

“Well, there was a baby; she survived. Zak, she’s here, and she’s my fated mate.”

“She’s your—” he interrupted himself with his laughter.

“It’s not funny.”

“It sort of is. Look at it this way, at least she’s a polar bear. Where is she now?”

“Inside, Betty’s looking her over. I’m going to fix dinner. I’ll try to get her to come to Otter Cove. She needs our help.”

“Agreed. The faster you get her claimed and the two of you are bonded, the better it will be.”

“I agree, but here’s the real problem...”

“There’s more?”

“Unfortunately. She doesn’t know...”

“About her mother being attacked by one of Henry’s clan?”

“That, either. And she doesn’t know about the murdered Shadow Sister. But the real kicker is she doesn’t know she’s a shifter.”

“How can that be?”

“I have no idea. I’m going to try and talk with her...”

“Give me the phone,” he heard Sienna say. “Derek? She might not want to come here. If she hasn’t a clue as to what she is, she’s going to need some time to process. Of course, both of you are welcome here, but...”

He could hear Zak reclaiming his phone. “Your mate; your call. I’ll back whatever play you want to make, but I’m sending a couple of our guys to keep watch over you, your mate, and your place. I’ll tell them to keep out of sight, but I don’t want you alone.”

Internally, Derek breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t wanted to ask, but he knew he’d feel a lot better about things if he knew he had backup close by. “Thanks, Zak. I’ll try to bring her around in the next few days.”

“If it’ll help, we can come there first.”

“It might. I’d like to play it by ear.”

“Like I said, your mate, your call. I’ll let you know when I have people in place.”

“Sorry to interrupt.”

“I’ll live.”

“You’ll also get laid, which is more than I can say for me.”

His older brother laughed. “And I suppose that’s what makes it seem fair to me. I’d say something rude, but my mate frowns on that kind of behavior.”

Derek laughed as he could hear Sienna smacking his brother. “Well, you two have a good time. I’ve got fish to catch.”

He ended the call and easily caught three trout. He wanted to invite Betty, but if she wasn't interested, they'd have it in the morning. He cleaned the fish, letting what he was discarding go into the river to nourish it and its inhabitants.

Derek headed back to the house, just reaching the porch as Betty walked out.

"She's fine. A little achy, but that's to be expected with a first shift at her age. Try to stay close; it'll help her body acclimate if her mate is close by. You do know she knows nothing about any of this—us, her mother, fated mates—"

"I know," Derek said with a sigh. "I talked to Zak. He should have people here in no time, but I need to talk to her about all of this."

"Good luck. Call if you need anything. Do you want me to call Jax?"

"I'd be surprised if Doc hasn't already, and I'm sure Zak will let him know, but thanks."

"Okay. Be safe and take care of her."

"I will." He watched Betty get in her vehicle and head back up the driveway.

As he entered the cabin, Tess was standing in the kitchen, still dressed in only his sweater. No one had ever looked more at home than she did standing there. It made every muscle in his body tighten in anticipation and arousal, especially his cock. Well, his cock was just going to have to wait.

She looked over her shoulder and smiled. "I hope you don't mind. The sweater is comfy, and I don't know about you, but I was getting hungry. I saw you had the ingredients of green bean almondine, which is one of my favorites."

"Mine, too," he said, joining her in the kitchen.

"Good; I got the beans started. They're almost ready to come out of the water. I also sliced the almonds and have them ready to go. I also got the sweet potatoes started. I don't know what you were going to do, but I really love them pan-roasted."



“Again, me too,” he said laughing. “If you’re sure you’re feeling up to it, how about you finish the side dishes, while I get these trout filleted and grilled.”

“Sounds delicious. I love your kitchen by the way. I don’t know that I would have expected a chef’s kitchen in a rustic cabin, but it’s really nice.”

“I like to cook, as in I thought about becoming a chef.”

“What happened?”

“My father didn’t approve and then I made some stupid mistakes young men often make. Jax—that’s Sheriff Miller—gave me a shot at becoming his deputy. I capitalized on it and think I found my true calling.”

There was an easy camaraderie between them as they cooked. It didn’t take long before they had dinner ready to serve. Given the size of the cabin, he’d opted not to have a traditional dining table. His island counter was large enough to comfortably sit four, but most times he either ate sitting on the couch watching hockey or over on his desk, which was a converted library table set in front of his front window with a killer view of the river.

“I’m telling you, the woman whose journals my mother gave me was a little nuts...”

“Because she believed in shifters?”

Tess nodded. “You sound like my sister. She reads a lot of paranormal romances that have shifters in them and she was like ‘cool,’ but you can’t tell me that you believe in anything that far-fetched, can you?”

“I can. It’s not that hard to believe when you live up here. There’s so much more to life than what is seen in the lower forty-eight. So many down there have lost touch with their ancestors.”

Tess sat back. “So, you don’t think it’s as fantastical as I do?”

“No. I don’t. I’ve seen and experienced way too much not to take a lot of things on a bit of faith or at the very least to

check it out before I reject them.”

Derek realized this was going to be difficult for Tess on a whole lot of levels. After all, when her bear came forward, she had blacked out and remembered none of it. He tried to think of a way to explain it to her but was at a loss for words.

Finally, he decided the old adage of a picture being worth a thousand words might be pretty accurate. “Tess, I know we’ve only just met, but do you think you can trust me?”

Instead of being taken aback, she leaned forward, taking his hand in hers. “As weird as it sounds I do. I could tell you it’s because you’re the deputy sheriff or because Betty spoke so highly of you, but it isn’t either of those.”

“It isn’t?”

“Nope. I trust you because I know deep down in my soul I can. I trust you because like you said, I believe we have known each other in different lifetimes. I know you now. I just don’t know all the details.”

“In that case, let’s finish up and go outside for just a bit.”

“Okay.”

They finished dinner and then Tess insisted they clean up, so they didn’t have to do it later. Once they were done, he took her outside, leaving her to stand on the porch by the railing while he went down the stairs and moved off to give her some space.

“I want you to know you are absolutely safe with me.”

“I know that. If I didn’t, I’d have left with Betty.”

“Don’t take your eyes off me. And remember, you are safe.”

“I get it, but you’re beginning to sound as weird as the woman in the journals my mother gave me.”

Figuring now was as good a time as any, Derek looked inward, found his great bear waiting and bade him to come forward. The enormous polar bear charged toward him as the swirling mist rose up from the ground with its accompanying

vortex of lightning, thunder, and colors whirling all around. He heard Tess gasp, but she held her ground.

The maelstrom fell away and where once a man had stood, there was now only a polar bear. Tess seemed frozen. She was frightened but not terrified.

“De... Derek?”

He nodded and chuffed to her.

Tess staggered back and looked like she was about to pass out. “Derek? Is it really you?”

He chuffed again but held perfectly still until the tension seemed to flow out of her body and a smile that began as just a suggestion at the corners of her mouth began to spread across her face.

“It’s really you? Can I come down there to see you?” He nodded and she came down off the porch. “Can I touch you?” she asked, reaching her hand out.

It was tentative, but there was no trembling. She laid her hand on his head, and he rubbed his face against her hand. She stroked the rough texture of his fur. Derek stepped back, giving himself space to shift without any of the electrical energy zapping her. He watched her face as the storm of power and light swirled up to surround him. Her face had a look of rapture and awe.

This time as the mist dissipated back into the ground, Tess was confronted with a naked man—a powerfully built and not unattractive man, but a naked man, nonetheless. He might have been perfectly at ease if his cock hadn’t reared up to show her its size and potency.

“You turned into a bear,” she said, staring at him appreciatively.

“You don’t have to stare,” he said, brushing past her.

“Sure I do. You’re gorgeous, and besides, you got to see me naked. Fair is fair. Sauce for the goose and all that.”

In spite of everything, he started to chuckle as he turned away. She had a point. “Well, come on back inside and let me

get some clothes on.”

She put her hand on his shoulder, stopping him. “Derek, I can’t imagine you wanting a lot of people to know about you—about what you can do. Thank you for trusting me.”

“You need to know that I’m not the only one.”

“You’re not?”

He shook his head. “No. All of the residents in Mystic River are what we call shifters. Not the same animals, but we can shift from one form to another.”

“Trudy? Dash? Betty?”

“Tasmanian devil, reindeer, and fox, respectively.”

“You have a reindeer-shifter named Dash? As in Dasher—one of Santa’s reindeer?”

Derek rolled his eyes. “It’s actually short for Dashell. And there’s no such thing as Santa Claus.”

“Right. Because there’s no such thing as shifters. If you don’t mind, I’m going to keep an open mind about Santa Claus.”

“I think we should go to Otter Cove in the morning. I’d like you to meet my brother. We’ll be safer in his compound.”

“Why aren’t we safe here?”

“We are. Hey, fellas, shine your flashlights so Tess can see you.”

Three flashlights signaled the location of Zak’s people.

“Does someone want to hurt me because I know now?”

“Some, but that’s not the only reason.” She quirked her eyebrows in question, so Derek continued. “There are two polar bear clans at Otter Cove. The oldest is known as Akiak and is led by my father. When my brother returned home and took over as sheriff, a bunch of us split off from the original clan and formed a second one. No one in Zak’s clan would want to hurt you. But Henry’s is another matter.”

“Why? I’ve done nothing to them?”

“You haven’t, but your birth mother did.”

“My birth mother?” she asked as realization started to creep into her eyes.

Derek nodded. Tess shook her head and started to withdraw. Derek took her hand. “Your mother was one of us—or rather them. You’ll be safer with Zak’s people. We can show you the things you need to know. Teach you.”

She shook her head again. “No. That isn’t possible. I would know.”

“Not necessarily. Did your mother ever give you anything iron and tell you to never take it off?”

She nodded. “An ancient Celtic cross. But the necklace part got caught in my hair and I ended up having to break it to get it untangled.”

“That’s why you could shift in the meadow. Iron touching our skin prevents us from shifting.”

“I can’t shift.”

“You can, and you did. When I first found you, you were a polar bear.”

Tess’s eyes rolled back in her head, and Derek stepped forward to catch her as she passed out. He scooped her up in his arms and headed into the house with her. It was going to be a long night, and the new morning didn’t show a lot of promise for improvement.

# CHAPTER 11



## TESS

Journal Entry, April 1st

April Fools' Day. How fucking appropriate. Why did I ever believe that maybe what happened in Anchorage would be good? Why did I think that maybe the bastard who abducted me might be kind, and I could build a life with him?

From the first day after my transition was complete, he was on me several times a day, breeding me. There was no kindness, no thought as to what he had done. He wanted offspring. I looked as though I could provide him with those. So, he took what he wanted—me. What kind of fool was I?

Life on the street, or in the shelter if I was lucky, wasn't great, but it sure as hell beat ole Henry's place. Life inside a polar bear clan, especially for one not born to their kind and/or female, is not good. The leader, Henry, cares little for any of those inside the clan and even less for the females. He has three sons and a daughter. The oldest, his heir, is just like him, but the others are different. I think someday the second son, Zak may rise up and challenge him for leadership. If he does and wins, the clan will be better for it.

Females have little to no say in their lives. If I had a better idea of where I would go or how I would provide for myself and my baby, I might have tried to take Henry's little girl, Annie, with me. Such a sweet, vivacious thing. I fear if she cannot break free, her spirit may be crushed.

God, my back hurts. I worry about what will happen after this baby is born. How will I care for



*us both! I can't work anywhere I might be found. The baby's sire—I refuse to call him by name or call him my baby's father—will be looking for us. I won't go back. I won't let them condemn me or my child to that life.*

*I won't.*

She wasn't out but for just a few moments as Derek was carrying her back into the cabin. "I'm awake. Sorry about that," she said, feeling as if she ought to tell him to put her down, but she didn't want to.

Like most girls who were tall and curvy, Tess had spent a lot of her life wishing that someday some gorgeous hunk might come along and sweep her off her feet. She was finding she rather liked it. And there wasn't even a hint that she might be too heavy for him, which made sense when you considered he was a bear-shifter. She said that again in her own mind: bear-shifter.

Instead of setting her down or tucking her back into bed, he sat down—naked as the day he was born—in the comfy leather wingback by the fire. He settled her in his lap, which might have been nicer if he hadn't been naked, and she'd had on more than just one of his old sweaters. It was another tall and curvy girl fantasy to have a boyfriend who was so much taller and bigger than you who didn't mind you wearing his clothes and whose sweaters, shirts, et cetera were all big enough so as to make you feel petite.

Tess might have chalked up his consideration to chivalry. There was an air of the noble warrior about Derek. But she knew there was more involved than that. The large, hard cock that throbbed against her backside let her know the man was most definitely interested in her—and not just as someone he

was compelled to look after. That was part of Derek's appeal. He was a protector. As nice as it was that he could cook, and he could, she thought he was much better suited to being in law enforcement than he was to being a chef.

Or maybe not. She giggled softly—something she didn't do very often.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. None of this—any of it—is your fault. Understand?”

She smiled and kissed his cheek, pulling back when he growled.

He tightened his arms around her. “Don't, Tess. I wasn't growling at you.”

“We're the only ones here.”

“Not really. We both have inner bears who also have wants and needs. Yours may be nice and polite, but right now mine is raging at me to be turned loose to call to yours and run through the fields, to bring you back here, take you to his bed, and claim you.”

“I don't know if that's the worst idea you've ever had.”

Derek shook his head. “It is. You just found out that bear-shifters are real, and that you are one. That's kind of a lot to process. The last thing you need to do is have some horny polar bear trying to get you into his bed so he can make wild, passionate love to you until you're too sore and tired to ever want to leave it.”

He was so serious. “Do you want me to get up out of your lap?”

“No. Do you want to?”

Tess burrowed into him. “Not particularly. I like sitting in your lap, being close to you.”

He relaxed his body, but kept his arms tight around her, holding her as if he never wanted to let go. “What made you giggle?”

She had to stop and think for a moment. Coherent thinking was difficult at the moment. Like Derek's bear, hers wanted out and to do the same things as his. And the woman wanted to be ravaged in the way he described. No soft, sweet and romantic lovemaking, but something wild and fierce. But he was probably right. This was probably not the time for her to throw herself into a passionate affair with a man she barely knew, and yet even as she thought it, she knew that wasn't true.

"I was just thinking about you as a chef. Not that I don't think you could rock any career you wanted, but you seem so much more suited to being a cop than a cook. Then I had a vision of you in your chef's white, directing the kitchen staff, and I could hear a narrator saying, 'Chef by day, superhero by night—the white bear seeks out those who are in need of justice.'"

Derek chuckled. "You see me as a superhero?"

"Most definitely. All those rippling muscles and well, not to put it too finely, you're kind of hung. That's not true," she said, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks, "you're really hung."

He groaned as his cock throbbed harder beneath her. "Could we not talk about my cock?"

"Why are there guys outside? Are they always there?"

"No. Zak sent them. Here's the thing, Tess, our father—Zak's, Annie's, and mine—is an old school bastard. To his way of thinking, you were sired by one of his people and then stolen from him. She-bears are a commodity to him, and he's going to want you back. We're not going to let them have you. I want to take you to Zak's compound. You'll be safer there. I also wasn't sure about how my trying to tell you about who you are was going to go, so I wanted to keep you here. And maybe I just wanted you all to myself for a few more hours."

Derek shifted in the chair, probably trying to get more comfortable, but all he managed to do was get his cock pressed more closely to her. He continued. "Zak wanted us safe, so he sent a few of his warriors. If—and that's a big if—Henry gets wind of you being here and decides to get stupid,

both Zak and I wanted to be sure we could protect you. This way you and I can get some sleep, and tomorrow we'll head to Zak's."

"I don't want to be any trouble. Maybe I shouldn't have come. Maybe you should just take me to the airport."

"It won't help. Once Henry knows you exist, he'll be after you. We won't let him have you. Bear fights are violent and are best done out of the sight of prying non-shifter eyes."

"But I don't want to bring trouble to your brother and his people."

"They're your people now too. And trouble has already arrived; no way to pretend it never was. I don't think Henry would be foolish enough to attack Zak outright. Trust me when I tell you, he'd lose."

"You seemed to know something about my birth mother. Did you know her?"

"Not really. I have vague impressions of her. I was only two when she left. Annie knew her better. She was older and your mother was kind to her." He smiled. "She was fierce, your mother. She had been abducted and forced into a pair bonding with your sire..."

"You never call him my father."

"He was a bastard. I don't call Henry my father, either."

"What happened?"

"I don't remember any of this; it's just what I've been told over the years. Your mother was able to contact a member of a group known as the Shadow Sisters. With few exceptions, they don't trust male members of shifter society. If you're interested, Annie can tell you more about them. She's worked with them for years."

Derek chuckled and shook his head. "Her mate, Deke, thinks she no longer does, but I know my sister. No cave lion is going to tell her what to do. Anyway, your mother was able to communicate with them, and they tried to get her out. Somehow Henry and your sire got wind of it, caught the

woman from the Shadow Sisters, and murdered her, thinking it would force your mom to stay. She was pregnant with you. But she didn't let them stop her. She got the both of you out and carved out a life for herself here in Mystic River."

