

SYNDICATE MASTERS
SIM
MIDWEST
MAFIA



TWIST OF FATE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DELTA JAMES

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of a copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by fines and federal imprisonment.

Please purchase only authorized editions and do not participate in or encourage, the piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Copyrighted 2023 by Delta James

*Special Thanks to: Autumn, Kathy and Maggie
for their help in the completion of this manuscript*

Editing: Lori White, Creative Editing Services

Cover Design: Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs

Proofreader: Melinda Kaye Brandt

✿ Created with Vellum

TWIST OF FATE

A DARK FATED MATES MAFIA PARANORAMAL
ROMANCE

SYNDICATE MASTERS: MIDWEST



DELTA JAMES

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Scene](#)

[Also by Delta James](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

*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*

PROLOGUE



Chokia was dying. Their gods had all but abandoned them. Close to the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi Rivers, it had once been the greatest city in North America, but now everyone was leaving.

Overpopulation had been rampant when an earthquake left the city in ruins, leveling buildings and spreading disease until the region had been so decimated there was no saving it. As those who had survived moved off to the West, the last of the priestesses gathered the last of her magick, mixed it with the prairie winds, and blew into her hand, releasing the guardians. To the north, the spotted leopard was dispatched; to the south, the noble striped tiger; and in between the two, the great maned lion.

CHAPTER 1



QUINN

*N*ew York City, New York
Seven Years Ago

Quinn Forrester shoved the handle on the revolving doors as she hurried inside. The newspaper occupied the entire building, including the basement where the large printing presses still ground out printed newspapers, although more and more, electronic versions ruled the day.

“Hold that door, please!” she called.

The distance between the revolving door and her destination seemed more like miles than a mere smattering of footsteps. She made it inside the doors just as they closed, thanking the older gentleman as they swooshed behind her. Quinn managed to twist herself until she was facing the doors and could hit the button for the fifteenth floor.

She might be a few minutes late to the staff meeting, but that would be all right. She’d broken an enormous political corruption story three days before and so was the paper’s rising star. Quinn had worked hard for her success—working hard for her degree from Columbia in journalism and taking any and every assignment that came her way from the time she graduated until now.

Her latest story was a doozy. A whistleblower in the Comptroller’s Office had learned of widespread corruption within the office. Numerous officials were using public funds

to afford their private pleasures. Her source had provided her with all the documentation she'd needed to blow the scandal wide open.

The night after her story broke, her boyfriend, Todd, who was also the publisher's son, had silenced all the wagging tongues and put a ring on her finger. Quinn had been flying high ever since. She had it all: a thriving career, a hunky fiancé with whom she shared a loft apartment in Tribeca, and a tidy savings account from shrewd and speculative investing. What more was there?

"Hey, Tina," she called to the receptionist, who didn't even look up.

That was odd. She and Tina were work friends. Granted they didn't really hang out together outside work, but they often had coffee or lunch together. It was probably Tina's skanky 'baby daddy' cheating on her again. Quinn picked up her pace as she headed to the large conference room where staff meetings were held.

Quinn entered the room and wondered at how quiet it was. Staff meetings were usually lively, noisy affairs where Todd's father had to rein them all in to get anything done. No one even looked up at her. In fact, they looked pointedly away. Something was up. When she glanced at Todd, he couldn't meet her eyes. Did whatever was going on have something to do with the fact that he'd been up and gone before her alarm went off?

Before Quinn could even form a question, Esme, who was Todd's father's assistant, stepped into the room behind her.

"Quinn, Mr. Hanson would like to see you," said Esme.

"Well, it's his staff meeting. Won't he see me when he comes in?"

"He'd like to see you privately," she said quietly.

Quinn looked to Todd, who was staring out the window. All the little things that had been 'off' about this morning were suddenly starting to congeal in the pit of her stomach. Without another word, Quinn turned to follow Esme to the publisher's

office. Esme opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Quinn to enter before closing it behind her.

Theodore Hanson, Sr., was seated behind his desk flanked by the paper's heads of human resources and legal departments. Quinn stepped towards the desk. It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room and she was left with nothing to breathe.

"Ms. Forrester," started the lawyer.

Ms. Forrester? That wasn't good at all. Nobody at the paper addressed anyone by their last name. Quinn stood behind the set of chairs that faced Senior's desk.

"It has come to our attention that the story you broke on corruption in the Comptroller's office is woefully erroneous, bordering on libelous."

"That's not true. My source was employed by that office in a position of considerable responsibility in the hierarchy. He gave me scores of information that I turned over to the legal department."

"But not until we forced the issue and not until the evening before your story hit the front page."

"You didn't tell me you wanted it until late that same afternoon. I've done nothing wrong," declared Quinn, hating how defensive she sounded.

The blob in her gut began to churn. Todd being gone when she woke, the morning paper missing from their apartment, the housekeeper showing up a day early, no one at the paper meeting her eye, security being stationed within close proximity—it all made sense now in a singularly horrific way.

"That may have been an error on the managing editor's part, but certainly you should have verified the documentation with other sources, as well as confirmed the employment status of the source who gave that information to you," continued the lawyer.

"I did verify that he was who he said he was."

“Did you speak to HR?” asked the woman who was in charge of the paper’s human resources department.

“Of course not. If I spoke to HR, I would have outed the guy. He came to me at considerable risk.”

“Not so much,” said the lawyer. “And the money you paid him does not help your case.”

Shit! How did they know about that? The source had said he needed money to get out of town and to start over. What the hell did I do? What’s going on?

“He needed expenses, and I knew—”

“You knew that this paper does not pay sources for information,” said Senior with a disdainful tone.

“That’s what you tell yourself,” scoffed Quinn. “Reporters have ways of covering that shit up. At least I used my money and not yours.”