"Did she live in town? Are there people who knew her?"

"Probably. The best person to talk to would either be the retired sheriff, Desmond, or Colby Reynolds. Desmond was sheriff during your mother's time. Colby is... well, Colby. I'm convinced there's little that goes on—past, present, or future—that he doesn't know about. I can probably arrange for you to meet with them."

"I'd like that. Do you know where she lived?"

"Right here. This was an old homestead cabin that she worked out of. When I came to Mystic River last year, I bought the homestead cabin and renovated it."

"You did a good job."

"It isn't fancy and doesn't have a lot of separation."

Tess laughed. "It reminds me a lot of my loft down on the waterfront. Do you know how my parents ended up with me?"

"The story goes your sire found out where your mother was and came after you or probably both of you. He confronted her as a bear, she shifted and fought for you. She managed to kill him."

"Did she die of her wounds?"

"I wish I could tell you she did. The people who raised you must have come across the fight and thought they'd be next..."

"Oh my god," whispered Tess.

"They didn't know, Tess. There was no way for them to know. Somehow, probably as she was dying, she had to have shifted and asked them to look after you and then shifted back. Your parents had to have been terrified, but still they located you and got you out of Alaska. They had no other choice. Even if they'd known about Henry's clan, if they'd tried to return you and he knew they'd found out about shifters, he'd

have killed them as well. It's one of our most sacred laws—non-shifters cannot know about shifters.”

“But they killed her...”

“No, baby. They killed a polar bear—an enraged one with blood all over her, who'd just killed another one. And then even as scared as they had to have been, they took you, protected you, and gave you a life. No, if you ask me, your parents were heroes.”

She flung her arms around his neck, hugging him close. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For telling me about my birth mother and what happened to her, but more importantly for not allowing me to think even for a moment that the parents who loved and raised me did anything wrong—the whole illegal adoption thing notwithstanding.”

“Your mom is kind of a badass legend in polar bear circles. We can leave for Zak's in the morning, but we probably ought to try and get some sleep.” He stood up and set her—reluctantly, it seemed to Tess—on her feet. “You take the bed; I'll sleep on the couch.”

“Nonsense. If anyone sleeps on the couch it'll be me.”

“I'm not having you sleep on the damn couch,” he said grumpily.

Tess suppressed her smile. She was finding Derek got grumpy if he felt you were insulting his chivalrous nature. “Okay, but I'm not having you sleep on it, either. We can share the bed. God knows it's big enough.”

They stared each other down. Finally, he relented. “Fine, but you stay on your side of the bed.”

“Don't worry, Deputy Grayson, your virtue is safe with me.”

Derek snorted, and headed toward the bed, grabbing pillows out of the antique storage trunk he used for a coffee table. Tess liked hers better, but basically their styles were

very similar. He lay the pillows down the middle, dividing the bed in half. As barriers went, it wasn't much, but Tess could kind of appreciate the effort.

It seemed even sillier when she climbed into bed—Derek on one side of the pillows and her on another, but when she thought of it, the fact that he was doing his best to protect her was sweet and very kind. He probably believed there was a lot going on in her head, and there was, but most likely not in the way he thought.

Derek's gift of telling her what he knew, offering to introduce her to others who might know more, had allowed her to settle a lot of the things that had been flying around her head. Her poor birth mother had endured so much and had given her life to ensure Tess's safety, and then her parents had picked up the torch, so to speak, and spent their lives giving her a family and a happy childhood. Most people might not agree, but Tess felt blessed.

Derek turned over on his side so he was facing away from her, giving Tess an unobstructed view of his strong, muscular back all the way down to where the covers had scooped down, and she could see the top of his ass. It was a truly magnificent piece of work. She couldn't wait for the day she could gaze, touch, and kiss every single bit of his gorgeous body.

Strangely, she knew there would come such a day.

Soon, the deep, rhythmic sound of his breathing told her he was asleep. Sleep was far more elusive for her. Tess knew it was insane, but she found herself falling for the polar bear shifter who had come charging to the rescue and into her life. But hey, if she could believe in a polar bear and a reindeer shifter, named Dash, why not love at first sight? And Santa Claus. Definitely Santa Claus.

# CHAPTER 12





## DEREK

Derek wasn't sure who had removed the pillow barrier, when it had been removed, or where the pillows had gone. All he knew was that instead of waking up sleeping on his side, his body using his cock for a kickstand and wishing like hell Tess was curled up with him, she was simply there. Sometime during the night, they had each gravitated toward the other.

As he opened his eyes, he found the pillows. They were on the other side of Tess. Somehow, she had wriggled between them, and he was glad of it. He laid on his back. Her head rested on his shoulder, her hand on his chest. His arm was curled around her, holding her close. His erection was snuggled between them.

It would be so easy to just roll her onto her back and ease into her pussy before she even knew what was happening. That would be a terrible violation of her trust, but his cock didn't much care. All it knew was that her warm, wet pussy was tantalizingly close, and it wanted inside. It would be a much better way to start the morning, not that the night had ended badly. Tess had seemed to take the whole "you're a shifter, your mother killed your sire, and my sire will be out to get you" thing rather well.

"Good morning," she said sleepily.

He couldn't resist the temptation to push her long, dark curls off her face. "Good morning."

"You moved the pillows."

He chuckled. “You’d best look again. You’re the one that crossed over into my territory.”

“I don’t suppose we could just lie here in bed and hope the world will go away and leave us alone, can we?”

“I wish we could,” he said, giving her a squeeze as he rolled up off the bed.

He hadn’t bothered with clothes last night so pulled on a pair of sweatpants. He looked toward the bed to find Tess sitting upright, her knees pulled to her chest, the bed covers caught between her legs and breasts, but still leaving a lot of side boob showing.

“You seem to have lost your sweater, or rather my sweater.”

“I prefer to sleep naked, and figured as you were naked and had our trusty bundling board between us...”

“They were pillows...”

“You get the idea. Anyway, I wanted to be comfortable so pulled it off.”

“We need to get the rest of your things from Trudy’s.”

“That sounds good, but don’t you think we ought to invite the guys who were out there all night in for breakfast?”

Derek chuckled. “You’re going to be really popular among our clan members. How about you get dressed, and I’ll go round up the boys. I’m sure we have enough to feed them something.”

“Will do.”

He gave her a last look, thinking how right she looked in his bed, and headed out to gather Zak’s men.

Recognizing his brother’s second-in-command, Derek extended his hand. “Wyatt. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Zak was putting together the team, and I wanted a chance to check out your place. Zak called. He’s already heard from Henry. That bastard Reynolds must have told him.”

Derek shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't think Colby is exactly what other people think he is. For one thing, whenever the chips are down or the odds are stacked against us, Colby steps up to lend a hand. Don't get me wrong; I think the man has a shady side, I just don't think he's the bad guy he wants people to think he is."

"It doesn't really matter. Zak said Henry is frothing at the mouth."

"Henry is always frothing at the mouth. I thought I'd run Tess out to Trudy's to pick up the rest of her things, but she thought we should feed you lot."

"Can she cook?" asked one of the other guards as he joined them.

Derek nodded. "Surprisingly well. Come on up to the cabin."

The other two men went ahead of them, but Wyatt held him back. "Why don't you let me send the boys to Trudy's to pick up her things? I think your mate is safer back at the lighthouse."

"Zak is that concerned?"

"He is. Don't get me wrong, I'd put the four of us up against three or four times that many of Henry's people, but if we can avoid violence, that would be preferable. How much does she know?"

Derek was getting antsy. The other men were headed into his cabin with his unclaimed mate. He didn't like it.

Wyatt laid his hand on Derek's shoulder. "They know she is your fated mate, as do all the other unattached males in our clan. No one will lay a hand on her."

"She knows the bare bones. She doesn't know about fated mates or that I'm hers. But she does know what she is, and she knows the little we know about her mother. I told her Doc and Colby might know more."

"Colby? Colby would have been a child."

Derek laughed. “I’m convinced that Colby was never a child. He came out of the womb knowing everything and unraveling his Machiavellian schemes.”

“I don’t get it. You’re the deputy sheriff around here, and you like him.”

“I do. He does a whole lot more good than harm. I often wonder if anyone knows him at all. I think he was an enigma even to his sister and Winter.”

“I hope you’re right. I know a lot of people are depending on him if and when the fight comes.”

“I have no doubt he’ll be there. In fact, my guess is he’ll be the one that lets us know they’re coming.”

They headed up to the cabin. Derek bristled as they opened the door, and he could hear Tess laughing with the men. Then his nostrils picked up the aromas coming from the kitchen—berries, bacon, and butter. Despite Wyatt’s assurances, Derek joined Tess in the kitchen, wrapping his arms around her from the back and brushing the side of her cheek with his lips. She leaned into him and brought her hand up to his opposite cheek in an intimate gesture.

“Tess is making some kind of hash with two kinds of potatoes, trout, onions and bell peppers.”

“That’s not what I smell,” said Wyatt, joining the other men at the island’s countertop. “I smell cream, vanilla, cinnamon, and maple.”

“So, the hash I get,” said Derek. “What’s the cream, spices, and maple for?”

“Tres Leches French Toast.”

“What can I do to help?” asked Derek.

“Think you can handle cooking the hash? Everything is cut up and the onions and potatoes are ready so just add the rest.”

“Got it.”

Once again they cooked companionably in the kitchen as they fed Wyatt and the two other men who had stood guard

over them.

“Wyatt suggested we send the boys to fetch your things at Trudy’s,” said Derek as they were all eating. Derek had insisted she take the last countertop stool, and he stood eating his breakfast next to hers.

“Your brother is that worried?” she asked.

“Not worried, just cautious.”

“As I told Derek this morning,” drawled Wyatt, “I have no doubt we can and will kick their ass if they try something. It’s just better if we can avoid a fight, but make no mistake, the clan will fight for you.”

“You really think he’d harm me?”

“Depends on how you define ‘harm,’” said Derek. “Do I think he’d physically hurt you? Not to start off with, but I do think he’d make sure you never got to leave again.”

She searched their faces and seeing the truth of his words, she took a bite of her French toast. “Then your sire had best hope that never happens. I know my mother escaped, but not only will I escape, I will bring down a world of hurt on him and his damn clan.”

Wyatt chuckled. “And here I thought Zak had gotten the feisty mate.”

He held his breath to see how she would react as the other two men grinned.

“I haven’t had a chance to meet Sienna—it’s Sienna, right?” asked Tess. Derek nodded. “But unless she has a black belt in Krav Maga and has been trained with handguns and semi-automatic firearms, I’d say I have a leg up on her. My mother—the one who raised me—insisted my sister and I know how to defend ourselves. I never understood why she was so insistent; now I do.”

When they’d finished up breakfast, Derek sent the two men who had come with Wyatt to get Tess’s things and settle her bill. “We’ll take the boat back to Otter Cove. The boys can grab my boat when they get back.”

Wyatt, Tess, and Derek headed down to the boat, loaded Tess's things, and pulled away.

"What about things for you?" she asked, looking back at the cabin.

"Don't worry, baby, we'll be back. I keep some things over at the lighthouse at Zak's so I don't have to pack a bag each time I visit."

"Deke and Annie are going to come down tonight. Zak thought we might have a bonfire."

Derek chuckled and said to Tess, "That's Zak's subtle way of letting Henry know you're safe at the lighthouse. He knows better than to try and snatch you from there."

"Aren't people going to be pissed that an interloper is coming in and bringing trouble with her?"

"You aren't an interloper, and there will only be trouble if Henry makes it. I don't think he wants to pick a fight with our clan. He'll lose, and he knows it," said Wyatt reassuringly.

The cigarette boat made short work of the trip between Mystic River and Otter Cove. Derek had called Jax before they left, arranging to take a few days off until he could get things more settled. As they pulled up to the dock, he watched Tess's face as she saw the lighthouse for the first time.

"It was one of the first lighthouses built in Alaska and came online in the late eighteen-hundreds. It was decommissioned probably twenty-five years ago, and Zak bought it while he was in the military. It had quite a bit of land with it, but he also acquired additional acreage so that he could build the compound for the clan. His hope is that at some point, the clan will have two sites here at Otter Cove—the traditional one founded by our ancestors at Akiak, and this one."

"I take it your brother doesn't care for your sire, either."

"Old Henry is a bastard and if it's left up to him, the clan will cease to exist," spat Wyatt. "He clings to the old ways for no other reason than they serve his personal interests. The younger members of the clan—those who are worth a damn—

leave and the she-bears refuse to stay. Zak split off when he came home, and we've been attracting polar bears not only from Akiak but other parts of Alaska and Canada."

They were greeted by Zak, Sienna, and several others. "Welcome," said Sienna, linking her arm in Tess's and leading her towards the lighthouse building.

"She'll be fine with Sienna," said Zak. "We're going to put her in Annie's room. Where you two end up sleeping is none of my concern, but Sienna thought it would be presumptuous to put you in the same room, especially given how new all of this is to her. Does she know about being your fated mate?"

"Not yet. It seemed a lot to put on her given everything else. I told her Desmond and Colby might know something."

"Des might, and I'm sure he'd be willing to talk to her. Colby was only a kid, but you're right; he probably knows. Deke just got back earlier today. He and Annie send their regrets, but will be here tomorrow."

"I understand we're throwing a bonfire," said Derek with a grin.

"Well, we wouldn't want Henry looking for her."

"She's got Teresa Travers's journals."

"They ought to give some real interesting insights as to what went on. If nothing else, if Henry gets the Council involved, it might be nice to have it as ammunition. But the strongest claim we'll have..."

"I know. I know," said Derek. "But it's an awful lot to put on her. She knew she was adopted, but that's about it. I thought I'd let her get used to being a polar bear shifter. I thought I'd see if she'd like to shift and go for a run."

"A run is good, but swimming is better. A lot of animals can run, but to be able to glide through frigid waters like we do is unlike any other animal."

"True enough," said Derek, thinking of all the times he'd gone swimming in the frigid waters of the Gulf of Alaska.

A combination of a thick, two coated system, a tough hide and insulating layer of fat were essential to keeping warm in the icy water.

Once Tess was settled, he asked her if she wanted to go for a walk. Taking her hand, they strolled away from the main compound but still within the safety of its borders.

“Is it hard to learn to shift?” she asked without much preamble.

“Not at all. Without the Celtic knot to keep your instincts at bay, you’d have learned to shift as a kid or at least by the time you were in your teens.”

“Why do you think my parents hid that from me, even after I started talking about having a polar bear as a spirit guide?” Tess stopped and took his hand in hers, looking into his eyes.

Derek rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. “That must have scared the shit out of them. And in their defense, they had no clue what they were dealing with. Remember, the only polar bears they’d seen were violent, lethal beasts—certainly not what they wanted for their darling baby girl.”

“How’d they know about the iron?”

“It’s one of those universal myths about magical creatures that’s actually true,” he said with a shrug. “It keeps a lot of things from shifting. But you shouldn’t be upset with them. You lived surrounded by humans in a place where polar bears don’t exist. Nothing good would have come of you shifting in the wrong place in front of the wrong people.”

“That’s true. Could you teach me?”

“Sure, there’s no reason not to. It really isn’t all that hard,” he said as he continued their stroll without releasing her hand.

“But how do I make her give me control back? She was always lurking in my mind, but since I quit wearing the Celtic knot, she’s been far more of a presence.”

“She came forward when she thought you were in danger. It is only in that instance that she would not wait for your



invitation, and she will give up control when you ask her to. The nice thing about Otter Cove and Mystic River is that you can shift pretty much anytime you like.”

“So, what’s with the ending up naked?”

He laughed. “Clothes, shoes, and all that stuff except precious metals and gems do not survive the shift, so you have to either get naked before you shift or plan to have clothes afterwards.”

“You want to tell me why Wyatt referred to me as your ‘mate?’”

That stopped him in his tracks for only a moment before he continued on. He’d really hoped she hadn’t picked up on that, but she had.

“Not particularly. Wait, let me rephrase that. I don’t really want to talk about it at this exact moment; not that I’m glad it isn’t true.”

“What makes you think it’s true?” she persisted.

“The buzzing in your head, the nausea, and dizziness—that only occurred when you were around me and vice versa. Sure sign that your fated mate is near.”

He thought he might have lost her, but she seemed to be thinking. “Is that why I feel so comfortable with you? That feeling we’ve been together before?”

He nodded. “I didn’t tell you because you already had so much to deal with.”

“What usually happens with fated mates?”

He sighed, but it was with humor. “I guess we’re talking about it, then. They become a bonded pair. If you were pureblood human or a different kind of shifter, at our bonding ceremony, we’d cut an X in our hands and co-mingle the blood so that you would be turned.”

“As in made into a polar bear-shifter?”

“Yep.”

“But we don’t have to do that?”

“Technically no, but a lot of people do it anyway. Part of the ceremony is ‘blood of my blood.’”

“If we shift down here, can I go back to the lighthouse to shift back?”

“Yeah. It’s usually easier to shift outdoors at first. If you want, I can turn my back to give you some privacy.”

“Do you want to turn your back on me and not see me naked?”

Derek growled and she laughed. “You are killing me here. You need to remember that while what you see before you is a man, I am also part polar bear. Every biological instinct tells me to cast aside human convention, throw you on the ground, and claim you for my own. But I’m trying to remind myself of all you’ve been hit with lately. I’ve got a tight hold on my lust, but if you keep teasing me, I’m not promising that I won’t let my bear off the leash and follow my baser instincts.”

“I’m sorry. I was teasing but didn’t mean it that way. For the record, I’m not all that sure I’d put up much of a fight. I find you incredibly arousing and feel drawn to you in a way I’ve never felt before, so I’ll try and follow your lead.”

“Does anyone else know—about the journals or about your birth mother?”

“My sister knows I have them, and that I think my birth mother may have been a bit crackers, but I don’t really remember how much I told her. But I didn’t know about who and what I was. She just thinks, as did I, that I was coming up to try and trace my roots. Lara would never betray us. Never.”

Derek believed her, but that didn’t mean that others would. They might need to get word to those they trusted in Seattle to keep an eye on Lara.

“So, what do I do?”

“Just find a quiet place in your mind, focus on your bear, and ask her to come forward. I’m pretty sure after all this time...”

He didn't even get to finish before he felt the vortex for the shift open and he turned to see the swirling mist envelop Tess's naked form as the lightning sizzled, the thunder sounded, and shards of color created the maelstrom. As it dissipated, Tess's polar-bear form was revealed. She was a glorious snow-white bear whose eyes sparkled with mirth and intelligence. She charged Derek, playfully bowling him over before whirling around on the rocky shore and galloping into the glacial coastal waters of the Gulf of Alaska.

Derek knew a challenge when one had been issued. He stripped quickly and called forth his own bear. The instant the centralized storm around him had dissipated, he charged forward in chase of his mate. This was one hunt he wouldn't lose.

# CHAPTER 13



## TESS

Journal Entry, November 5th

Today I shifted for the first time. I can't believe I wrote those words. It is somewhat mind-boggling to now know that I share a mind, body, and soul with a lethal predator, and yet within me she is gentle and grieves with me for that which I have lost.

I try to tell myself that never having had a family, I will adjust to having one and to having rules imposed by others. But I also know that's a load of crap.

I don't like it here. I don't like that I was forcibly mated to a man who thought it perfectly okay to kidnap me and rob me of my

humanity. I am trying to convince myself that the freedom and joy that I find in being my bear self compensates for all the shit that comes with it.

But she knows. I cannot fool her. She knows, and when I cry all alone in the night when he's done with me, she chuffs in consolation and in sorrow.

There must be something I can do. Some way I can get away. I overheard Henry and his henchmen condemning a group of women known as the Shadow Sisters. Perhaps they can help.

The first time she read that entry, her heart broke for her mother, and she believed she was cracking under the strain. But now, Tess knew better. Knocking Derek on his ass had been fun, but she doubted it would work a second time. She rushed towards the waters that beckoned her with their siren song. She was one with the sea and with the beast within.

There was something freeing in becoming her bear self. She felt as though a puzzle piece that she had long known was missing was finally falling into place. Because she'd always accepted her polar bear as a kind of spirit guide, it also felt as if every question she'd ever been too afraid to verbalize was now being answered.

It also meant that she knew a lot about polar bears. She'd studied them. They were incredibly strong swimmers, swimming across bays or wide expanses of water without hesitation or fear. They could swim for several hours at a time over long distances without rest.

Tess knew from her reading that her enormous paws were webbed, and she used them to propel her through the water, keeping her hind feet and legs flat to be used as rudders. She wasn't able to swim particularly fast compared to other marine mammals, but there was a grace and effortlessness to her swimming that she would never have experienced as a human.

She dove underwater, making shallow dives as if she were stalking prey or navigating ice floes. She couldn't hold her breath much longer as a polar bear than she did as a human, but still, it was easier, and there was no need for nose plugs. She played in the water, swimming upside down and doing a kind of backflip. She could not only see Derek coming, but she could also feel him.

She dove down, making a sharp pivot and swimming past him to get away, although it was only play. Tess had always liked the water, but this was something else again. She could glide through the water with a speed and, dare she say, elegance she'd never known before.

However, once she emerged from the water, all that disappeared. She had more of a lumbering gait as she rushed up the rocky beach. She wasn't even a little bit cold, which was nice. By the time Derek realized she had left the water and emerged himself, Tess had shifted back, pulled on her clothes and made a dash for the lighthouse—being in the cold as a polar bear was one thing; being outside in people clothes was something else altogether.



Tess spent the next several days getting to know Zak and his people and how the grumpy alpha ensured that his people were happy and well-cared for. The thing that always made her

smile was how he doted on his mate. Zak made sure that Sienna had pretty much anything that made her happy. She did find that most of the shifter males, although they were very much in charge, made sure that their mates felt loved and appreciated. They also seemed to participate equally in taking care of their children.

Derek's job kept him away through most of the day. He stayed there most nights and was always there for breakfast. He and Tess had taken to getting up and cooking for those in the lighthouse cottage, which was actually an enormous octagon-shaped building with the tower for the light house coming out of the top.

Sitting on one of the dug-out benches, Tess smiled as Derek's sister, Annie, joined her. "He's nuts about you."

"So he says."

"He's serious, Tess. I've never known Derek to behave around a woman the way he does you. He's always been a bit of a playboy—he didn't break any hearts, but he was kind of a friend with benefits, and he's still on excellent terms with his former girlfriends—but with you he's different. Even Deke noticed it, and Deke never notices anything about interpersonal relationships."

Tess smiled. If Zak was grumpy, Deke was downright malevolent, but he loved Annie and would do anything for her.

"He says we're fated mates."

"That's not something my brother would say unless he was certain it was true."

"What if I don't want to be—mind you, I'm not saying that, but you know, what if?"

Annie laughed. "Girl, you are gonzo over my baby brother." Her expression turned serious. "You know what he says is the truth, and I can tell you from experience those feelings won't go away, and neither will Derek. He will follow you to the ends of the earth to keep you safe and by his side. I ran from Deke. I put both of us through hell. If you truly believe this is not for you and that you cannot make a life with



my brother, then leave. I'll help you get away, and the Shadow Sisters will keep you safe..."

"They didn't help my mother," Tess said softly with a trace of bitterness.

"No, because my murdering bastard of a sire killed the woman they sent and buried her somewhere on Akiak. By the time the Sisters knew she hadn't made it to help your mother, Teresa was gone. We learned from that experience and a couple of others. Hard-learned lessons to be sure, but ones we took to heart. We can get you out and set you, and your sister if you like, up with new identities."

Tess shook her head. "No. I don't think so. Like Derek says, so much has happened so fast, but I feel so drawn to him, in a way I never have to anyone before."

Annie nodded. "I know the feeling, and so does Sienna, so don't think you're alone. You aren't."

"I want to go to Akiak."

"That's not happening."

"There have to be people there who knew my birth mother..."

"But there are also people there who were directly or indirectly involved with her abduction, being turned without her consent, and the murder of the woman who was trying to get her out. I know Deke said Desmond was out on a fishing trip, but he'll be back. One thing you have to know is that Zak expects Derek to keep you safe and that means keeping you in line. Polar bears aren't fond of having their authority thwarted."

"What about cave lions?" Tess quipped.

"Even less so, but then I like to live dangerously, and usually when I appeal to his baser instincts, Deke forgets why he was mad at me in the first place. Just think about what I said. All I ask is that you don't break Derek's heart deliberately."

"I won't."

They walked back up to the cottage. At the front deck, Tess turned and looked toward the south. She so wanted Lara to see this and be a part of it. Derek said it would put her in danger, and Tess believed him, but if Lara couldn't come here, Tess needed to see her. She couldn't make any decisions without seeing her sister first, but she knew what her heart, soul, and inner bear wanted.

Tess could feel the familiar buzz as Derek pulled his boat up to the dock in the compound. She stood and walked down the pathway to greet him. His hand stretched out and cupped her neck as he drew her gently forward and into his body. He lowered his head, brushing his lips across hers. The tingle every time he touched her to hold her hand or to guide her somewhere was magnified by a thousand times as all the lives they'd shared before were unleashed and flashed through her memory.

She reached up, clutching his shirt in her hands and hauling him close as the flame of desire sparked into a full-blown wildfire. His fingers tangled in her hair as he tilted her head back, his tongue surging in to dominate and dance with hers. His free hand traced her spine until it found the curve of her buttocks and squeezed.

"I missed you, too," he murmured as he broke the kiss, wrapped his arm around her shoulders and headed up to the house.

Dinner that night was a lively, noisy affair that Tess had come to cherish. She never remembered a dinner with her family in Seattle where there'd been this much love and laughter. After cleaning up the dishes, Tess headed into her room, undressing and slipping into bed. The woman who had suffered from bouts of insomnia all her life was asleep in an instant. It was as if being back where she belonged allowed her to push away any and all worry and just indulge.

As it had before she even made plans to visit Alaska and every night since she'd been here, Derek walked into her dreams as if he was the only man she'd ever wanted or needed.

*He drew back the covers that shielded her nudity from him. “See how beautiful you are? Why do you want to hide yourself from me?”*

*“I don’t. I don’t want to hide anything from you,” she all but purred at him.*

*His clothes vanished in an instant—the way they often did in dreams—and he stretched out on top of her, making a home for himself at the apex of her thighs, rubbing the stubble of his beard along the soft skin of her breasts, leaving the barest trail of bristled flesh and making her nipples bead into hard diamond shards.*

*Tess wound her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer as she wrapped her legs around him. Something was different this time. It wasn’t just about sex or arousal or need. No, this went much deeper than that. It was as if the veil between all their lives—past, present, and future—dropped to reveal their fate. This wasn’t lovemaking or possession. This was a sacred reconciliation of all that had come before and would be again. Things were perfect in the dream world, but not so much in the real one. She wanted to resolve some things in her own mind and really, really wanted to talk to Lara.*

*Derek wasted no time as his cock poised at the entrance to her core and pushed in—no hard strokes, no shorter and then ever deepening thrusts—just a single long penetration. Derek was claiming what was his, what she could no longer deny him.*

*He drew back and thrust into her, burying himself up to his balls, giving her his weight, as he drew back and stroked in again. He set up a relentless pace as he pounded into her, his cock never breaking speed or rhythm. His hands slipped under her, holding her steady while he gave himself up to their mutual rapture. His body slid along hers, she could feel every muscle, every patch of hair, every piece of scar tissue as it rasped along her body.*

*Twisting his hips in just the right way, he managed not only to hit her clit but the sweet spot inside her pussy with every surge forward and back. The tension built with every*

*single stroke. Tess felt as if her whole body had become a time bomb just waiting to go off. He drove deep with a final, brutal push, causing their mutual orgasm to crash all around them like the stormy seas outside. He ground himself against her as he gave up his cum to fill her with its warmth and promise.*

Tess woke to find herself alone. She knew it was only in the physical sense, and that if she wanted, she could go out by the bonfire. There was always someone milling around. But she didn't want to. She wanted to hug her pillow close and dream that it was Derek and realized that someday it would be.

Knowing what she wanted dovetailed perfectly with what fate seemed to be offering her, Tess curled up, snuggled into her pillow, closed her eyes, and hoped for a repeat of the dream.

# CHAPTER 14



## TESS

Journal Entry, December 25th

There is no Santa Claus. I had thought that perhaps this Christmas I might find some joy. I always believed that finding out I was pregnant would be the ultimate gift. Such is not the case.

As much as I have tried to believe otherwise, I am a prisoner here. It's a beautiful prison for the most part, but a prison, nonetheless. Most of those around me do not understand why I cannot simply conform. Why I cannot accept what happened to me and behave as if it hadn't. I was kidnapped and mated to a man who sees me as nothing

*more than a vessel to carry his offspring.*

*They expect me to be grateful—at least the males do. But there are those females who yearn for a better life—only they are too afraid to snatch back their freedom and run. I am not among them.*

*I will see no child of mine raised in this place. We shall be free.*

The more she read of Teresa's journals the more she found to admire about the woman who had given birth to her. She must have been desperate—pregnant, alone, and knowing that any bid for freedom would be punished. Holding her mother's journal, standing on the dock of the lighthouse compound, she looked out over the waters of the Gulf of Alaska.

Getting to know those who had once been a part of the clan at Akiak, she could well imagine what Teresa's life might have been like. Not one person who had been at Akiak had anything good to say about it or its alpha, Henry.

She tipped her chin, considering. That wasn't precisely true. Most expressed their surprise that he had sired offspring as exceptional as Zak, Annie, and Derek. Apparently, Derek had been a bit of a hellraiser when he was young, but Tess found him to be sweet and kind, but with the same air of authority as his older brother, Zak. Tess found herself increasingly drawn to him and her dreams continued to be rich, sensual, and incredibly erotic.

Even though those who had left Akiak to join Zak's clan and Teresa's journals painted a grim picture of life there, those here at the lighthouse compound shared their own experiences

and confirmed that Teresa was not crazy and had to have been desperate to make a bid for her freedom with no one to help her. But Tess wanted to see it for herself. She supposed she wanted to look Henry in the eye and tell him her mother had taken back what he had stolen from her, and that Tess lived on in her name.

Derek was something of a conundrum. He could be goofy and gregarious, and yet there was an underlying steel to the man that belied his silly side. Part of her agreed with him that she had enough on her plate to deal with without becoming involved with him, especially as for Derek there would be nothing casual in their coming together. He truly believed they were fated mates, and when she allowed herself to think about it, she could almost believe it as well. But commitment to Derek meant leaving most of her old life behind.

Before she could commit to Derek, she needed to do two things: see her sister and go to Akiak and spit in the eye of the man who had robbed her mother of her freedom and ultimately her life. She had never once blamed her mother and father—the people who raised her—for Teresa’s death. She traced that right back to those at Akiak and ultimately to Henry. There was no way to tell what Teresa might have made of her life—good or bad.

“You don’t have to decide right this minute,” said Zak, who had come up beside her with the silence of a wraith moving through the wilderness. “You can take all the time that you need.”

“I thought you didn’t believe I was safe and wanted me to stay here,” she said without looking at him.

Zak chuckled—the sound so similar to Derek’s but lacking the ability to tickle its way up her skin and warm her to the depths of her soul. “I do want you safe. And I do believe you would be safest here with us or at least in Mystic River with Derek, but as my sister and mate remind me, you are strong, intelligent, and capable. The Shadow Sisters could help you, and even your sister, disappear. On the other hand, your sister could join us in Mystic River.”



Tess laughed. “My sister is not a bear-shifter, although I think she’d love the idea of shifters in general and would be a little disappointed that I was one and she wasn’t.”

“If that’s what she wanted, we could arrange for that—with or without her taking one of my people to mate.”

She searched his face. He was serious. He would offer her sister that gift. It was not something most clans would do. They would turn one of their own’s mate, but not just any human.

“Why?”

“Because she is your sister, and you are Derek’s mate. Don’t get me wrong; the unattached males in this clan would be all over trying to convince her to choose one of them, but if she wanted it, I would allow it.”

Tess sometimes forgot that the alphas of the clans were the ultimate authority, and their word was law.

“You don’t have to worry about it. She’s a vet in Seattle.”

“Otter Cove could use a vet. Autumn Miller, Jax’s mate, is an excellent vet, but she’s in Mystic River and has her hands full there. Besides, as you’ve no doubt heard, trouble is coming. We’re going to need all the medical help we can get. Doc is great, but he’s only one man and he’s a human doctor. The fact is, shifters heal better in their shifted form, so another vet would be an asset. Besides, Lara works with the Woodland Park Zoo and with exotic creatures.”

“Do you think she’s in danger? Derek kind of brushes it off when I ask him.”

Zak grinned. “Because Derek isn’t mated, he thinks it’s best to keep information he thinks will upset you from you. I, however, am far wiser...”

“Because you’re older?” Tess asked, skeptically.

“No. Because I am mated to Sienna, and I have learned the hard way it is far easier to tell her than to deal with the aftermath once she finds out—and she always finds out. My beautiful mate has a fiery temper, which she has no trouble

turning on me. I didn't mean to come down here and burden you with our troubles..."

"You didn't. You gave me a lot to think about. I can't thank you or everyone else here enough for your kindness and understanding."

"Think nothing of it. You are one of us—Derek or not. You belong here, but I am not one who will force anyone to stay who wishes to leave. If you do choose to leave, think seriously about taking your sister with you wherever you go."

"How worried should I be about her?"

"Not too. I had to do something I never thought I would. I called Colby Reynolds. He has assets all over the world, and I know he has a number of them in Seattle and is connected far more closely to the Shadow Sisters than anyone might have thought. He very smugly told me he already had people watching her. He's keen to meet you, by the way."

"What do you think? A lot of people say he's a gangster and not to be trusted, but Derek likes him and thinks there is far more to him than most believe."