“Which is why, with two additional provisos, we were able to convince the Comptroller’s Office not to sue the newspaper.”

Quinn felt the weight of all that had happened descend on her shoulders. She closed her eyes and breathed through the moment before opening them and looking directly at the lawyer. “That the paper print a front page retraction and fire me.”

“I see at least you learned at Columbia the ramifications of shoddy journalism and making unfounded charges against a city official and his staff,” intoned Senior.

“I had no reason to question my source. Everything looked legitimate.”

“But it wasn’t,” said the lawyer. “He forged all the documents. None of it was real. None.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“That’s why you should have checked with human resources,” said the HR person. “He was terminated and had an ax to grind.”

“But I didn’t know that.” Quinn hated the way she sounded like she was pleading, which she supposed, she was. “I had no reason to believe he wasn’t still employed or that he would go to so much trouble to dummy up the information. I thought I’d dotted all my I’s and crossed all my T’s.”

“You thought wrong,” said the lawyer.

“As you are being terminated for cause, and New York is an ‘employment at will’ state, you will receive no severance, no reference, and no extended benefits will be available for you.” The head of the human resources department stepped forward, extending an envelope. “This check covers your employment from your last paycheck through today and any and all unpaid leave you are due. Your desk has been packed up and security will escort you from the building.”

Quinn looked at Senior. “Let me guess; Todd knew about this.”

“Yes. My son is very disappointed in you, as am I. Maria packed your things and they are being held at the desk in the foyer of the building. I need to collect the keys to the apartment, as well as your credentials, identification and security badge, and your engagement ring.”

From the moment Quinn had begun to realize what was taking place, she’d been twisting her engagement ring, hoping to loosen it up without spitting on it. Finally, it came free, and she tossed it on Senior’s desk as she took the proffered envelope from Human Resources. She flattened her lips into a thin line as she turned to leave.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?” asked Senior, finally rising to his feet.

“Yeah,” she said over her shoulder. “Fuck you.”

The security guards, who were merely overtrained chimpanzees in uniform who’d been rejected as applicants for the police department, seemed to enjoy her ‘walk of shame’ as she was escorted from the building. The larger of the two set the box of her belongings on the ground before he and his partner returned inside.

“Ms. Forrester? Ms. Quinn Forrester?” asked a man in a cheap suit and bow tie.

“Yes, I’m Quinn Forrester,” she said, taking the folded paperwork he offered her.

“You’ve been served,” he said before spinning on his heel and walking briskly away.

Knowing what she would read, Quinn unfolded the paperwork. Sure enough, the Comptroller and the others she had named in the article were suing her for libel. They’d gotten their pound of flesh from the paper, who had, in turn, fed her to the lions.

Leaning over, Quinn picked up her personal belongings and hailed a cab. But where to go? She no longer had a place to live. Remembering a lawyer, Genelva, whom she’d interviewed about the glass ceilings female and non-Caucasian lawyers still encountered, Quinn retrieved her cell phone and called the woman’s firm, only to be told that the lawyer in question had left the firm and opened her own shop. Quinn repeated the address to the cab driver as she dialed the new number.

“Quinn? Ever since I saw the retraction and the paper’s editorial condemning unfounded stories and damning you, I was hoping you’d call. Are you on your way here?”

“I am.”

“Good. Do not say another word to anyone. Have you been served?”

“Did you know about this?”

“No, but I was pretty sure they would once I saw the paper. I’m on the fourth floor. We’ll be waiting. You’re not in this alone.”

“It sure feels like I am.”

“That’s your fear talking. Believe me when I tell you, you’re not. We’ll get this sorted out.”

Arriving at the address she’d been given, Quinn paid the cabby and saw Genelva and a young man waiting under

umbrellas. The young man came forward, offering to take her things, which she was glad to let him have. Genelva helped her out, putting an arm around her so they could share the umbrella and ushered her inside.

“God, you could have drowned between the cab and the door. Let’s take the elevator.”

“You didn’t have to come out and meet me,” said Quinn as she shivered not just from the cold and damp, but from the hand she’d been dealt—one minute she had everything and the next she was pretty damn sure she would lose it all.

“Of course, I did. My business is thriving because of you.”

“I was afraid they’d found out you were the one who made those damning comments for my article.”

“They might have figured it out. But after you left, I kept asking myself the same question you’d asked—why did I tolerate it? Why did I allow them to control my future? I know I didn’t have an answer for you. When I didn’t have one for myself, I knew it was time to make a change. So, the morning after the story came out, I walked into the senior partner’s office and quit. I’m told a lot of firms lost a lot of females and persons of color that morning. So, I owe you. I’m taking your case *pro bono*.”

“You don’t owe me anything, and I have money to pay your fees.”

“Let’s not talk about that until you have officially engaged me as your attorney.”

Not ten minutes later, Quinn had a lawyer. “I still don’t think it’s right that you aren’t going to charge me.”

“Like I said, if it hadn’t been for you, I might never have gone out on my own. My business is thriving and I’m doing the kind of work for the kind of people I always wanted to. Besides, I think we’re going to need every last dime to get the Comptroller and his cronies to back off. Any chance you have the documentation you were provided?”

“Yes, I scanned and saved it to my personal laptop.”

“Good. I want to use that to show them that there was no malicious intent. Maybe you could have used a bit more due diligence, but you had no reason to question it. But they are going to want to have proof they are vindicated.”

“They have a retraction.”

“From the paper. Trust me when I tell you, your former employer had to have thrown you under the bus and genuflected numerous times to get them to go after you. They’re going to want to try and break you. We’re not going to let them, but we’re going to need as much cash as you can muster to keep this from going to trial.”

“Don’t we want to go to trial?” asked Quinn.