"My brother is a wise man, which makes him an excellent lawyer. He also has exceptional taste in women." He tipped his ballcap to her. "You have a good day. I'll see you this evening."

Zak turned and headed back down the dock. He was as much of an enigma as his younger brother.

Hugging her journal to her chest, she walked back up to her room. Zak had given her a lot to think about. One thing was for sure, she needed to go back to Seattle and talk to Lara. She understood the shifters' need for secrecy, but Tess knew for a fact that Lara would never betray them. Ever.

Tess went into her closet and brought out her bags but stopped to look at them. She didn't need both if she was coming back. That was a good question—was she coming back? She thought about what Zak had said. She still wanted to know more about where she'd come from, what it was like to be a shifter, what it might mean to become a part of this

community, and perhaps more importantly, what it would mean to move forward in a relationship with Derek.

She could feel Derek as he approached the cottage. No longer was there an inordinate amount of buzzing in her head accompanied by headaches, nausea, and dizziness. Now, it was just a pleasant buzz that let her know he was here. He tapped on the partially closed door before coming into her room.

“What’s this?” he said, looking at her bags. “Were you just going to leave and not tell me?”

“Nothing of the sort,” she said as she turned to face him.

“Then what’s with the luggage?”

“I want to see my sister. I need to talk to her.”

“That’s what phones are for,” he said, getting a stubborn set to his lips.

Tess closed the small distance between them, laying her hand on his forearm. “I need to talk to her in person. I need to tell her what I’ve found out so far.”

“It is forbidden to tell humans of our existence. You would put everyone in danger.”

“Zak didn’t seem to think so. In fact, when I joked that she would be jealous because I was one and she wasn’t, he offered to turn her.”

“He did?”

Tess nodded. “Yes. He said she was in danger either way and thought she’d be safer up here.”

“She would be; so would you.”

“He also said there was trouble coming and that medical people would be needed. He thought she could make a place for herself in Otter Cove as a vet. I understand your boss’s wife is a vet in Mystic River, but it’s not like they’re right around the corner.”

“That’s all true. But you don’t need to go to Seattle,” he said, sounding almost petulant. But he was a polar bear. She

didn't think polar bears could be petulant. They were too big to sulk. "Have her come here."

"I don't want her to feel pressured, and no, I don't think any of you would allow that to happen. But I know my little sister."

"I don't like it."

"So I gather," said Tess, wryly. "I was just trying to decide if I needed to pack everything or just what I'd need for a couple of days. In fact, I'm not sure I need to pack at all. After all, I'll be back before the end of the week, and I have a whole loft full of my stuff..."

Tess knew she was rambling and probably not making any sense. Before she could figure out how to do that, Derek was behind her, spinning her around and setting her up on the dresser, moving between her legs and making a place for himself. Tess wasn't sure how to respond. Usually Derek was polite and kind, but she could all but feel the passion and tension rolling off of him.

He loomed over her, invading her personal space as she sat on the dresser. He trailed his fingers up the outside of her legs, and she wondered if somehow fate had intervened when she'd opted to put on a heavy, full knit skirt with a pair of boots and a belted sweater. His hands continued to move up underneath her skirt.

She inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of him. There was no cologne or aftershave, only the fresh clean aroma of the sea and his masculinity. She could feel the heat and arousal rolling off him like the waves that lapped the shoreline.

Derek slid one hand down her leg only to place it on her arm and draw his finger to the hollow of her throat before sliding under her hair to cradle the base of her head. Her nipples perked up and her pussy began to soften as he lowered his head, his mouth covering hers. Heat sizzled along her synapses and desire flashed through her system, encompassing her entire being.

He kissed her with a mixture of sweetness and seduction. He nibbled along her bottom lip, teasing and coaxing as his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. There was something about the way Derek kissed. It wasn't so much intoxicating as it was inebriating. She felt more drugged than drunk, and yet she never felt intimidated. Her mouth seemed to soften of its own accord and his fingers wound in the hair at the base of her neck as his tongue surged in.

Derek didn't have the kind of in-your-face dominance that his brother had. Derek's was quieter, more persuasive, but there was no doubt in either of their minds as to who was in control. His tongue tangled and danced with hers as he used his hand to angle her head into the precise position he wanted it.

Tess wrapped her legs around him under his powerful buttocks and her arms came up to drape over his shoulders before clasping her hands behind his neck. The hand he had under her skirt slid its way closer to her sex and he smiled as he realized she wasn't wearing any panties. She'd given up doing so a long, long time ago.

He covered her mound with his hand before strumming his thumb across her clit. It was all Tess could do not to come all over his hand as she cried out his name. Given that her lips were parted, Derek once more allowed his tongue to invade her mouth, tasting and exploring as he tightened his grip on her hair and allowed his fingers to slide down to her pussy, tracing light lines up and down until she was all but squirming.

"Hmm, does my mate like having me play with her pussy?" he purred.

She knew that polar bears didn't purr, but she was pretty sure her mate had just done so. 'Her mate?' Why did that suddenly sound like the most natural thing in the world? Thank god she hadn't said it out loud. Tess moaned and rubbed her swollen labia against the heel of his hand.

Derek lightly flicked her clit with his thumb as he used his fingers to part her lower lips and ease into her pussy. He plunged them about halfway in, curling them up before

drawing them out, making her tremble as he pressed them back inside.

“Such a nice hot, wet pussy. I can’t wait to get balls deep in you and ride you hard. Would you like that, Tess?”

He didn’t really expect her to answer him, did he? Because speech was absolutely not possible; she was having trouble with breathing. All that she could process was the way his hand was tugging gently at her hair and his fingers—those long, lovely fingers—were playing inside her again. He fucked her with them as his thumb strummed her clit as if she were a stringed musical instrument.

“Come for me, Tess,” he crooned as his fingers foraged deep, and curled up as he dragged them back over and over again.

Tess ground herself against his hand as he continued to stroke her deeply. When he used his thumb to press down hard on her clit, her world came undone. She grasped Derek’s shoulders with her hands, flinging her head back, arching her back and crying out as pure pleasure surged through her being.

Her body was still shaking as he pulled his fingers out, licking her juices from them before kissing her again. “You see that you’re back by Friday. I’ll pick you up in Kodiak and we can have dinner in what passes for the big city in these parts.”

He stepped back, rethought it, stepped back in between her still-splayed legs, kissed her deeply, and then left her sitting on the edge of the dresser, wondering what he’d done to her. Tess was bemused, angry and—despite having just experienced the most powerful orgasm of her life—incredibly aroused. He better be planning on making good on an earlier promise to ‘make wild, passionate love to her until she was too sore and tired to ever want to leave.’ Yes, that sounded like an excellent plan for her return.

# CHAPTER 15



## TESS

### Journal Entry, January 5th

I'm free. I don't know why the Shadow Sisters abandoned me. They said they would be there, but there was no one outside the compound to help me get away. I ran as fast and as far as I could. I knew it would only be a matter of time before they came after me.

I will keep my baby safe and free. My only regret is that I don't believe he or she will ever be safe with me. Perhaps I should make my way back to the lower forty-eight and see if I can't find a wonderful family to adopt her. One with two parents, a house, and a yard with a



*swing in it—maybe even a sibling or two.*

*The only problem is I have no money; no way to get to someplace... no one to help me. Even if I could, who could I trust? No, baby mine, we're on our own, you and me. We'll be fine.*

Tess closed the journal as the plane leveled off. Normally she needed a stiff drink or two to get her through a flight, but she found Teresa's journal so fascinating that she didn't need anything to calm her nerves. She was too engrossed in the story.

When she arrived at the airport to use her open-ended ticket, she was informed that her seat had been upgraded to first class, and a message had been delivered for her. The ticket agent was grinning from ear-to-ear as she handed Tess a single sunflower—a symbol of undying love—and a note.

*Missing you already. Your open-end return flight is also first class.*

*Text me the details of your return flight. I'll be waiting.*

*Derek*

“I don't know who Derek is, but he's gotta be a keeper.”

Tess could feel the blush staining her cheeks. “I think he is.”

“Ms. Dixon, welcome back,” said the same flight attendant who’d been so kind to her on her flight up. “You had a quick trip.”

“Yeah, I’m headed to Seattle to see my sister. I may be moving to Alaska permanently.”

“Really? That’s great. If your sister is there, will you be traveling with us often? I looked you up on Amazon and some of the books you illustrated are among my niece’s favorites. If I brought them with me, would you mind signing them?”

Although not as often an occurrence as authors being asked to sign a book, illustrators were sometimes asked. It was still rare enough that Tess was always excited and a little humbled.

“I’d be delighted to. If we miss when I’m headed back, just call the sheriff’s office in Mystic River or Otter Cove. Both will know how to get hold of me.”

“Was there some kind of trouble?”

“Not at all. I just know people in both departments.”

“Oh, good. I probably shouldn’t have asked that; it’s none of my business.”

Tess smiled. “It’s fine. There was only concern in your tone. I don’t think it’s ever wrong to be concerned.”

*Journal Entry, July 4th*

*It might be Independence Day for the rest of the United States, but in my corner of the world, I feel anything but independent. I have my freedom, though, and I think the sheriff here will see that Henry and*

his goons don't make another play for me.

The look on Henry's face when I confronted him and his men with a sawed-off shotgun in my hands and another shotgun leaned up against the doorway was pretty funny. My guess is they never thought some heavily pregnant female would dare to defy them. They thought wrong.

Maybe I'll put up a high-power electric fence to keep the bastards at bay. I've almost got enough money stashed under the hearth to get that and some kind of alarm system for the cabin. I won't be taken back. Nor will they take this baby—not while there is breath in my body.

P.S. I also had a high-powered rifle just inside. If the two shotguns hadn't stopped them, I could have ducked inside and barred the door.

Once again, Tess was struck by the indomitable attitude Teresa must have possessed. Turned without her consent, thrust into a world not of her choosing and completely unknown to her, she had adapted and triumphed over her captors. She had won her

freedom and was prepared to do whatever it took to protect herself and her baby.

God, how she would have liked to have met her. To have been able to sit and talk with her—amazing. Tess didn't wish for a different childhood or parents—she had the best of both, and as Teresa had hoped, she'd had a sibling and a house with a yard and a swing in the back. But she would have loved to meet her birth mother; if for no other reason than to tell her thank you.

Tess wished she'd known the whole story, or at least as much of it as they had been able to figure out. She would have loved to have been able to comfort her mother as she was dying, assuring her that it wasn't her fault Teresa was dead. The fault with that lay solely on Henry's head. He could have stopped Teresa's mate from going after her and ensured that he left her and her child alone, but he didn't. Instead, from what little she'd learned, he had berated and challenged the man to go after Teresa and bring her back to Akiak, keep her in line and get her bred again as soon as possible.

There was no way that would have turned out well. Tess had no doubt her mother would have responded—most likely violently—and who's to say, perhaps Derek, Annie, and Zak might not have split from Henry and Akiak the way they did.

The flight to Seattle was long but made less tiring by being in first-class and being able to nap comfortably. Not having any checked baggage made it easy to walk to where she'd parked her SUV. Once inside her vehicle, she backed out of the parking spot, paid her fee, and headed for home.

She called Lara. "Hey, you."

"Tess. Where are you? Are you back?"

"I am," she said, glancing in the rearview mirror and spotting what she thought might be a tail. "I just got in. Want to meet at the Sound View Café? My treat."

"That sounds great, but wouldn't you rather go crash? How about if I pick something up from Biscuit Bitch and meet you at your loft? I can go over and get it opened up for you."

Tess was exhausted, and her sister knew her all too well. Biscuit Bitch was one of her favorite places to get breakfast, although the Sound View Café was a close second.

“That would be amazing.”

“Great. I’ll call the clinic and tell them I’ll be in a little late. I’ll head over to your loft and open it up and call in our order. Then I’ll run down and get it. You want your usual?”

Tess’s usual was the Hot Mess Bitch, consisting of a biscuit topped with sausage gravy, shredded cheddar, garlic grits, two scrambled eggs, a split and grilled Louisiana Hot Link, and pickled jalapeños. Lara generally went for the milder Gritty Scrambled Cheesy Bitch, which was the Biscuit Bitch’s best seller. It was made with a ‘big-ass biscuit,’ country sausage gravy, shredded cheddar, two scrambled eggs and a scoop of garlic grits.

“Yes, please. There should be plenty of coffee and the cream should still be good.”

“Great, I’ll see you when you get home. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. I’ll call when I’m taking my exit.”

“Sounds good. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Tess had no worries about Lara betraying their secret. Her sister would understand the importance of no one knowing about the shifters. Tess only hoped she would want to come to Alaska and become a polar-bear shifter. It shouldn’t be too hard to convince her it was all real. After all, Lara loved paranormal romance books that had various kinds of shifters.

She had almost convinced herself that she’d been paranoid at the airport, thinking she was being followed, but decided to play it safe and so took whoever might be following her on a wicked trip through the city and its surroundings. Seattle could be a bit tricky to navigate if you didn’t know your way, and Tess was betting she knew it far better than anyone following her.

Once she was convinced there was no one tailing her, she headed for her loft, phoning Lara to let her know she was off the freeway. Tess had never been so happy that her loft had excellent security, including a gated entrance into the underground parking lot. Once she was parked, she headed to the elevator, taking it to the fifth floor, which was where her loft was. Her mother had called it the ‘penthouse,’ but the only difference in any of the ten units was ceiling height and view. All ten had access to the rooftop common area.

She opened the door to the loft and could smell the heavenly aroma of Biscuit Bitch’s food. There was no doubt in her mind that someone would have to open one much closer to home than Seattle. Tess shook her head—so Derek was now her mate and Seattle was no longer home. Damn.

Lara rushed across the expanse of the loft, throwing herself at Tess and hugging her tight.

“I’m so glad you’re home. Did you leave your bags down in your SUV? I just got back with breakfast. Let’s eat it while it’s hot, and then put your feet up and I’ll go get your bags. I had a really light day, so I had them move my appointments and gave the staff the day off with pay. I know you haven’t been gone long, but it feels like ages. I invited myself to hang out, eat lots of food, and maybe binge watch something.” Lara barely took a breath as her plans spilled out of her. “God, I hate flying. They squish you in like a sardine.”

“Not in first class,” said Tess, picking up her food, which Lara had taken out of the take-out boxes and put on plates.

She looked at her dining table, and opted for the comfortable sectional, facing Puget Sound.

“First class?” asked Lara, following her to the couch. “Since when do you fly first class?”

“Since some nice guy who hates flying and was sick had me upgraded so he could have the row to himself. I have to tell you, once you fly first class, you’re not going to fly any other way.”

“Were you able to track down your mother’s people?”

Tess set her fork on her plate and her plate on the coffee table. “Let’s be real clear. My *mother* is the same person she’s always been, the same one who’s your mother, and the one who we recently lost.”

Tears welled in Lara’s eyes. “You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say that.”

“Okay, now that we’ve got that settled,” Tess said as she picked up her plate and fork and resumed eating. “I got so confused trying to remember to say ‘birth mother’ or ‘mother who raised me.’ So, I just decided Mom is Mom and I will refer to the woman who gave birth to me by her first name, which is Teresa.”

“Do you think Mom and Dad knew?”

“Yes. I think they named me for her.”

“Did you find out if the adoption was legal?”

“Not for certain. I decided not to pursue that as I didn’t want Mom and Dad to be seen as having done anything wrong.”

“But if it wasn’t a legal adoption...”

“Teresa was their guide on their last trip to the Alaskan bush. They found Teresa mortally wounded in the wilderness with me not far away. Her dying request was for mom and dad to take me and run from her abusive spouse’s family and keep me safe. They honored that request.”

There would be time enough to fill Lara in on all the details, but that pretty much covered it—well except for the part that their father had shot Teresa when she was a polar bear-shifter, but that could come later.

“So, what did you find?”

“I found some people who had heard Teresa’s story. It wasn’t pretty, and I found out something very unique and unusual about her. Something she passed down to me.”

“Like a genetic trait or disease?” asked Lara, concerned.

“Not a disease and nothing bad, but I’m going to tell you something that is pretty fantastical and that you have to swear you’ll never tell another soul.”

“I would never tell anyone anything confidential you shared with me. You know that.”

“I do, which is why I’m trusting you. My life and those of others could be badly compromised if you tell anyone.”

Lara put her empty plate down on the coffee table and took her sister’s empty plate, placing it beside hers, and then took Tess’s hands into her own. “Are you dying?”

Tess laughed and squeezed her sister’s hands. “No. In fact, I’m told I have a genetic predisposition to a longer, healthier life, and shouldn’t have much of a weight issue.”

“Can we do a blood transfusion? That sounds good; I’d like to sign up for that.”

“If after you hear what I have to say, it’s what you want, I can arrange it.”

“That’s not how blood transfusions work,” Lara said, looking perplexed.

“I know. Technically it wouldn’t be a transfusion, but my blood could overwrite your base DNA.”

The look of confusion on Lara’s face intensified. Tess figured it was best to try and explain it to her in as scientific a manner as she could.