“No. The fact is, you reported what you believed to be true so there is no malice, but it’s pretty clear that you didn’t check out the source or the information as carefully as you might have.” Genelva held up her hand to wave away Quinn’s protests. “Trials are expensive for everybody involved and they have a whole legal department. What I want to do is negotiate a settlement, and that is going to take some doing, especially as I am going to get them to forego looking at any criminal proceedings. It’s also going to take most, if not all, of your cash.”

Quinn slumped lower in the chair. “I wish I hadn’t surrendered my engagement ring so easily.” She shook her head. “He snuck out before I got up this morning, after I finally gave in to his wanting to have anal sex, and then he wouldn’t even look at me. The weasel.”

“Oh, there are far worse things that I’d want to call him. But right now, we need to focus on getting this thing settled. How much of your money can I spend?”

“I guess all of it. I don’t want to go to jail, Genelva.”

Genelva leaned forwards, taking both of Quinn’s hands in hers. “I’m going to do my damndest to see that we avoid that. Were you living with Todd?”

Quinn nodded. “Yes, Daddy Dearest arranged for the cleaning lady to come and pack my things. They’re at the desk

in the foyer. I don't even know where to stay.”

“I have a friend with a room she rents out occasionally. It's not the Ritz, but it's clean, safe, and cheap.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Great. I'll give her a call and if she's on board, I'll have Ignacio get your things and take them and the stuff from your office over to Malania's place.”

“He shouldn't have to do that...”

“Are you kidding? He loves to get out of the office. Besides, I want to go over our strategy and maybe even make a preliminary call to the attorney representing the Comptroller and his buddies. Just between you, me, and the shark tank, I don't know that your story was that far off the mark. I just don't think we can prove it with what we have.”

Quinn sat, watching Genelva begin the song and dance that was negotiating a settlement with a bunch of old men who had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar and were looking for payback. Quinn realized quickly the law firm had been fools to let Genelva go. She was a skilled attorney who seemed to excel not only in the application and finer points of the law, but in the art of negotiation.

After several days of strong and masterful lawyering and negotiating, a settlement was reached. Quinn would pay all but five thousand dollars of her life's savings and agree never to practice journalism again within a thousand miles of the State of New York. The contract included a non-disclosure agreement and mutual resolution of claims for all parties involved, including the newspaper.

An investigation of her assets revealed a great aunt she only barely remembered had passed and left a small studio apartment in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Genelva had managed to get it exempted, explaining Quinn's plan was to move to New Orleans and start over. That hadn't been Quinn's plan at all but facing the stark reality of having nothing but a career in ruins, the City of Second Chances seemed to be a fitting place to begin again.

With her things loaded and en route to the Big Easy, Quinn gave Genelva a hug and thanked her for everything as she boarded the southbound train out of New York City's Grand Central station. She waved at Genelva and Ignacio as the train pulled out, listening to the thunder roll and watching the lightning flash and the rain begin to fall. It seemed a fitting way to bid goodbye to the city that had once seemed to offer her everything but in the end had turned its back on her with a cold and utter finality. Squaring her shoulders, she looked straight ahead toward the City of Second Chances: New Orleans, Louisiana.

CHAPTER 2



QUINN

*N*ew Orleans, Louisiana
Present Day

The alarm sounded and without opening her eyes, Quinn groaned as she reached across the bed to turn it off. She managed to roll up into a sitting position and open bleary eyes. It wasn't even Mardi Gras, and she was hungover. It was universally understood that most of the city's residents would be at least a bit hungover for the entire two plus weeks of the festival. The official opening of the festival had begun at her favorite watering hole, The Refuge, last night.

The Refuge was something of an institution in the Big Easy. The story was that Pierre Lafitte, older brother of Jean, had founded the pub when he retired from being a pirate and it had been in continual existence since that time. It had gone underground during prohibition, but it had never gone away. Curiously, it wasn't those who plied their trade on the waters of either the Gulf of Mexico or the Mississippi River who made The Refuge their port of call. Instead, it was writers—be it novelists, bloggers, or journalists.

Quinn had found a community of sorts there for her off hours and a home at the New Orleans Gazette, a small, twice-weekly newspaper dedicated to hard news. The publisher and editor of the Gazette was a wizened journalist who had been blacklisted when he'd had a similar experience to Quinn's, only his had been in Chicago. That commonality had secured

her position, but Levi Bennet demanded the best from his staff. Little-by-little, he had built the paper and its reputation into something nationally recognized and a force to be reckoned with over the past five years. Quinn had been with the paper for almost that entire length of time and was still the newest reporter on staff. Those who went to work for the Gazette were soon as devoted to it and its reputation for hard-nosed, investigative journalism as Levi. One of his proudest moments was when someone compared the paper to the old *Sixty Minutes* television show.

Knowing she would need a shower to revive her, Quinn stumbled into the small bath and turned on the shower. When she'd first arrived in New Orleans and looked at the flat her great aunt had left her, she'd burst into tears. The building itself was nice enough, but her little studio was pretty grim. Quinn had set about trying to reconstruct her career and her life out of the ashes New York City had given her.

She'd begun writing freelance—selling her stories and articles wherever she could. Top Ramen and chicory coffee had been her staples that first year. But being frugal had allowed her to begin to renovate her little home in the French Quarter. She'd haunted the local building supply stores for returned paint or tiles that could be bought at a fraction of the cost, as well as the local salvage and antique stores. The worst job had been restoring the floors. Days of sanding and stripping the wood floors and removing the cheap linoleum in the bath had revealed the beauty of the original flooring—encaustic tiles in the bath and wide plank, maple flooring everywhere else. It had been hard work, but every time she saw them, she smiled. They were beautiful and original.

Quinn had combined subway tile with grout matching the encaustic tile flooring to create a unified look that paid homage to what had always been. She'd opted for a large walk-in shower versus a tub/shower combination and had managed to find vintage appliances to place throughout. She'd given up some of her space in the small bath to fit a washer/dryer all-in-one machine. Over that little cubby, she'd created additional storage.