“You can’t just overwrite someone’s DNA. I mean you can do it to an egg, but once a person’s born, that’s it. Your DNA is your DNA, and it can’t be changed. There are people trying to figure out how to do it, but so far, they haven’t been successful. And I’m not sure that’s a slippery slope I want to go down.”

“What if I told you it was possible?” she said, shaking her sister’s hands in hers. “What if?”

“Did you watch some weird movie on the plane while you were half asleep? Remember that time you dozed through



some Michael Crichton thriller and thought it was all real? You called me up in the middle of the night...”

“It’s not a movie—at least not one that I know of—and I’m not crazy. But it is something you’ve read.”

“No, I don’t like science fiction or thrillers. I like romance books.”

“Yes, but paranormal romance books, specifically those that deal with human-animal hybrids or shifters.”

Lara sat back, watching her sister’s face closely. “But those aren’t real. They have all these shifters existing alongside humans and the humans are clueless that they even exist. There’s no way.”

“What if there was?” Tess implored, knowing if she could just get Lara to accept the possibility, there was a chance she could make her understand.

“Are you drunk? I know you’re not high.”

Tess laughed. “I promise, I am stone-cold sober.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“That animal-shifters exist and that I am one. More than that, you can be one, too.”

Lara’s face froze in horror, and then she started to laugh. “Ha! Ha! Very funny. I know you hate those books, but I think they are fun escapist fantasies.”

Tess said nothing and just looked at her sister, slowly shaking her head.

Lara stopped laughing and shook her head. “That... that can’t be right. Even if shifters existed, which they don’t, I would know if you were one. I’ve known you all my life.”

“In your books, what’s something that can be used to keep a shifter from shifting?”

“Depends on the animal, but the kind of universal thing is iron. It can’t kill them, like if they’re collared with it, but it interferes in the process somehow, and the person or animal can’t shift.”

“What was the one piece of jewelry I never took off? What was the one thing Mom made me promise I would always wear?”

“That Celtic knot thing.”

“Which was made of?” Tess asked, raising her eyebrows at her sister.

“Iron.” Realization dawned as the color drained from Lara’s face. So many little things suddenly slipped into place—their mother only taking Tess to certain doctors or hospitals; never wanting Tess to go to the Woodland Park Zoo, and several others. “Holy shit.”

Tess nodded. “Holy shit indeed.”

“You aren’t bullshitting me, are you? Please tell me you are.”

“Why?”

“Because if you aren’t and someone finds out... oh fuck, that’s why you made me promise not to tell.” Lara batted at her sister. “I would never tell anyone. That could put you in danger. Everything else aside, if the government found out...”

“Precisely.”

“You can really shift between two forms? What kind of animal are you?”

“What has always been my spirit animal?”

“You’re a polar bear-shifter? For real?” Lara’s eyes had lost their horror and now shined with a joyful glee.

“Yep. The first time I shifted I got to swim in the Gulf of Alaska, and I wasn’t even cold. It was amazing.”

“But how could I become one? In all the romance novels, it’s a part of the claiming ritual and the males turn females with or without their consent. Was your mom born a shifter?”

Tess took a deep breath and stuffed down the myriad of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. “No. She was abducted and turned without her consent. She didn’t get her happily ever after.”

“You’re going back, aren’t you?”

“I am. Partly because there are two communities that are nothing but shifters. Partly because there’s trouble coming, and as a vet, you could be of a lot of help...”

Lara nodded. “I can see that. I could work on people whether they’re shifted or not.”

“Exactly. There’s a polar bear clan in a place called Otter Cove. Actually, there are two, but that’s a whole other story. Zak Grayson is alpha of the one at the lighthouse—it’s so beautiful there—and he said if you wanted, he could arrange to have you turned. Otter Cove could really use a vet—regardless of any danger that’s coming.”

Lara searched her sister’s face. “There’s something else.”

Tess grinned. “Not something; someone. His name is Derek, and according to him, he’s my fated mate.”

# CHAPTER 16



## DEREK

“*Y*ou have been a miserable sonofabitch since she’s been gone,” snarled his boss, Sheriff Jax Miller.

“You’d be in a shitty mood too if Autumn was gone and you weren’t sure she was coming back.”

“If I wasn’t sure she was coming back, I’d have never let her go. Besides which, that’s no reason to give Colby Reynolds a ticket for going six miles over the speed limit.”

“The speed limit is the speed limit,” argued Derek.

“And everybody knows there’s a grace of five miles over the posted limit.”

“Well, he was going six.”

“If you’re so fucking worried about it, why don’t you go down to Seattle and drag her ass back home?”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“Not for humans, maybe, but you’re a fucking polar bear, and so, by the way, is she. You don’t even have to turn her, for god’s sake. And aren’t you the guy that tried to poach one of my she-bears? I’m pretty sure you weren’t planning to be all nicey-nice and say pretty please. No. You were going to man-up, be a bear, and drag her sweet ass home. By the way, that never would have worked. The stronger DNA always triumphs, and Kodiak DNA trumps polar bear every time.”

Derek snorted. It was an old argument. Scientists couldn’t seem to agree on which of the two apex predators was the

biggest or the strongest. “Bullshit, my DNA would have crushed hers.”

“You’re lucky I beat the shit out of you that night. You pull that Neanderthal bullshit with a Kodiak she-bear, and you’d be lucky if you had your balls left. They can be nasty when provoked and knocking one over the head and dragging her back to your cave is pretty much guaranteed to provoke her.”

Derek wiped his hand back and forth across his forehead. “You’re right. I know you’re right. I knew you were right when I pulled him over. But he’s so fucking smug. It’s like he knew why I was doing it. I could almost feel him giving me a pat on the head—like ‘there, there, little bear, the big, bad gangster understands.’ I’ll apologize to him in the morning and tear up the ticket.”

“Don’t you dare,” said Jax. “Six miles over is six miles over. That SOB can pay the fine like everybody else.”

Derek laughed. He was pretty sure it was the first time he’d done so since Tess had left. She had to be coming back. She just had to. He had to wait. It was her decision. He would respect that. A growl rose in his throat. Bullshit. He would give her to the end of the week, just like he said he would. Then he’d track her down in Seattle, claim her gorgeous ass, and drag her home by the roots of her hair if necessary.

He hated to admit it, but the images of that flashed across his brain and made his dick turn to granite instantly. He had no doubt that if it happened that way, Tess would fight him tooth and nail, but he also knew he would win. Not only because he was bigger and stronger than her, but because in her heart of hearts she knew he was right. They were fated mates and meant to be together.

Jax stood up. “Try and give yourself a little space. I, for one, think she’s coming back, not just to be here with her own people, but with you. These things have a way of working themselves out.”

“You think Colby will let me take his private jet if I have to go after her?”

“Not after you gave him a ticket,” laughed Jax, before he sobered. “Actually, he probably wouldn’t not because of the ticket, but because unlike most of us cavemen who call ourselves alpha, Colby really likes and respects females. He doesn’t like that they don’t have as much autonomy as we men. Hell, his second used to be a female.”

“Winter was gorgeous,” said Derek.

“And knew more ways to kill you than you know how to die. That woman was lethal, and absolutely devoted to Colby. Sean Campbell is a lucky man.”

“Luckier than you?”

“Oh, hell no,” said Jax, heading for the door and pulling on his parka. “Nobody, and I mean nobody is luckier than me, and if I don’t go collect my lucky charm and drag her off to bed, she’ll stay up all night doing paperwork.”

Derek smiled as his boss left the office. With nothing better to do at home, he stayed at the office catching up on paperwork and ensuring their files were up to date. When there were no more reasons to avoid heading back to his empty cabin, Derek locked up the office and headed home—only it didn’t feel like home anymore. It had felt like home when Tess was there, but now it just felt like an hollow shell waiting for her to bring her life and light back to it.

When he arrived home, instead of going into the house, Derek walked down to the river and onto the dock. He stood at the end, watching the deep water rush past. He used to stand here for hours, finding great solace in the way the river rolled to the sea, sort of like a life rolling towards eternity. Only now there was beauty but nothing else. She was his solace. She was his life.

Fuck it. If he didn’t get a text or something from her by Friday, he was going after her. He didn’t care if that meant he was a Neanderthal or some kind of barbarian. Tess was his fated mate and he was not going to be denied her. After all, his brother-in-law had gone after Annie and brought her home. But Jax was right, if he was going to pull that caveman shit,

he'd better see if he could get Colby Reynolds to give him the use of his private plane.

His whole body ached for her, and his cock was way past the little blue pill's ad advising seeking medical help if the erection lasted more than four hours. He'd tried more than one cold shower and it hadn't helped. He'd thought about using his hand to give himself some relief, but instinctively he knew that wouldn't help, either. Oh, it might work for a minute or two, but he had faith his cock would be rigid again in record time.

Looking down at the fast, bitterly cold water, he made a decision. He called forth his bear who was in a growly, nasty mood. The only thing more pissed at him for letting her go than his cock was his bear. The chaotic storm of energy, power, lightning, thunder, and color swirled around him in an angry vortex as his bear rushed forward and Derek became one with him.

Leaping off the dock, he expected the cold to take his breath away, but it didn't. His fur, thick skin, and layer of fat insulated him from the icy waters. Derek ducked under the surface of the water, swimming aimlessly as he came to the surface and dove again. Anything to try and quiet the sense of loneliness that had plagued him since she'd insisted on going to Seattle to see her sister.

When a particularly delectable and plump steelhead ventured too close, Derek snatched it up and headed back to shore. He stopped long enough once he was on land to clean the fish, letting the waters of Mystic River help wash it clean. Without being a bear, the frigid air and nearly freezing droplets of water on his skin chilled him to the bone. He sprinted up to the cabin and let himself in.

Normally when he returned home, there was a pleasure that washed over him at being there. The cabin was spacious and comfortable, and Annie and Sienna had done a masterful job of decorating. It was easy to see that the cabin belonged to a man, but it had a woman's touch. He was certain he and Tess could make a life there. There was a spot by one of the windows that would give her great light to do her illustrations.



He tossed the steelhead onto a cast iron grill pan along with onions, peppers, and garlic before heading into the bath to towel off. One of the things he'd been talked into installing were towel warmers. Like most days, he was glad of the indulgence when he pulled the towel from the rack. Walking back into the main space of the cabin, he grabbed a pair of worn Levi's and pulled them on, not bothering to button the fly.

He cut up potatoes and put them into a boiling pot of salty water, cooking them until they were fork tender and ready to mash. Draining them and turning them into a bowl, he added garlic, salt, pepper, sour cream in lieu of milk, and butter—lots and lots of butter. Once Derek had the potatoes prepared, he removed the trout from the grill pan and quickly sautéed some green beans. They wouldn't be as good as Tess's green bean almondine, but they would suffice for tonight.

Grabbing a beer, he ensconced himself on the couch, turning on the television and flipping through the channels until he found a hockey game. He wasn't sure if it was live, recorded, or a game from the past. It didn't matter. He only hoped that the food, the game, and the beer would be enough to distract him from his morose mood, which centered around missing Tess and wanting her home.

*God, I've become a miserable, grumpy bear!* He really didn't know what he was going to do if she didn't come back. That wasn't true. Actually, he knew exactly what he was going to do—go to Seattle, drag her home, claim her as his fated mate, and live happily ever after. Yep, that was the plan. The fact that there were some rather large holes in that plan didn't bother him overly much. He'd figure it out. All that really mattered was that Tess would be his and they would be together.

The dull buzz had been gradually getting more annoying as the day had gone on. It seemed to have abated a bit when he'd been in his polar bear form, but it had been getting worse since he'd emerged from the river's icy depths. He'd told her he would wait until Friday, but that seemed like an unreachable goal. He needed and wanted her here, and he was convinced

she felt the same. He understood that she didn't have the same frame of reference that he did to accept being someone's fated mate, but he would make her see that he was right.

Well into his second beer, but by no means drunk, he was a bit startled by the knock on the door. Normally, Derek was a tough sonofabitch to sneak up on, but he couldn't remember hearing anything. He reached into the side table, pulling out his handgun and releasing the safety. He walked toward the door and once again damned himself for not putting in a peephole.

Opening the door, he damned himself for having a gun in his hand and quickly set it down on the small antique cabinet Annie had insisted he needed next to the door to put things on when he came home. There was a gorgeous dough bowl that was more than a hundred years old. The gun slipped in and seemed to fit perfectly.

“Hi. I'm back...”

She was home. His cock bulged, trying to get out of the open fly. She looked gorgeous and he was greeting her with a bare chest, a barely contained hard-on, and no shoes. And he didn't care. She was beautiful. Without saying a word, he hauled her into the house, closing and locking the door behind her as he pushed her up against the door, lowering his head to hers, and capturing her mouth. He was done waiting.

His instinct was to throw her on the ground—not even bothering with the bed—rip her clothes off and shove into her, claiming her as his as quickly and completely as possible, but Derek knew better. He knew his job was not just to possess her, but to cherish her and see to her needs. Tess settled back against the door, her arms coming up to wind around his neck as she leaned into him, parting her lips in invitation. An invitation he accepted.

Derek fused his lips to hers—arousal, heat, and passion surging through his body. His fingers sank into her hair, fisting the silky tresses so that she couldn't get away. He tilted her head into the position he wanted as his tongue surged in deep, tangling with hers as she moaned and sagged into him.

“I missed you so much,” she said when he let her come up for air.

His cock throbbed against her. “Not nearly as much as I missed you.”

Taking a deep breath, he leaned in and retook her mouth, reveling in the way her whole body surrendered to his. They were perfect together, just as he’d known they would be. Reluctantly he broke the kiss and hoisted her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest as he strode back to the bed, setting her down beside it, his mouth retaking hers.

Dragging her sweater over her head, he made short work of getting them both naked, his mouth only leaving hers when it absolutely had to and coming back to it as soon as possible. She was every bit as gorgeous as he remembered. The perfect hourglass shape with heavy breasts, a nipped in waist and hips a man could hang onto when he was pounding her from behind.

Her nipples were tight and pebbled, silently begging him to take them into his mouth and suckle. He used one hand to cup her jawline—anchoring her head—while the other came up to cup her breast, thumbing her nipple. He wanted to be slow and deliberate, but this first time wasn’t really an exploration, it was more about feeding a hunger they’d had from the time she’d awakened in his bed.

Tess’s hands roamed over his skin, tracing scars and learning every inch of it. He placed one of his hands over hers, ensuring there was mutual contact between them. The idea of not having her hands on him was one he couldn’t abide. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips over hers and allowed his feelings to flow.

Derek palmed her breast as his other hand snaked around her waist, pulling her closer. Her nipple was a diamond shard against his hand, daring him to twist and play with it. He rolled the nipple between his thumb and forefinger, making her squirm before pinching and then tugging it.

Tess trailed her finger down his torso—her hand making its way down to his cock. There was no way he was going to

let her touch it at the moment. If she did, he'd come all over her hand and that was not how this night was going to go. He turned her around, nestling his cock in the swell of her backside. Tess's arm came back, and she cupped the nape of his neck with her hand.

His hand swept down, covering her mound possessively and giving it a gentle squeeze before his fingers found her clit and began to strum. Tess's head dropped back against his shoulder, and she moaned in anticipation and need. He nuzzled her neck as he played with her sex. She was wet and soft, ripe and ready for him. His fingers slid through her labia and stroked the opening to her core before returning to her swollen clit.

Derek used his tongue to trace the outline of her ear before nipping the lobe. Tess made a small whimper before grinding her ass against his hard length. So his mate wanted more, did she? That was good, because he meant to give it to her. He felt like a live wire, waiting to go off as he felt the arc between them connect, setting them both on fire.

One hand continued to play with her clit, sinking down to play in the folds of her sex. The other played with her nipple as he held her prisoner in his sensual embrace. He continued to play her body like the fine instrument it was, plucking and strumming as her body moved in perfect harmony with his.

Sensing her increasing arousal, he increased his attention—moving his upper hand between her two breasts while his lower hand pressed and stroked her clit, swirling around it until her body arched back, her every muscle tightening as pleasure pushed her over the edge into ecstasy and she cried out. As the sound evaporated into a sigh, she slumped back into him, all the tension gone.

Derek turned her in his arms and swept her up, depositing her on the bed. He gazed down at her and liked what he saw—a naked Tess, splayed over his bed, her body flushed with her first orgasm of the night. It was the second time he'd made her climax in real life; it would definitely not be the last. She was the visual depiction of lust and temptation, which seemed appropriate as she was an illustrator.

“My beautiful mate,” he murmured as he covered her body with his, taking the place that belonged only to him.

He slid his cock along her wet folds, preparing it and her for his first possession. His eyes never wavering from hers, he thrust up into her, making them one. Tess cried out and clutched at his shoulders—not in pain though he could be a lot to take—but in carnal bliss as he drove home, filling her completely.

Derek focused on giving her pleasure, kissing her as he drew back and then surged forward again. His libido was in a frenzy, and he fought down the need to take her hard and fast. There would be times in the future when he gave in to that need, but tonight was about reconnecting with her from all the lives they’d shared before. He thrust in and out, finding a rhythm with Tess that made her keen with pleasure and that he’d never known before.