Once in the shower, she washed using hot water to loosen all the kinks out of her system and then rinsed with cool water to refresh herself. Stepping out of the shower, she toweled off quickly and pulled her black hair up into a high ponytail which she then braided. She pulled on what she thought of as her normal workday attire—leggings, a loose tank top and some kind of natural weave jacket. She wore the outfit paired with ankle boots that could be worn comfortably all day as well as minimal jewelry.

Her most significant adornment was the ring that had replaced her engagement ring. When she arrived in New Orleans, she'd spent part of the money she'd been able to bring with her on a tribal design tattoo around her left ring finger to remind her that she was 'married' first and foremost to herself.

Finally, she trotted down the steps from her flat out into the humidity of New Orleans. It might be February, but it wouldn't be long before the heat and humidity of Spring began to cast their pall over the bright, sunny days. New York had prepared her for heat, but Quinn found the city's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico made it far less noticeable.

Hopping on the cable car, she smiled and waved her pass at the conductor before taking her seat. There was something relaxing about taking the cable car. On New York's subway system she'd felt like she had to be on alert. Here in the Big Easy, riding a cable car, there was time and space just to breathe—to gear up for the day or wind down for the evening. Quinn was so lost in her musings that she might have missed her stop if the conductor hadn't called to her. Trotting down the back stairs of the trolley, she crossed the street and entered the Gazette's small building.

"He's looking for you," said Yvette, who served as Levi's assistant as well as everyone else's. She was the heart of the paper, and they were all convinced they couldn't do without her. She was indispensable and irreplaceable.

"Quinn! Quinn, did I hear you?" called Levi from his office at the back of the bullpen where all of the reporters toiled.

“What you suppose he’d do if I said ‘no?’”

Yvette smiled. “Most days he’d laugh it off. But we’ve lost two more major advertisers. I’d tread lightly.”

The congealed blob she’d felt that last day working for the paper in New York seemed to come together much more quickly this time. Quinn had known that the paper was experiencing the same kind of squeeze every other newspaper was feeling—electronic media, in all of its forms, was beginning to snuff out the viability of paper news. No one felt that squeeze more than the hard news weeklies, or in their case, the twice-weeklies.

Quinn entered the newsroom. A few people averted their eyes, but not most. She placed her laptop case, purse and other personal items on her desk, but didn’t open them. She swung into the doorway into Levi’s office.

“Yo, boss man, what’s up?”

“Come in and close the door.”

Shit! Shit! Shit! She’d just begun to feel like she was on solid ground again.

“Let’s cut to the chase. Are you firing me?” she asked.

“What? Hell, no,” said Levi, who actually sounded surprised she asked. “At least not today. I’ve been talking to everyone individually, though. The paper is in trouble financially. We’re probably going to be having to let people go. There are those who say last in, first out—”

“And I was the last reporter hired, you can’t fire anyone else. We’re already barebones.” Quinn stood up. “I really appreciate the opportunity you gave me. I’m not sure anyone else would have done so. If I could get a reference from you, that would be great.” Quinn turned to walk away. She really didn’t want to cry in front of Levi.

“Done being a martyr?” he asked sarcastically. “If you’re done having your say, how about we let me have mine?”

Quinn turned back and sank gracefully into the seat.

“That’s better. I know what people think, but I also know who my strongest reporters are. We’ve got enough money to see us through the next three to four months. If I can find an angel investor before then, we’re home free, but I need this paper to be turning out the best stories—the ones no one else can get—to drive up circulation and advertising, or to entice someone to invest in the paper.”

“Do you have anyone in mind to invest?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. But between now and then, I need your absolute best pieces. Not you, but a couple of the others have been turning in puff pieces. While those have their spot, the Gazette is known for its hard news—news that affects people’s lives. News that gives them the information they need.”

“I try,” Quinn said, feeling the hardened, swirling mass of emotion in her gut begin to dissipate.

“And you succeed. While Roosevelt likes to confront a story subject head on, you have far more finesse and don’t even mind a bit of subterfuge. I always think he gets it done faster, but you get it done better. Your commitment to seeking the truth rivals my own, but I can’t let my personal feelings get involved. Each of you has been given the challenge: by the end of April or before you need to wow me to keep your job. After that, unless I get an angel investor, I’m going to be looking at letting one, if not two reporters go, and it will not be based on seniority. It will be based very heavily on the quality of the work, with a little bit of quantity.”

“Thanks for the opportunity, Levi. I won’t let you down.”

“You’d better not. All of the reporters are on the chopping block, and nobody is safe.”

“I can handle that. I’ve got a bit more to do on the irregularities of the last defense contract that was awarded. Then I’ll go find something really exciting, important, and sexy.”

Levi grinned. “From anyone else, I would think that was a boast or ego talking, but I don’t doubt you for one minute. I’d

like to be the paper you're working for when you win the Pulitzer. Don't let me down, Forrester; I'm counting on you."

Quinn practically skipped back to her desk. At least she had a shot at keeping her job.

"So, the old man is favoring the cute chick with the great ass," said Dave.

"That's enough, Dave," said Roosevelt angrily.

"Not to worry, Rosie. Dave's just pissed because whoever leaves will be chosen based on their work, not on some arbitrary reason."

"Well, I've already got something up my sleeve," Dave said with a belligerent tone.

"Ah yes, but is it any good? Is it as good as my defense contract bidding piece? That shit is illegal, and hard-working taxpayers get tired of the people who work for the government or military taking advantage of their positions. Heads are gonna roll," Quinn taunted.

"I'll bet you thought that when you took a big swing and a miss at the Comptroller in New York," snarked Dave.

"Knock it off, Dave," said Rosie. "She's paid for that mistake a hundred times over. The biggest difference I see between you and her is Quinn just keeps getting better and better, while your drinking and laziness are beginning to edge you toward the long slow slide to the end of your career."

Quinn laid her hand on Rosie's shoulder. "It's okay. Dave is who he is and is going to do what he's going to do. I say we all do our best and let the cream rise to the top. In the end, the Gazette is going to keep going forward and being the best small press in the United States. Nobody is better than us at what we do. Dave can either be a part of that and work his ass off to write stories that help increase subscription and advertising rates, or he can kiss his job goodbye. I, for one, am going to write the best piece of my career. And just because the story on the defense contract is going to shake them up over there, it won't be the one I work on for this. I'm writing for my life and for that of the paper, as well. I am honoring the

man who chose to give me a second chance when he didn't have to."

Rosie chuckled. "Hasn't he told you when that whole scandal broke, he was so upset? When he heard you'd come to New Orleans, he was on a mission to get you back into journalism. Girl, you never had a chance. That good ole boy in there is the best fucking editor, not to mention publisher, any of us will ever have a chance to work for."

Quinn wasn't afraid of competition—in fact, she thrived on it. Not even the kind of dirty-dealing, back-stabbing competition Dave would bring to the table was going to get in her way. She could write circles around Dave on his best day even if she was hungover. Nah, Quinn knew this was her game to lose, and she had no intention of doing so.

But the question remained—what was the story that would give her the win?

CHAPTER 3



BODIE

The great beast within him stretched, yawned, and opened his eyes. Bodie Lambeau could feel the warm body lying next to his. She wasn't his fated mate, but his elusive prey was close. He could feel her presence. She was somewhere in the City of New Orleans, and she would be his. Before the close of Mardi Gras this year, he would claim his fated mate. He could feel it in the depths of his soul.

“Good morning, Bodie,” purred the she-cat next to him.

It was all he could do not to toss her out on her pretty backside. A backside he had taken great delight in spanking to a fiery red. Larisa needed a mate and needed one badly. She was beautiful enough that any tiger would be proud to call her his own, but she was not Bodie's fated mate. He knew that as well as she did.

Unfortunately, she'd been there last night when he'd gone for a long-needed run in his shifted form. He'd been able to stretch his muscles, get all the kinks out and tire himself out.

With his mate this close and the Gutierrez Cartel making a play to move into his territory, he'd left himself vulnerable to attack—not that of a rival or enemy, but to a beautiful tigress who needed to be mated to a strong tiger who could bend her to his will. Tigresses like Larisa could be difficult. They only respected a mate stronger than they were but would not submit willingly. It would take a tiger with an enormous amount of patience, a strong strap, and a hard cock to bring her into line.

His worry was that having taken her to his bed last night, everyone in the clan would think her claimed. He needed to shut that shit down—not only with the rest of the clan, but with Larisa, as well. He could blame his lapse of judgment on a lot of things—stress, need, the high from a run, the residual from having drunk too much—none of it mattered. If he couldn't find her a mate who could overlook his transgressions, he would find her a mate outside of the clan. He would not, regardless of her father's wishes, return her to her origin clan. Larisa deserved better than that.

Larisa rolled over in the bed, snaking her hand down to his already hard cock to stroke and tease. “Did I please my alpha last night?” she purred.

Visions of Larisa on her knees, sucking his cock with skill and a determination to swallow him down, arose. The issue was that he knew it was not out of wanting to please her alpha or even the man she was with. Larisa did things for one reason and one reason only, to further her own ends. She was seductive, beautiful, and always had an ulterior motive—one she kept hidden from everyone but herself.

He'd lost enough of his iron control to let the beast come out to play before forcing it into submission some time last night. He did not normally succumb to his more primal self. When Larisa had sidled up to him in the men's changing room before he'd had a chance to pull on any clothes, he'd pulled her across his thigh and peppered her backside with his hand, tattooing his displeasure with her behavior and making both of them snarl and hiss in anger and outrage. Larisa had never been subjected to the will and authority of anyone, her father included. He'd let the headstrong beauty run wild.

Bodie had spanked her until she'd capitulated, meaning to let her up and give her a final swat to send her on her way. Only his tiger had gotten a good long whiff of her aroused scent and when she'd turned around and sunk to her knees, he'd let the beast take control.

Fisting her hair, he'd taken her mouth with strong, bold strokes, making her choke and sputter on his engorged member as he'd taken his pleasure. Using her mouth instead of

her cunt, he'd pounded into her, not allowing her to move as he drove into her over and over again. When he'd finally spilled himself in her belly, she had swallowed every last drop and then used the tip of her tongue to lick him clean. All the while, she had looked into his eyes, smiling as she tried to manipulate him.

Bad enough that he'd used her mouth to alleviate his ache, the knowing and scheming smile had all but enraged him. Bodie had tossed her over his shoulder, carried her to his bed, and fucked her long and hard throughout the night. Not once did he have the urge to take her neck in a claiming bite, not even when he'd taken her from behind and she'd offered herself to him. Nor had his barbs released to strafe her inner walls, preparing them to trap his seed until it could fertilize her egg. He'd been more than happy last night to fuck her, but not once had he thought to breed her.

Bodie was torn between feeding her vanity and pride and telling her the truth. As much as it would hurt to admit his own shortcomings as an alpha, he knew the truth would be the best and kindest thing he could do.

"You are a gorgeous tigress, Larisa, you know that, but what happened last night should not have happened, and it will not happen again. Last night proved we both need to find our mate. We both know that we are not that to each other. I will ask my warriors if there is one of them that could overlook their alpha's moment of weakness in order to claim such a beautiful mate. If there is not, I will task Navarro with finding you one."