Her body trembled and she tightened around him, her pussy clamping down on his, and he lost the battle of wills with his cock and his bear. He pounded into her at a feral and primitive pace, glorying in the fact that her body raced to meet his at the edge of the abyss so they could leap into forever together. His orgasm hit as she cried out again, sending him over the edge as he spilled himself inside her.

When her pussy had coaxed every last drop of his release into her, Derek allowed himself to give her the weight of his body and was surrounded by the warmth they shared. He rested there for a moment before rolling off her, dragging her up against his side, wishing they could stay in this cocoon of pleasure and warmth forever.

Even as he drifted off to sleep, he knew it wouldn’t last. Trouble was coming. He could feel it.

# CHAPTER 17



## DEREK

Morning. The light filtered through the windows as Tess snuggled into him, replete from the last time they'd made love not more than an hour ago.

"I think you made good on your promise," she murmured against his skin as she whispered kisses along it.

"What promise?" he asked lazily, not really caring as she said he'd fulfilled it.

"The one where you told me you wanted to make, and I quote, 'wild, passionate love to me until I was too sore and tired to ever want to leave your bed,' or something close to that. I mean the quote is close; you exceeded the actual deed."

Derek couldn't contain the self-satisfied grin or the soft chuckle that escaped his lips.

"I didn't bother to ask last night, but how did you get here? Why didn't you text me? I was going to take you to dinner in Kodiak, show you I know how to court my mate."

She burrowed closer. "This is and was much better. I didn't see any reason to wait until Friday."

"Did you have a chance to talk to your sister?"

"I did. In fact, Lara came with me. I told her everything—you, me, shifters, and Zak's offer. She's not sure about the being turned part, but I think she's leaning that way. I called Annie and she picked us up. She dropped me at the dock and was taking Lara up to the lighthouse."

“Zak will take care of her.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. She accepted it even better than I thought she might. Like I said, she reads romance books about shifters all the time and just loves them. And I’ve always seen my bear in the darkest corners of my mind. I just thought she was my spirit animal which, I suppose, she is.”

He smiled down at her—happier than any bear had a right to be. Derek felt as if he’d finally passed that last test of becoming a bear-shifter and warrior. He had his fated mate curled up beside him, basking not only in the sunlight, but in the aftermath of their long night of lovemaking. She was only half awake, and he knew that came from having settled within herself where her place in this world was—with him.

He heard tires crunching on the gravel drive. He didn’t care. Whoever it was could just fuck off and die. Anyone who was a serious threat would have come overland on foot or by boat. He supposed he could get up and see who it was, but he wasn’t inclined to get out of bed and have Tess wake up completely.

Somebody stomped up the steps to the cabin. Derek decided ‘somebody’ was going to die—well maybe not die but get hurt anyway. A fist pounded on the door. Tess’s eyes flew open wide in alarm.

“It’s all right, baby. Bad guys don’t usually announce their presence by driving down on a gravel road, clomping up the steps, or pounding on the door.”

She grinned up at him and he leaned over to give her a kiss before giving her a squeeze and rolling out of bed. If ‘somebody’ was going to come to his cabin to roust him out of bed with his mate, then ‘somebody’ was just going to have to deal with the fact that he was naked and aroused.

Again, with not having a peephole. The next time he was in town he was getting one and installing it. Come to think of it, he’d best install an alarm system. If Tess was going to be out here on her own, he’d need to make sure she was safe. Of course, there were several old buildings in town that might work for her to have a studio.



He threw open the door, growling, “What?”

Of all the people he might have imagined would be standing on his porch, his sire wasn't one of them. Henry tried to push past him and found the son he'd bullied in the past was now a fully grown, fully mature polar bear-shifter, just entering his prime. The days of Henry pushing past him were over.

Henry's eyes looked down at Derek's engorged cock. “Can't you put that thing away?”

“I was planning on it, only you and your goons came down here to ruin my morning. I asked you what you're doing here? And unless you have a real good reason for putting a damper on my plans, I suggest you get the fuck out of here,” snarled Derek.

“You watch your tone, boy. I am still your alpha.”

Okay, now that was downright funny. Derek laughed. “You haven't been my alpha since you goaded my oldest brother into a fight with Jax and provoked him to the point he wouldn't back down, forcing Jax to kill him. You haven't been my alpha since you encouraged me to try and poach one of Jax's she-bears, and he beat the crap out of me. And you haven't been a whole lot of other people's alpha since Zak came home and set up the lighthouse compound. Now state your business, you pathetic old man, or I'll kick your ass all the way to my property line. You are trespassing, and I'm giving you thirty seconds to get moving or I will put you in handcuffs, take you into town and book your sorry ass.”

The look on Henry's face told Derek every barb had hit their mark. It was in that instance that he realized how old Henry had become—not so much in years, but in the way the years had played out. The two goons Henry had brought with him stepped forward.

“You two are trespassing, too. I don't have any problem with the three of you spending the next several nights in a cell. The judge is out fishing and can't be reached. Well, he probably could be, but neither Jax nor I would be inclined to bother him.”

“You’re outnumbered, boy,” sneered his father. “You might be able to take me down on your own, but I doubt you can take two trained warriors down.”

The distinctive sound of a pump action shotgun came from the side of the cabin. Four sets of eyes focused on the gorgeous woman, dressed only in his sweater, with the shotgun leveled at their intruders.

“I’m not sure I believe that, but I guarantee, old man, that he can take you down. As for these two thugs, my trusty shotgun will make short work of them.”

“You won’t pull the trigger,” growled one of Henry’s men as he turned toward Tess.

“Triggers, asshole. This shotgun has two triggers, one for each barrel, and I can assure you if you so much as breathe wrong, I’ll drop you, force you to shift, and skin you to use as a rug in front of our fire.”

Damn, she was mean first thing in the morning if she wasn’t being loved on. The bear who had thought to intimidate her froze in place.

“That girl belongs up at Akiak. One of my men gave his life to bring her back—” snarled Henry.

“Almost thirty years ago—” started Derek.

“Hey, I won’t turn thirty for two more years. Let’s not rush this.”

Derek chuckled. “I stand corrected. My point being, that one of your clan snatched a human off the streets of Anchorage, turned her without her consent, and got her pregnant. When she ran because the thought of dying was better than staying at Akiak, you had him track her down—whether to kill her and take the baby or take them both is irrelevant. Tess has never—let me repeat that—never belonged to you.”

“I will tell the Ruling Council; they’ll agree with me.”

“Who the fuck cares? They want to try and take my mate; they’re welcome to try. Like you; they will fail. Both my mate

and I are members of Zak's clan, and our alpha will raise his warriors to fight you or anyone else he has to."

Henry seemed flustered for a moment until he concocted another argument. "That girl..."

"That girl is my fated mate. Watch how you speak about her."

That seemed to stop Henry. Derek was pretty sure he hadn't expected Derek to claim her as his fated mate. "That girl has broken one of the most serious laws known to shifters. She told a non-shifter of our existence. Even brought her up here..."

"How the hell does he know that?" asked Tess, concern in her voice.

"It doesn't matter. She's with Zak, so she's safe."

"The other girl isn't the one who broke the law, but if the Council rules against your mate, the law states that they both be banished or executed." Henry turned to Tess. "I'll bet you didn't know that, now did you, missy? Your mother was as unprepared for the reality of being a shifter as you are. You were stolen from me; my clan and I will have you back."

Tess furrowed her brow. "Seriously? Do you hear yourself? I can almost hear you cackling and picture you in green skin. Tell me, are you planning to disappear in a cloud of smoke because if you are, could you take your goons with you and do it now? I'm hungry. Your son kept me up most of the night and we worked up quite the appetite, didn't we sweetheart?"

"Yes, we did. You heard her, Henry. Go away and leave us alone. Keep your mouth shut, too. I promise you any trouble you visit on me and mine will be returned to you tenfold."

Henry seemed to be casting around to find something to say. Finding nothing he stormed back to his car with his thugs in tow. As she moved slowly up towards him on the porch, Tess never let the shotgun drop, she had it fixed on them even as the car headed up the drive.

Taking the shotgun from her, Derek wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'm sorry you had to be witness to that. But you're okay, right?"

She looked up at him, blinking. "Not exactly the way I wanted to meet Henry or people up at Akiak, but I guess he saved me a trip. I don't want to know him. Teresa must have been out of her mind. I can't even imagine how she coped."

"She did because she was a survivor. She had your grit and determination. It took a hell of a lot of courage for you to come around from the back and get the drop on them. By the way, you with a shotgun, dressed only in my sweater. I've got to tell you, pretty sexy."

"You're a sick man. You do realize you're naked and have a hard-on, right?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her. "I am and I do. Come on inside, you sexy shifter, you, and I'll fix you breakfast."

"Can we have it in bed?"

"Is there any other place to have breakfast with a naked man with a hard-on?"

"I can't think of one," she said with a laugh.

They entered the cabin and Derek pulled on the pair of jeans he'd had on the night before, but that was all. If Tess could run around in nothing more than his sweater, he could walk around in just his jeans. He joined her in the kitchen where he began cooking shakshuka.

"The whole fated mate thing has meaning among our kind, doesn't it?" she asked and then seeing his smile she asked, "What?"

"I like how you refer to shifters as 'our kind.'"

"Just stating the obvious, but when you told Henry I was your fated mate that seemed to kind of slow his roll."

Derek nodded. "It did. Fated mates are a big deal. Not everyone is gifted with one."

“There’s more to it than just the romantic stuff, isn’t there?”

“Yes,” he said, stopping in his chopping. “The romantic stuff and feelings are all there. But any male shifter worth his salt would literally die to protect his fated mate. Without her, he’s nothing. In some species—wolves for example—males don’t survive more than a year past their fated mate’s death. In most cases it’s more like six months. They just sort of fade away. We bears aren’t quite so dramatic, but we become grumpy and morose and most often go off and live as hermits.”

“So even though you knew I was your fated mate, you were willing to let me go.”

Derek nodded. “To be honest and clear, I would never have let you be gone for good. Both Zak and Jax told me that it was fine to let you go and see if you’d make the right decision, but if you didn’t, I should go to Seattle, track your ass down, and drag you home.”

“You couldn’t do that in a metropolitan city like Seattle.”

“Think not?” he laughed. “Ask my sister about how she and Deke finally got together.”

Tess joined him, wrapping her arms around the bicep of the hand that was holding the vegetables as they were chopped and brushed her cheek along the muscle before kissing it.

“You want me to go back to Zak’s, don’t you?”

“Much as I don’t want to admit it, yes. I thought about an alarm system for up here, but what good is it, as we’d have to respond and by the time we got here, it might be too late. I thought about finding a place in town, but that, too, isn’t foolproof. No, the best solution is for you to be at the lighthouse compound.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, but I don’t want to be parted from you.”

“No chance of that,” he said. “If Sienna hasn’t already done so, we’ll move your things into my room, which will

now be referred to as ‘our room.’ I suspect she did that once Annie told her Lara would be joining us as well.”

“Hey, I haven’t had a chance to tell you, but I think I might have been followed when I left the airport in Seattle. I thought I saw the same SUV, but then I lost it.”

“Could have been Colby; if not him, then probably the Shadow Sisters.”

“I wondered in light of his knowing I told my sister about shifters if it might not have been Henry.”

“Maybe, but Henry’s a cheap sonofabitch, and having you followed in Seattle would be expensive, but I’ll see if I can’t find out who it was.”

“Or maybe I’m just being paranoid.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being paranoid when there are people out to get you.”

# CHAPTER 18



## TESS

Journal Entry, December 1st

I need to be more circumspect. I think there are those who have figured out I'm going to try and run. Henry and his thugs are keeping a close eye on me. Several of the older she-bears have made mention of the fact that turned humans who try to run are hunted down.

If Henry's people find them, they are dragged home and either their mate ensures their obedience or if unmated, they'd be forced into a pair bonding not of their choice. If Henry can't find them, he puts out a notice that they are missing and are a danger to the shifter society as a



whole, because they could tell non-shifters.

If the Council gets involved, they issue an order to "neutralize" the escapee. The Council is also reported to send members of the so-called Shadow League to find and kill the person before they can tell anyone.

Rumors are rife that if the escapee is a woman, she does not die easy and not until the members of the League catch her and have their way with her. Bastards.

I will not let stories of these boogymen stop me. I would rather be dead than have to live here. I will be free. There is no other choice.

Teresa had lived under horrific conditions and must have been so frightened. But she had also been convinced she needed to give her baby the best chance at a happy life, and she had done that. She'd paid with her life, but she had accomplished her goal of giving her baby a wonderful future. Tess just hoped that somewhere, Teresa Travers knew that.

Grabbing the things she'd brought with her, she and Derek boarded his boat and headed down to Otter Cove. She loved being out on the water with Derek. She'd always loved being close to the water and watching it in all its glory, but to be out on it in an open boat with the man she loved—loved? Where

did that come from? Tess thought about it and tried to tell herself it couldn't possibly be love, but deep in her soul she knew it was. Derek was the answer to the dream she'd never even allowed herself to dream. He wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but then again, neither was she. All she knew was that he was perfect for her.

Derek stood at the wheel with Tess in front of him and his arms around her as the boat skated over the choppy waters of the Gulf of Alaska. When she saw two boats rapidly approaching, she stiffened.

"It's okay, Tess. They're from the lighthouse compound. They're Zak's people. Our people."

Derek throttled down and let the boats approach. As they got closer, Tess could see Annie's mate, the enigmatic Deke, standing onboard. When they got close enough, he jumped from the boat he was on to theirs.

"I got some news, and Zak asked me to come. That bastard you three call a sire has gone off the deep end. Apparently, he was very offended when your mate there got the drop on him and two of his men." Deke looked at Tess. "Well done."

Derek chuckled. "Yeah, neither he nor his thugs were too happy about that. So, what's the problem?"

"Well, he's gone to the Council and leveled two charges at Tess. The first is that she is the child of a traitorous female whom one of his warriors had taken to mate, and who then stole the offspring of that union, which by Henry's reckoning belonged to the warrior and then to Henry." The cave lion shifter lifted his hand to stave off an argument. "I know; that's just Henry trying to spin an old tale. The second charge is one he lobbed at both Tess's birth mother and Tess, as well."

"That I told my sister, a non-shifter, about shifters—but how would anyone know what my mother told anyone?"

"Apparently the belief is that she had to have told the people who adopted you either by actually saying it, or by allowing them to see the fight between her and the bear who sired you. Most likely both. It makes sense. If she knew she

was dying, she probably asked them to look after you before shifting back into a bear.”

“So, Henry’s making trouble. What of it?” said Derek, suspiciously.

“We have enemies on the Council. This is the excuse they need—and no one is blaming you or Tess—to try and move against us. The Council, and more specifically their bully boys, the Shadow League...”

“Teresa Travers wrote about them in her journals,” said Tess.

“I don’t doubt it. My guess is, Henry used the Council and their thugs to track down those who got away from him, making them pay with their lives. Your birth mother wasn’t the first, nor was she the last.”

“I don’t remember many people leaving the clan until Zak came back,” said Derek.

“By the time you were old enough to notice, Henry had pretty much terrorized everyone at Akiak to the point they didn’t dare leave. If anyone ever starts digging at Akiak, I think they’re going to find a lot of bodies buried there, including the Shadow Sister that tried to help Tess’s birth mother.”

“Are you saying the Council knew?” asked Derek.

“Not only did they know, they probably buried some of the bodies themselves. None of that is important. What is important is that those who were looking to make a move against us now have an excuse.” Deke looked directly at Tess. “And that is all that it is. An excuse for them to make a move to test our strength and our resolve. Trust me when I tell you they have woefully underestimated both. As much as you are the poster child for the Council to come at us; you are just as much our symbol of all that’s wrong. Bottom line, Zak wants Tess and Lara at the lighthouse.”

“I get that we need to be careful,” said Derek.

“You don’t understand,” said Deke. “The Council has issued orders to the Shadow League—the first time they’ve

done so openly—to ‘neutralize this threat against our society.’ That’s a direct quote.”

“Would it do any good if I took Lara and ran?” asked Tess, not wanting to have people die on their account.

“None whatsoever. For one thing you wouldn’t get far before they caught up to you. Much as I hate those slimy bastards, they’re good at their job and efficient. And for another, even if you managed to get away, they’d say it was because of Zak and the lighthouse clan and move against them. This is the excuse they’ve been waiting for.”

Derek cursed, long and low. “They have to know they won’t get far with this—that it will involve far more than just me and Tess.”

Deke nodded. “For sure.”

“I know my brother. What’s he doing?”

“For one thing he’s talked to Jax. Mystic River is on full alert. Mark Hadley is mobilizing the people he has in place. Zak has got everyone at Otter Cove on alert, as well. Henry did himself no favors with this little maneuver. There are few cave lions left in the world, but they’re coming, as are the dire wolves and the snow leopards from Scotland.”