The words had barely left his mouth when her hand cracked across his cheek. "You bastard," she hissed. "How dare you think to fuck me all night and then toss me aside this morning because you've had your fill."

There was a knock on the door. "Come," called Bodie, not once taking his eyes off Larisa. She might be female and therefore inherently smaller and weaker than he, but she was also a tigress. Often her kind would attack even knowing the odds if they felt threatened or gravely insulted.

Bodie's beta, Navarro, entered the room. "The Gutierrez Syndicate has entered the city."

Bodie nodded. "Take Larisa and confine her to her room, by whatever means you deem necessary."

Larisa threw herself at him, dropping to her knees. "Please my alpha, do not use me so cruelly and then abandon me."

Navarro was no fool. He knew Larisa was not his alpha's mate. His hand whipped out and slapped Larisa's ass. She released her hold on Bodie and turned on Navarro.

"How dare you lay a hand on me? Our alpha has taken me to his bed. I will be his mate."

"Our alpha is not your mate, and when he finds you dosed his drink last night with catnip, the lingering redness from a mild spanking may well be replaced with the stripes from his belt."

"Catnip? She dosed me with catnip." Bodie groaned, knowing Navarro spoke the truth. "Before I deal with an external threat like the cartel, I will damn sure deal with an internal one."

"It was only a little bit," Larisa said, trying to retreat.

"There is a reason catnip is forbidden within this clan. While it may make for some amusing antics in housecats, it can have deadly results in tigers," explained Navarro, coming between Bodie and Larisa. "You could take your belt to her and lay down welts that would take days to heal. But then I'd have to challenge you, and I would hate to kill my oldest and best friend."

"Why would you challenge him?" asked Larisa hesitantly.

Navarro turned, his eyes pinning her in place. "Because while I could forgive a drugged reaction to a beautiful, bewitching tigress such as yourself, I would never let him truly harm you."

Bodie started to laugh. "You're mad."

Navarro shrugged. "Perhaps. But as you are quite certain your fated mate now lies within the boundaries of our territory,

I am equally as certain that mine stands here in this room.”

Bodie put his hand on Navarro’s shoulder. “You could forgive my indiscretion? I would accept a challenge from you to defend her honor but not to the death. I will not be forced to kill you.”

“You arrogant bastard,” laughed Navarro. “What makes you think I couldn’t take you?”

“A lifetime of attempts. But I do apologize.”

“No, my Alpha, it is I who begs your forgiveness for my mate’s inexcusable behavior.”

Larisa stomped her foot. “I am not Navarro’s mate—fated or otherwise—and I will not be discussed as if I weren’t here.”

Navarro growled at her seductively, calling to her as the males of their kind had called to their females for millennia. The effect was profound and immediate. Larisa’s whole body responded with flushed skin, stiffened nipples, and the scent of her arousal.

“That behavior doesn’t seem to be getting any better while we stand here,” laughed Bodie.

“No. Why don’t you join the others for breakfast? I will reprimand my mate and install her in my chambers and then join you downstairs. Depending on how you want to handle Gutierrez, I will claim my mate as soon as possible.”

Bodie feigned surprise. It was rare that he got to tease Navarro. “You mean you don’t wish to have her in the bed she shared with me?”

“No, my alpha,” replied Navarro with a wry smile. “That is the first, last, and only time Larisa will grace your bed. I thought to take her out on the balcony, lean her over the railing, and spank her until she has learned her lesson and declares to all that I am her mate. Once that is done, I will take her to our chambers, where she can spend the rest of the morning in desperate need contemplating the abysmal behavior that landed her there.” Navarro fisted her mane and pulled her close. “You will learn to yowl for me and me alone,

my mate. Best I find you in a conciliatory and submissive mood upon my return.”

Navarro’s mouth descended on hers, ravaging it with his own. It took but a moment for Larisa’s tigress to take hold and respond to Navarro, clinging to him and returning his kiss with the same ardor which bordered on violence.

“You cannot let him do this,” she said as she finally found the will to push Navarro away, who only laughed at her belated response.

“Don’t look now, Larisa, but I already did. Navarro, I leave your mate in your hands. I will see you downstairs when you are able to ensure she is safe, relatively happy, and sated.”

“Your will; my hand,” intoned Navarro.

Bodie laughed and exited the room to the sounds of Larisa caterwauling and trying to evade the punishment she knew she had coming. Navarro would have his hands full, but Bodie was quite certain in the end, they would make a spectacular couple. He counted himself lucky. He could have ended up mated to the wrong tigress and having to kill his best friend.

While the use of catnip was forbidden within his clan, he chided himself for not having forced the issue with Navarro a while ago. Bodie had suspected that his lifelong friend was called to the fiery Larisa. Dosing someone with anything, especially catnip, was grounds for banishment if not death. Bodie would not have wanted to impose such a sentence on a tigress that he believed, mated to the right tiger, could be of huge benefit to the clan.

Bodie would find a way to repay Navarro’s generosity and grace. He jogged down the steps to join the rest of the clan. As much as he would like to give Navarro the time to claim and tend to his beloved, the threat from Gutierrez would not wait. The leader of the capybara needed to be dealt with and sent packing back to South America.

CHAPTER 4



BODIE

*B*odie longed to go for another run. The one last night had merely whet his appetite. Having a woman hadn't helped. Perhaps both shifting and fucking would need to be put on hold. Or perhaps the capybara would prefer to fight in their shifted form. Either way, Bodie meant to send Gutierrez packing.

The doors that led out to the expansive brick patio were wide open to take advantage of the morning breeze that drifted up from the Mississippi and across the fertile land known as the delta. Its scent was rife with rich earth and the souls of those who had lived here before. Like all of those who had preceded him, Bodie felt connected to the land and to his ancestors. Their territory would not fall to the likes of the capybara—not on his watch.

Because Navarro had her pinned down on the balcony railing outside Bodie's bedroom, those assembled in the great hall—and perhaps within the boundaries of the estate—could hear Larisa receiving her new mate's loving discipline. Bodie had no doubt she would not be repeating her transgression.

"I didn't see that coming," muttered one of Bodie's warriors.

He stood and tapped the rim of his orange juice glass with his butter knife. "As you can all hear, Navarro has asked for my blessing to take Larisa to mate. I have granted it. I know Larisa has been disruptive since she joined us—" There was muffled laughter all around. "but she is Navarro's fated mate and her place is with us—" A long, loud, strangled wail could

be heard coming from above. “Our beta will ensure his mate’s behavior is much improved but let it be a lesson to everyone within this clan: catnip is forbidden and the use of it, or worse the dosing of someone else with it, will have serious and permanent consequences.”

Bodie sat down and enjoyed his breakfast and then headed into his study. It didn’t take long for Navarro to join him.

“My apologies. It would appear your mate is stronger willed and more stubborn than I imagined. I take it her scent clinging to you is evidence of her capitulation?”

“Most definitely.”

“Again, Navarro, I feel badly...”

“Don’t, Bodie. Seriously, if I didn’t know for a fact she’d dosed you with catnip and then lay in wait for you to return in a vulnerable state, it wouldn’t have happened. The beast inside took control and took what Larisa offered and had manipulated. But there is no need for you to concern yourself with what happened. I say we put it out of mind and not give it another thought. Gutierrez, however, needs to be dealt with.”

Bodie nodded. “Not only is he planning to use the Mississippi to distribute this new drug, but he’s also looking for space to manufacture it.”

“How can he think you’ll let that go unchallenged?”

“I’m not sure. Beck and Nolan have already sent him packing. He has to know I will do so, as well.”

Navarro shrugged. “Well, critical thinking has never been a capybara trait.”

“Which is what worries me. Gutierrez has all the subtlety of a freight train, and yet he’s managing to play his cards close to his vest. I want eyes on him and his people at all times.”

“It’s already done—well, that is, on his people. Gutierrez seems to have gone to ground, but we have people watching and searching. We’ll find the weasel and send him packing. Turning to a more positive thought—any ideas about where you might find your fated mate?”

“She is within the boundaries of our territory; she will not escape me.”

“If you are correct—and you usually are—then she is not a tigress. I have had people searching high and low, offering a substantial reward for information leading to her, but so far, we’ve got nothing. How long have you known about her, and what do you know?”

“I have known since my first breath that she existed, but it is only recently I have known she was near.”

“So, we’re looking for someone new to New Orleans.”

“Not necessarily. She could have been here for years, maybe even been born here. The knowledge of who she is only comes when you are ready, but the knowledge that she exists is given from the moment we are sentient.”

“I’m glad it’s not that way for those of us not cursed to be alpha. I didn’t know I had a fated mate until the first time Larisa growled at me and then it was like an anvil was dropped on my head as a voice whispered in my ear, ‘go get her.’”

“Then why didn’t you say something?”

“Her father sent her to you as a possible mate to cement an alliance between our clans.”

“But you have always known I would settle for nothing less than my fated mate and I knew she wasn’t Larisa.”

“It wasn’t my place...”

“Of course, it was. If I were you, I’d punch me in the nose, preferably in front of Larisa.”

“You didn’t know,” exclaimed Navarro, confused.

“No, but I knew she wasn’t mine. I’m just telling you, your mate will like the fact that you punched the alpha in defense of her honor.”

“You didn’t dishonor her,” argued Navarro. “If anything, she dishonored you. She’s lucky you don’t banish the both of us.”

“I should have been able to resist her.”

“Oh, so now you’re Super Tiger. I can live with *El Tigre*, but Super Tiger might be a bit much. Bodie?”

“What?”

“Why are we arguing?”

Bodie started to laugh. “I’m not sure. What do you say we stop?”

“Other than letting me have my mate, that might be the best idea you’ve had all morning.”

Sobering, Bodie said, “I think we need people at all the various balls and parties. If we need to bring in men, I know Beck and Nolan will back us. I just have to believe Gutierrez is smart enough to use Mardi Gras to make his play.”

Navarro nodded. “Agreed. I doubt he’ll hit the smaller balls. It’s too easy to be spotted.”

“True, but the really huge krewe balls like Orpheus, Bacchus, and Endymion are too large, too noisy, and too heavily patrolled by both the police and private security—too much scrutiny. Their best bet is to hit the medium-sized public celebrations.”

“You’re probably right, so that leaves six or seven we should focus on?”

“Probably closer to ten. I doubt they’ll try and conduct business at the debutante’s ball.”

“You never know. Some of those dresses could hide a multitude of sins.”

“I also want people on the street and up on the rooftops. We have friends all over this city, let’s make sure we’re out in force.”

“I still don’t get it. Why here?”

“Because both coasts are cluttered with cartels, gangs and rival syndicates. Not that the Midwest doesn’t have its issues, but for the most part, there is far less competition. On top of that, if you’re looking for global penetration, New Orleans is

one of the largest and busiest ports in the United States and the World. If Gutierrez can get a foothold here, he can expand outward from both the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. There's a lot of relatively open water without a lot of patrols. If I wanted to create a new drug and export all over America and the World, I'd sure as hell take a look at New Orleans."

"I know Larisa most likely undid all the good your run last night might have provided. We've got this covered and I can monitor everything here. Why not go for another run? Before last night, when was the last time you shifted and ran?"

"Longer than I'd care to admit. Once we get rid of Gutierrez and I claim my mate—"

"No doubt in your mind you will find her?"

Bodie shook his head. "None whatsoever. As I was saying, once I've claimed my mate and things settle back down to a dull roar, I'd like to see us go back to having scheduled clan runs. I think when we did that, we were tighter, and keeping the beast caged up too long is not good for man or beast."