Tess tried to keep from trembling. They were talking about a war. Not just people trying to kill her and her sister, but an honest-to-god war.

Derek put his hand over hers, squeezing it reassuringly. “I probably should have used more care when I confronted Henry.”

Deke turned to Derek. “Nope. You don’t get to take the blame for this, either. Tess is an excuse. That’s all. If it wasn’t Tess, they’d have found another. I talked to Colby. His theory is that whoever their mole is has picked up on the growing resistance and the training going on out at Vulpecula. They may think this is their best shot.”

The boat bobbed in the water, and Tess wondered if the feeling of nausea that was coming over her was from the motion in the water or what she feared was coming. It was bad

enough for some group of people she'd never even met to basically put out a hit on her. It was quite another for them to use her sister and her as an excuse to start a war.

“Look it's getting cold, and the sea is coming up. In case anyone has forgotten, cats aren't particularly fond of water. We can go over all of this back at the lighthouse. Zak wanted you to have a heads up, and he wanted you to have an escort.” He laid his hand on Tess's arm. “This isn't a fight the Council can win.”

Deke jumped back to the other boat and all three continued in a group on their way to the lighthouse compound. Tess could see the changes that had already taken shape. Armed guards openly patrolled the shoreline and the dock.

Tess pointed to the black dorsal fins cutting through the water. “I've never seen so many orcas. Those are orcas, right?”

“Yes. I knew Zak reached out to Keiko and asked for her assistance. Not a big surprise that the orca-shifters are providing marine support. Orcas are a matriarchal society, so they have always had their own issues with the Council.”

“So, we're the excuse for them to take the Council on and have an army at their back.”

Derek grinned. “You're catching on to shifter politics really quickly.”

Tess shrugged. “I don't think it's all that different than human politics.”

“Probably not. Deke's right. None of this is anyone's fault—not even Henry, only he's too stupid and arrogant not to notice. Whatever happens though, you need to know I will keep you and Lara safe. Colby's sister is on the run with the guy who used to be the baker in Mystic River. Turns out he wasn't a baker at all—well he was, but he was also hiding from the Council. So, trust me, Mystic River and Otter Cove have been in the Shadow League's crosshairs for a while now.”

“Doesn't the League operate on the Council's orders?” asked Tess.

“That’s the story they give you, but many of us believe the League has gone quietly rogue and is pursuing its own agenda.”

“Which is?” she asked, leaning back to rest her head on his shoulder.

“No one knows for sure, but whatever it is isn’t good,” answered Derek, scanning the surrounding area. “There’s some speculation that they envision a world where shifters rule and humans are culled with only the best being used for breeders.”

“Regardless of what she chooses about becoming a shifter, Lara will fight with us.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. But she may not have a choice about becoming a shifter. Zak will have a stronger position with her turned and with you formally bonded to me.”

Tess turned in his arms and grinned at him. “Is this your idea of a romantic proposal?”

“Do you want a romantic proposal? Because I can arrange that.”

“No,” she said turning back around. “I think I prefer this nice intimate one.”

He bumped her backside with his knee. “You need to say yes.”

“Yes.”

“While I certainly want you to be bonded to me, and I think your sister will be happier as a shifter, neither needs to happen if you don’t want it to. Both of you will have my protection from this day until I draw my last breath. I will only relinquish your sister’s care to the one who can prove to me that he is her fated mate.”

“From the time Teresa was snatched, she was terrified, and she hated shifter society for what it had done to her. The more I read, the more I thought she had to be right. But she was wrong. She just met the wrong shifters. Her whole life—even when she was in Anchorage—was nothing but fear, danger,

and insecurity. She died making sure my life would not be the same, and she succeeded. Maybe her real legacy to me is that I was born a shifter so I could be your fated mate.”

“Could be. Fate often has cards she doesn’t show. But rest assured, Lara could well have a fated mate out there. The gift of a fated mate often runs along familial lines.”

“But technically we aren’t related—not by blood.”

“Blood and DNA are not the be all and end all in the shifter world. I have faith that your sister will find her own happy ending amongst our people.”

# CHAPTER 19





## DEREK

As they pulled up to the dock, Zak, Sienna, Lara, and Annie were waiting. Deke jumped off the other boat, catching Annie up in his arms and kissing her soundly. Their relationship may have gotten off to a rocky start, but Derek knew of few couples who were more closely bonded.

Zak's face was grim. There was more news, and it wasn't good. Derek tied off their boat and then stepped onto the dock, holding his hand out to help Tess.

"What's happened?"

"The Council was closer than anyone thought. They're up in Mystic River, and they are demanding we appear before them."

"That's bullshit," growled Deke.

"What the cave lion said," echoed Derek.

"That's all fine and good, but if nothing else, we need time to get our people in position. If we can placate them just a little, we may be able to buy them that time. Jax convinced them that as Mystic River is bigger, it's a better place to hold this little pow wow."

"But we and Henry are from Otter Cove. We have more of the people on our side," said Derek.

Zak nodded. "But we don't believe it's just the Council, and I'm not convinced that it's just the Shadow League. If it is, Colby has intelligence that says the League is far bigger than anyone thinks. In any event, the object of this first gambit is to

buy the rest of the resistance some time. Wyatt,” he said turning to his second-in-command, who was hanging back, “I’m leaving you and Deke in charge. Derek and I will head over to Mystic River.”

“I think you should take an escort,” said Wyatt.

Zak shook his head. “No. We don’t want them to think we’re concerned about this at all. Colby thinks this thing has gotten far more out of hand than they, or even Henry, thought it would.”

Annie nodded. “Deke thinks that Henry’s ultimate goal would be to force Tess and Derek back into Akiak. He has no heir, so to speak, and with Tess under his thumb and under threat of execution, he could force Derek to capitulate, which would in fact weaken you.”

“Your mate has a keen grasp of the events as they are being presented. I’m not sure she isn’t right,” said Zak.

Derek nodded. “Agreed. Henry is just Machiavellian enough to think it would work, but too stupid to realize the last thing he wants is Tess and I up at Akiak sowing seeds of discontent. In fact, I’m not sure that wouldn’t be a good thing.”

Zak grinned. “That’s a discussion for another day.”

“Why not just have Derek challenge the sonofabitch for leadership?” asked Deke.

“That isn’t beyond reason, either, although I would be the more recognizable candidate as alpha. Derek has made his home in Mystic River; Akiak is here in Otter Cove.”

“The community here grows by the day as polar bears learn what’s happening here and wander in seeking Zak’s protection,” said Sienna. “Akiak may end up being needed, and if so, Henry will have to be dealt with.”

“In any event, we’ve been summoned,” said Zak, “and I don’t particularly want to give them an excuse to launch an attack, although with Keiko’s patrols here and in Mystic River, that might prove far more difficult. Wyatt? I think we’ll be safe enough surrounded by Keiko’s people.” Zak turned to his

brother. “Let’s go see if we can’t figure out what these bastards are really up to.”

Derek nodded and gave Tess a deep and passionate kiss. “Two things before we go. First, Lara, I’m Derek. It’s good to have you with us. I told your sister, and I’m telling you in front of witnesses, you have my protection regardless of your decision to be turned or not. Second, Zak, Tess has agreed to be formally bonded to me.”

“Oh, goodie. I get another great sister-in-law. Now if I only had a fated mate in my hip pocket for Lara,” said Annie, gleefully.

Tess’s sister blushed deeply. She was going to have to get over that and quickly with Annie as some kind of sister relation.

“It won’t be the celebration she deserves, but it’ll strengthen our claim to both her and Lara.”

“That’s not very romantic,” said Lara.

“Trust me, little sister,” said Tess, “Derek is all about the romance, but he’s right, we can celebrate later. Right now, we need to do everything we can to be a thorn in Henry’s side.”

“In that case, somebody go fetch Maurice,” said Zak.

“Who is Maurice?” asked Tess.

“He’s our uncle,” explained Derek. “To be precise, he is our sire’s younger brother. Henry banished him a long time ago.”

A man who looked far more like his nephews than their sire, approached, walking down the dock to join them. “No need to fetch Maurice. When I heard what was going on, I figured someone would figure out the more ways we have to trap Henry, the better we are. So,” Derek’s uncle said, taking Tess’s hand in his, “you are the fated mate of my nephew. I have to say, Henry’s sons know how to pick them.” He turned to Derek. “Do you have a ring?”

“It’s kind of last-minute,” explained Derek.

“Well, you can’t get bonded without a ring. But I’ve got just the thing. My parents were fated mates. I’ve been carrying their rings with me since the day they passed. I knew Henry would run me out. I wanted something to carry with me to remember them by. I can’t think of a better use for them.”

Maurice reached up behind his neck and unclasped a silver chain before withdrawing the rings from beneath his shirt and handing them to him and Tess, who appeared as dumbstruck as Derek was.

“I can’t possibly...” Tess started.

“Of course, you can,” Maurice chuckled. “It’s not doing any good hanging around my neck. Besides, I’m sure Henry will recognize them, and that really ought to set him off.”

“If you’re sure,” Derek said, echoing his uncle’s tone.

“Well, then, it’s settled. We’ll do this up right when we’ve settled things with the Council and the Shadow League.” He pulled a piece of cloth out of his pocket.

“Do you always carry a bonding sash with you?” asked Annie, incredulously.

“Yes, ma’am. You never know when you’re going to need one. Like right now—if I didn’t have it with me, I’d have to be cutting a strip from someone’s clothing.” Maurice leaned over to Tess. “You’re okay with this, right?”

Tess smiled, her face lighting with happiness. “I’ve never been more okay with anything in my life.”

Annie leaned over and whispered something in Tess’s ear.

Maurice pulled out a knife and cut a slash across each of their palms. Tess winced a little, but she didn’t pull back and she didn’t protest. Maurice clasped their hands together, using the bonding sash to bind them before looking at Derek.

“Blood of my blood,” Derek said solemnly, slipping the diamond and sapphire ring onto her finger, only mildly surprised that it fit her perfectly. “You are my fated mate. I will be with you until we pass into the last sunset together. Will you spend eternity with me?”

He could see tears welling in her eyes. “Blood of my blood,” she said, placing the ring on his finger, which again fit—fate, surely. “I do.” Annie must have whispered the proper words to her.

“Then with the blessings of our ancestors and those that will follow, I declare you to be bonded and fated mates. Derek, give your mate a kiss and then go kick the Council’s ass.”

Maurice didn’t have to tell him twice. Derek hauled Tess up against him and brought his mouth down on hers in a hard, searing kiss that she returned in kind, her hands fisting his parka.

“Let’s go, little brother,” said Zak. “Daylight’s wasting. Wyatt? Deke? Keep my people safe.”

Both men nodded as he and Zak got on Zak’s boat, untied it from the dock, and then moved out into the open water, carefully navigating through the orcas who formed a kind of aisle between them that stretched as far as the eye could see. They rode in silence to Mystic River, where Colby Reynolds was waiting for them at the marina.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said Colby. “It would seem you’ve got our Council in quite a snit fit. They’re convinced—or at least they say they are—that Tess’s mother was a she-devil and spawned the same, and that the sister that she trusted with our most sacred secret isn’t much better. I’ve met both of those girls and they’re lovely.” Colby pointed to the ring. “Well-played. Think the sister might care to be a lynx?”

Both polar bear-shifters growled. Colby chuckled. “I just thought I’d ask.”

“How do you know they’re ‘lovely?’” asked Derek. “Was it your people who were following Tess in Seattle?”

“Not mine, specifically, but those I work with. She lost them, by the way. They got so turned around, they had to use their nav unit to get out of downtown Seattle. Now, let’s go get the Council set right. Mark says they’re ready to roll if we need them.”

The three men walked up to the town hall where the Ruling Council for North America was waiting. Colby faded back into the shadows and Zak and Derek took their place before the raised dais.

“You know why you have been called here?” asked the leader of the Council.

“We know why you called us but dispute your right to do so,” said Zak.

“Where’s the girl? And her sister? They should be here,” snarled Henry from the sidelines.

“Both my bonded mate and her sweet sister are back at the lighthouse compound where they are safe from the ravings of my lunatic sire,” said Derek as a plan started to form.

“Your mate has broken our most sacred law, as did her mother before her.”

“No one knows what Teresa Travers said or did. Four of the five are dead, and my mate was still a baby. But it is safe to assume that Teresa chose to save her child, trusting those who had shot her believing her to be a purebred. Teresa made the choice to save her baby, for which I am eternally grateful. What we do know is that my sire endorsed the kidnapping of a human girl and her forced turning, bonding, and breeding. Teresa Travers was given no choice in the matter.”

The leader of the Council held up his hand. “Is this true, Henry Grayson?”

Zak leaned over to Derek and whispered. “Your talents are wasted as a deputy sheriff. You should be a lawyer.”

“Well, parts of it are, but as my son points out, no one was there so we don’t know what happened. You must make them uphold our most sacred law. It is tradition.”

“Tradition,” sighed Derek. “The laundry line on which every zealot hangs themselves. And if our tradition is that we would kill a woman who sought to save her baby or her daughter who thought to protect the only sister she’s ever known, then this council can hang itself right beside Henry. It’s time shifters everywhere looked to their traditions and

councils to see if they still served them well. I would say in this case, not so much.”

“I have a suggestion,” said Colby from the back.

“The Council will hear the Alpha of Windsong.”

“For some time,” said Colby, addressing the Council, “there has been a schism among the polar bear-shifters at Otter Cove. A breach that has been encouraged and widened by Henry Grayson. It is my belief that more than half of Henry’s people only stay at their ancestral home because of Henry and his threats to them, to their families, and to others whom they care about.”

“That’s not true,” snarled Henry.

“Isn’t it?” said Colby, turning to face him. “If I might, I have affidavits of more than sixty-nine percent of those presently at Akiak who state, for the record, that they would leave if they could, but are afraid to do so. I’m sure I would have more did I not have to gather the information in secret to protect the anonymity of those who answered.”

“I want to see those names,” growled Henry.

“Over my dead body,” answered Colby smoothly. “It has always been the tradition of this Council that if two-thirds of those who make up a designated clan no longer believe in their alpha, that the Council will step in and remove him.”

Henry’s swagger began to fail him. “You can’t count those traitors at Zak’s lighthouse...”

“I didn’t. We only got affidavits from those who reside at Akiak. I would propose to the council that Henry Grayson be removed and that the Akiak Clan be reunited under Zak’s authority.”

“I can foresee two problems...” started Zak.

“I won’t go,” sneered Henry.

“That isn’t much of a problem,” said Derek matter-of-factly. “If you refuse, I will challenge you in Zak’s name.”

“I can make my own challenge,” said Zak evenly.

“Maybe so, but that bastard basically put out a hit on my mate and her sister. The right to kill him belongs to me.”

Henry paled in the face of his youngest son’s acrimony.

“As I started to say,” continued Zak. “Two problems: the first is I’m not sure the populations of Akiak and the lighthouse compound can be combined and not overwhelm the properties. The second is that some of those at the lighthouse would never return to Akiak under any circumstances.”

“Might I propose a solution to both?” asked Colby. The head of the Council nodded. “I would propose that a second clan be established at Mystic River. Derek is an alpha male and has proven himself to be an excellent leader. Like Zak, he would be the natural heir to claim the role of alpha up at Akiak were Zak not available to lead there.”

“Where would we put them?” asked Jax, who had been lurking in the background.

“I’m so glad you asked,” purred Colby. “It just so happens that I own the acreage from Derek’s homestead cabin up to the border of Wolf Run. I would be willing to sell Derek the land for his people for the sum of three hundred twenty-three dollars and fifty cents.”

Derek and Jax started to laugh—it was the fine on the ticket Derek had written him.

“I would also propose,” Colby continued, “that as she has said she is amenable to being turned, Lara Dixon be stationed and granted lands for a new clinic over in Otter Cove. The area could use its own vet. I would be willing to donate one of several buildings I own that I believe might be perfect for her.”

“That’s generous of you, Colby,” said Derek.

“Think nothing of it. The land I’m offering you is more suited to polar bears than lynxes. And last, but not least, I demand the edict demanding the arrest and execution of Lara Dixon and Tess Grayson be nullified for all time.”

The council members looked between themselves and agreed. “The Council hereby accepts the proposal as outlined by the lynx-shifter.”



“Wait!” screeched Henry, “I don’t agree to any of this.”

“Then prepare to be challenged,” said Derek coolly. He had no desire to kill his sire, but if that was the price of keeping Tess and Lara safe, so be it.

“I don’t need any more bloodshed in this town,” said Jax. “We just went through this with the arctic foxes. You can leave under your own power, Henry, or I’ll ask Colby here to put you in a cage and transport your ass to a zoo in Arizona.”

Knowing he was defeated and had no recourse, Henry’s shoulders slumped, and he started to slink out the exit. “Henry,” called Zak. “As Alpha of Akiak, I hereby banish you from this day forward to your last day on Earth. You are alpha here no more. Violate that banishment under pain of death.”

“That goes for the clan at Mystic River, as well,” said Derek.

Derek almost felt sorry for his sire as he turned away and exited the building.

“We haven’t heard the last of him or the Council,” said Derek to his brother as they too left the Council.

“Not by a long shot. Nor have we heard the last of the Shadow League,” said Zak.

# CHAPTER 20



## TESS

Journal Entry, September 2nd

I can feel her moving around. She's a feisty little thing.

I'm not sure why I believe my baby to be a girl, but I do. I keep thinking I should come up with a name, but nothing seems to fit. I suppose I'm hoping that I'll be inspired. Maybe once she's here I'll figure it out.

The small of my back has been cramping all day. I've read it's one of the first signs of labor. It won't be long now. I'm scared to have her on my own, but even more afraid that someone will take her from me.

*She may not have been conceived in love, but by god, she'll be born in it. I never thought I would learn to love her due to how she came to be. But the first time I felt that little foot kick me, my whole world changed for the better.*

*I love you, baby girl.*

## *P*olaris Compound

*Mystic River, Alaska*

### *Several Weeks After the Council Meeting*

Tess wasn't sure how she found the peace and quiet she'd always needed to do her illustrations amid the construction and creation of the compound and living quarters of the Polaris Polar Bear Clan. As Zak had predicted, there were those who wanted never to see Akiak again, and so they and many of the newcomers followed Derek to Mystic River where they established the site. It was noisy and dusty from dawn until dusk, but she, like everyone else, was thriving.

Instead of a large house and smaller outbuildings, Derek had opted to follow his brother's plan for small cottages for families and large dormitories with private rooms for those who were unbonded. There was a large communal dining/meeting hall where people gathered to share meals and conversation. The links that were being forged in these first few weeks would serve as a basis for all to come.

Curiously, Wyatt had asked to join them at Polaris, as his memories of Akiak were not ones he wanted to revisit. Derek had been glad to have his steadying hand as they built the clan and developed the land they would live on for all the days that followed. Zak had grouched, but in the end had convinced Deke

to take on the role of his second-in-command in Wyatt's absence.

They were working steadily, and although many of their people were still living in tents, there was an excitement and joy that came from being a part of something new. Tess and Derek had fallen into a routine—he went into town each day to perform his duties as deputy sheriff and then returned to share their evening meal with the clan.

After dinner many of them went for a run, either up in the heavily wooded lands that separated Polaris from Wolf Run, or along the rocky shoreline. She and Derek often went for a private run or swim after everyone had settled down. Tess enjoyed the freedom of being a polar bear and next to making love to Derek, swimming was her favorite activity. Lara had yet to be turned, mainly because there were several male shifters who had expressed more than a passing interest, and Lara was enjoying playing the field, much to Zak's dismay.

After dinner, Derek asked her to go for a moonlit walk with him along the shoreline. Their impromptu bonding ceremony may have had all the romance of a foreign invasion, but Derek made up for it every single day, telling her he loved her, bringing her flowers, leaving notes, and other romantic gestures. He'd made a trip in Colby's jet to get her drafting table, desk, and chair and made a special place for her to work where the light was ideal.

"We need to talk about having a bonding celebration. Both clans want to celebrate with us, especially our people here at Polaris, and honestly, Annie will never let me hear the end of it if we don't."

Tess laughed. Annie was a force of nature and had become one of her best friends, as had Cecily, Wyatt's mate, and Sienna. With Lara in tow, the lot of them got up to all kinds of fun which left their mates grumbling about the bad influence they were on the rest of the she-bears.

"I was thinking we'd wait until we had more of Polaris completed and then have a kind of housewarming and celebration at the same time," Tess said.

“Ever the practical mate, but fated mates aren’t always about practicality. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t change our impromptu bonding ceremony for anything...”

“Don’t you find it kind of spooky that your grandparents’ rings fit us so perfectly?”

“Not really. They were fated mates. Neither my sire nor my uncle had one. Obviously, my sire took a she-bear to mate, but they were never fated. So, it was almost as if my uncle picked up the rings as an act of faith on behalf of the fates.”

A long, low, mournful howl split the rapidly descending darkness. One long note followed by two short barks, a pause, a short bark, and another long howl.

“I didn’t think we were that close to Wolf Run,” said Tess.

Derek stopped, trying to pierce the darkness so he could see. “We aren’t.”

The sequence sounded again.

“That’s Asher Wells,” said Derek. “That’s a warning. We need to get back to the compound.”

As he reached for her, they both spotted the red dot of a sniper’s sight dead center in the middle of Tess’s chest.

“Down,” Derek growled as he shoved her down and away, shifting simultaneously from man to bear.

The cacophony of noise that followed was one that would haunt Tess for the remainder of her life. The sound of the rifle firing the bullet meant for her; the roar of pain as the bullet found its mark in Derek; the sound of another shot from a different gun, and then a body cascading down the granite cliffs that formed the border of their coastline.

“Derek,” Tess called as she scrambled back to him. “Derek. No.”

The gravely wounded polar bear who was her fated mate raised his head painfully and nuzzled her hand.

“No. You do not get to die on me. Do you hear me? That’s not happening.”

She spun towards the cliff where she'd heard the body fall. Something was crashing through the brush and sawgrass as it scabbled over the rocky terrain. Not knowing who or what was coming, Tess called forth her she-bear and made ready to stand her ground to protect her mate. From the direction of the compound, she could hear the sound of several ATVs headed their way, but with no way of knowing how long it would take help to arrive, she had no choice but to confront this threat on her own.

The vortex whirled from the ground and moved upwards, encompassing her body in a swirling mist charged with lightning, thunder, color, and, Tess thought, a little bit of magic. She paced back and forth between her mate and the intruder, hoping someone from the compound would have heard the shots and be on their way.

Tess pinned her ears as she bluff-charged in the direction of whatever it was that was running toward her. Just as whatever it was came into the clearing, Tess stood up on her hind legs, growling and batting her paws with their lethal claws to let whoever it was know she meant to fight. A gorgeous black wolf sprang into the clearing, stopping short before it, too, was encompassed by a swirling mist that left a man where a wolf had once been.

“Tess, it’s me, Asher. There was a sniper...”

She banished her bear to the recesses of her brain and became human once more. “Ash, I didn’t know it was you. It was you who howled the warning.”

“Yes. I couldn’t get a clear shot until after he fired, but I hit him, and he went over the cliff. I double checked for other snipers. It appears the threat has been neutralized. I can see you’re all right, but how badly is Derek hurt?”

“Get away from her,” growled Wyatt as several enormous flashlights lit up the area.

“Wyatt, it’s Asher,” said Tess. “Derek is hurt. Asher’s the one who warned us and took out the assassin.”

“I need a litter, and I need it now,” ordered Wyatt, before turning to Tess. In a much gentler tone, he said. “If he’s conscious, see if you can get him to shift back. He’ll be easier to transport as a human.”

Tess turned to Derek, who seemed to be losing too much blood to recover. “Don’t you dare die on me. You owe me a bonding ceremony, and I intend to collect. Wyatt’s here, and so is Ash. Can you shift back for me, sweetheart?”

With a groan, Derek shifted back from bear to man.

“I’ve already called Autumn,” said Ash. “She’s calling Doc Hadley, and they’ll meet us at the compound. They don’t want him moved any more than possible. But we’re out in the open. If the League...”

“The League?” said Tess and Wyatt simultaneously.

“Most likely. We should be able to recover the body come sunup, but that would be my working theory.”

“Why were you up there?” asked Tess suspiciously.

“I’d heard rumor of a park ranger being spotted in the area. I knew for a fact none of my rangers were up here which led me to believe someone wanted to pin something on either my rangers in general or me in particular. So I came looking for him. That little stunt you and Colby pulled with the Council left them reeling. They were looking for an excuse to set the Shadow League on us and failed.”

“But why an assassin?” asked Tess. “And why disguise him as a park ranger?”

“I think to make it look like the attack came from Wolf Run. My father hasn’t been quiet about his feelings of having a clan of polar bears on his doorstep, especially when he’s always coveted this land.”

“You’re going to have to deal with him sometime,” Wyatt said pointedly to Asher.

Asher took a deep breath and sighed. “I know.”

The sound of the ATVs returning was music to her ears. As his men rushed in to pick his body up, someone handed her a



sweater. It was her favorite sweater of Derek's—the one she most often wore in the cabin.

As they made their way carefully back to the compound, Tess could see three sets of headlights headed down the drive. Unless she was badly mistaken, they would be Autumn, Doc, and Jax. She turned to Asher, “Can you deal with Jax? Also, can someone call Zak and let him know what’s happened?”

Asher grinned at her. “Derek chose well for the first lady of his clan.”

She gave him a warm smile. “There wasn’t any choice involved; it was fate.”

After using Autumn’s portable x-ray machine, they deemed that the bullet was too close to his heart to risk moving Derek any more than they had to. They cleared the tables in the dining hall, sterilized the area they needed to, and then chased everyone out.

Three gut-wrenching hours later, Autumn walked out and hugged her mate before turning to Tess. “He’s going to be fine. The bullet didn’t do as much damage as it might have, but operating here was the right thing to do. Moving him could have sent the bullet into the heart itself and killed him.”

“Can I see him? I need to see him, Autumn,” Tess said, her eyes pleading.

“I understand. It’s not standard procedure, but very little is up here in Mystic River.”

Tess left them discussing a search party for the body of the assassin. When Doc stood up, Tess threw her arms around him. “Thank you.”

“Happy to do it. Your mate is a fine man. Once he’s come out of anesthesia and we get him moved to wherever you’d like him to recover, I’d like to see if we can get him to shift. He’ll heal faster that way. We’ll need to set up some kind of bed where we can keep everything clean and we’re going to need to set up IVs and that kind of thing.”

“Have Autumn tell Wyatt the specifics of what you want. We’ll set it up in our cabin. That way we’ll have a full kitchen,

bath, and anything else we need. Get them started now and my guess is by the time we're ready to move him, they'll have it ready."

Doc left her alone with Derek, who opened his eyes. "Hi, gorgeous."

"Don't you 'hi, gorgeous' me," she scolded him, fighting the tears that threatened to roll down her cheeks.

"I'll be fine, baby. I promise. We'll have that bonding ceremony. I think we should either have it here, the meadow where I found you, or the dock at the lighthouse compound."

Tess smiled. "I don't care where we have it, just as long as we have it together."

He nodded. "I love you, Tess. You're the very best thing in my whole life."

"I love you, too—to the moon and back and into the great beyond."



### *Several Weeks Later*

She and Derek were sitting on the front porch in the rocker that Annie had given them. She'd had it specially handmade by Max down in Kodiak to fit Derek's frame, as well as give him room to have Tess in his lap. Derek was healing far more rapidly than he might have if he hadn't spent two weeks in his shifted form, and he was well on his way to a full recovery.

"So, what did you put in the time capsule under the stone flooring in the dining hall?"

One of the things Tess had ordered changed was the beautiful wood floors of the dining hall. She had them torn up and replaced by stone. With a fight coming, having a make-shift operating theatre or hospital facility might be crucial, and stone was a lot cleaner and easier to sterilize than wood. One of the workers had questioned both her choice and her

authority and had found to his chagrin that Tess needed neither Derek nor Wyatt to back up her decisions.

“Teresa’s journals. In some ways they are so sad, but in another way, it’s really a story about triumph and a testimony about the love of a mother for her unborn child. Have I thanked you for having the carving done to represent her and what she started?”

“Yes, but not in the way I want,” he grumbled.

“Yeah. You take that up with your doctor. As soon as he says you’re good to go, I’ll be all over you.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, baby.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you down.”

He hugged her close. “That thought never entered my mind.”



## *Journal Entry*

*I'm not sure of the exact date today, and this will be my first, last, and only entry.*

*I want anyone who may find or read these journals in the future to know I had a wonderful life. Teresa Travers may not be the woman I called 'mom,' but she not only gave life to me, but gave her life to ensure I would have my own happily ever after.*

P.S. Thank you for your sacrifice,  
Teresa. Job well done. Your watch has  
ended. Go in peace and love.

# FIRST LOOK



## BAH HUMBUG MATE

### *A Mystic River Shifters Holiday Novella*

“*W*hat do you mean I need to be mated by the winter holiday? Are you kidding me?” Dash said as he paced back and forth in the attorney’s office.

“Look, Dash, I didn’t write the damn will. Well, I guess technically I did, but your grandmother was very particular. She was very angry you left the herd. So, if you want to inherit what I agree is rightfully yours, you need to be married by the holiday deadline.”

“Which is?”

“December 24.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“I’m afraid I am. Your grandmother took these kinds of things seriously.”

“For heaven’s sake, Blitz, where the hell am I supposed to find a comely, female reindeer-shifter in the next...” he glanced at the calendar on the wall “twenty-three days?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, and there are provisions that will have you tied to this girl for at least ten years.”

Dash plopped down in the chair. “A decade? I have to spend a decade with some girl I don’t even know?”

“You know lots of girls,” said Blitzen.

“And none of them I’d want to marry.”

“Dude, for that kind of fortune, I’d marry Godzilla.”

“Do you have her number?”



Thank you for reading *Stolen Mate*. The next book in the series is [Bah Humbug Mate](#).

Dash doesn’t believe in Christmas or fate. He never expected to meet his fated mate, Noel, on that cold winter night, but fate had other plans.

Noel had always believed in the power of fate and the magic of Christmas, and she had no doubt that Santa would deliver her true love on the

special day.

When Dash and Noel meet, sparks fly, neither of them expecting the connection they feel.

Dash needs to get from grumpy humbug to a believer if he is going to catch his fated mate before it is too late.

Will Dash be able to embrace the power of Christmas and accept his fate? Or will Noel have to find her true love without the help of Santa?

If you enjoy holiday romances that make you smile then you’ll love Dash and Noel’s story in “[Bah Humbug Mate](#).”

## BONUS SCENE



Thank you again for reading *StolenMate* (Mystic River/Otter Cove Shifters)! The next story is Dash and Noel's story in *Bah Humbug Mate*. Watch what happens when an unbelieving male reindeer is forced to marry in a hurry and his fated mate is a true believer. Wait till you see the hijinks these two get up to.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Derek and Tess as a thank you! All you have to do is click the link below or scan the QR code with your phone, sign up for my newsletter, and you'll get an email giving you access!

[SIGN UP HERE](#)





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[Phantom Fire](#)

[Wild Fire](#)

[Dark Fire](#)

#### Mystic River Shifters (small town shifter)

[Defiant Mate](#)

[Savage Mate](#)

[Reckless Mate](#)

[Shameless Mate](#)

[Runaway Mate](#)

[Stolen Mate](#)

[Bah Humbug Mate](#)

#### Otter Cover Shifters (small town shifters/ spinoff Mystic River)

[Suspicious Mate](#)

[Unexpected Mate](#)

[Substitute Mate](#)

[Accidental Mate](#)

#### Syndicate Masters

##### Midwest

[Kiss of Luck](#)

[Stroke of Fortune](#)

[Twist of Fate](#)

##### Eastern Seaboard

[High Stakes](#)

[High Roller](#)

[High Bet](#)

##### La Cosa Nostra

[Ruthless Honor](#)

[Feral Oath](#)

[Defiant Vow](#)

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#### Syndicate Masters

The Bargain

The Pact

The Agreement

The Understanding

The Pledge

Box Set

**Looking Glass Multiverse**

Shifted Reality

Shifted Existence

Shifted Dimension

Box Set

**Reign of Fire**

Dragon Storm

Dragon Roar

Dragon Fury

**Masters of Valor (spin off Masters of the Savoy)**

Prophecy

Illusion

Deception

Inheritance

**Masters of the Savoy**

Advance

Negotiation

Submission

Contract

Bound

Release

**Ghost Cat Canyon**

Determined

Untamed

Bold

Fearless

Strong

**Fated Legacy (spin-off Tangled Vines)**

Touch of Fate

Touch of Darkness

Touch of Light

Touch of Fire

Touch of Ice

Touch of Destiny

**Tangled Vines (spin-off Wayward Mates)**

Corked

Uncorked

Decanted

Breathe

Full Bodied

Late Harvest

Mulled Wine

**Wayward Mates**

In Vino Veritas

Brought to Heel

Marked and Mated

Mastering His Mate

Taking His Mate

Claimed and Mated

Claimed and Mastered

Hunted and Claimed

Captured and Claimed

Wayward Mates Box Set One

Wayward Mates Box Set Two

**Alpha Lords**

Warlord

Overlord

Wolflord

Fated

Dragonlord

**Contemporary Suspense**

**Mystery, She Wrote (Cozy Mysteries)**

Murder Before Dawn

Paint Me A Murder

Deadline To Murder

Murder in the Afternoon

**Relentless Pursuit (Duet)**

To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Charade

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[The Scoundrel](#)

[The Scavenger](#)

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[The Sentinel](#)

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[Wicked Predator](#)

[Deadly Predator](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Other books by Delta James:** <https://www.deltajames.com/>

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different than the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Delta loves connecting with her readers and tries to respond personally to as many messages as she can! You can find her on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/DeltaJamesAuthor> and in her reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

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