"Agreed. We could run in groups, and you could switch off, leading different groups."

"I'd also want to see if we can't find a way to set up some kind of protected playground obstacle course for everyone to enjoy, but especially for our younger tigers and children to perfect their skills and abilities."

"Larisa will apologize to you before the day is through."

"That's not necessary."

"Maybe not for you, but it is most definitely necessary for her. Her father's inability to control or guide her has not served her well. She needs love and discipline. He's a cold sonofabitch."

"What do you expect?" laughed Bodie. "He's a Siberian Tiger. Siberia is not exactly known for its sunny climate. I think with you to provide both to her, Larisa will really begin to flourish."

Navarro nodded. “I think you’re right. For a tigress with her ferocity, she often strikes me as very lost and lonely. I have some phone calls to make and want to check on my mate. I’ll see you at supper. And again, my deepest thanks for allowing me to take Larisa to mate.”

“I’m sure the two of you will be very happy together and will only strengthen our clan.”

Navarro left, and Bodie swiveled his chair to look out the French doors and onto the finely manicured lawns that surrounded the compound. On three sides, the extensive, cultivated land was surrounded by the swamps for which the area was so famous. On the fourth side, the magnificent Gulf of Mexico beckoned.

Bodie picked up the landline and called Larisa’s father, Vladimir. After the usual customary greetings and inquires into each other’s health, Bodie broke the news to Vlad that his daughter had been claimed by Navarro.

“This is an insult,” roared Vladimir. “If you were not going to take her to mate yourself, you should have sent her home. I could have used her in other ways.”

“And therein lies the seeds of Larisa’s unhappiness with her origin clan and you. She was nothing but a pawn to be used or sacrificed as you saw fit.”

“She is my daughter! I will do with her as suits me best. If this beta of yours has yet to mark her with his claiming bite, you may allow him to live, but if not...” Vlad let the threat hang.

“Watch yourself, Vlad. You sent the girl to me. The first night she was here, she begged me to never send her back to you. If you wanted to use her to further an alliance with me, then shut up and listen to me. She is not my fated mate.”

“The stuff of myth and legend.”

“Maybe, but my parents were fated mates, and I have known all my life mine was out there, and I will not settle for less. Having Larisa mated to Navarro is the same as if she was mated to me. You and your clan taught her some nasty habits

that will not serve her well here, but Navarro is confident he can make her see the light and walk the line.”

“I will not agree to this. Either you send her home, or I will send my men to get her.”

Vlad didn't have the manpower in terms of skills or numbers to go up against Bodie, and they both knew it.

“Larisa has been mine to protect and care for since your men dumped her on my doorstep. Send your men, and I will send them home in body bags. If you violate my territory with anything other than the most benign of intentions, I will rain a firestorm on you and yours the likes of which you'll never recover from.”

Bodie ended the call and walked over to Navarro's office. Navarro looked up from his desk. “Let me guess, the phone call to Vladimir did not go well.”

Bodie shrugged. “It went about as well as it could, considering he didn't get what he wanted, but you need to get her claimed. That'll go a long way to having this settled for both of them. Make sure Larisa knows she is a member of this clan. No one harms anyone under my protection. To do so is to invite retribution and death.”

Navarro cocked an eyebrow. “You really need to go for a run before you give yourself testosterone poisoning.”

“You're probably right. Let our people know Vlad may be stupid enough to try something. I don't want to be caught with our guard down.”

“I strengthened our patrols immediately after I left your office. But I'll spread the word. Go take a run. When you get back, I'll see to claiming my mate.”

Bodie grinned. “Much as I like to run, I think you're going to have a much better time than me. Wait, that didn't come out the way I meant it.”

Navarro returned the grin. “I know, but I may take you up on that offer to punch you in the nose.”

Laughing, Bodie spun on his heel and returned to his own study where he removed his clothing. He closed his eyes, centering himself, and called forth the spirit of his tiger who roared in response as he charged towards Bodie. The tiger leapt at Bodie in his mind as lightning and thunder crashed around him, and a swirling maelstrom encompassed him. Fire and power flowed all around and through him, accompanied by bright colors and a mist that crackled with all that was, had been, and would be again.

When the storm had dissipated, where once stood a man, now stood a tiger who roared his defiance and announced his arrival. Bounding towards the doors, Bodie tripped the trigger that automatically opened them. Navarro had installed the system after Bodie seemed to get into the habit of forgetting to unlock or even open the doors and simply crashed through them, splattering glass everywhere.

CHAPTER 5



BODIE

Bodie hit the grass at a full gallop. Navarro was right; it wasn't good to keep the tiger within caged. Taking a deep breath, he charged across the open lawn, hearing his people call a greeting as he flew past them. Stretching out his body to maximize his stride, he entered the tall grass that fringed the manicured lawns. He moved with grace and power, enjoying the prowess he embodied in his tiger form.

The further away from the house he got, the more he was able to let go of the residual guilt for having spent the night with Larisa. After all, she had drugged him with catnip. What had she been thinking? She had been thinking, he had to admit to himself, that she was unhappy and believed that as first lady of the clan she would, at least, have some semblance of power. She'd been raised in a clan that had a *the ends justify the means* mentality. However it had happened, Larisa was now where she belonged—with Navarro. Bodie had absolute faith in his beta's ability to claim the beautiful tigress and provide her with the love and stability she would need to finally settle and be happy.

The rough texture of the taller grass tickled his paws. The short grass of the manicured lawns had the feel of velvet, but the sawgrass on which he trod now was rougher and felt as if it had a dull blade along the edges. Bodie reminded himself it was good to get in touch with the earth without the barrier of a shoe. In the world in which they lived—a world that forced them to hide their very nature—it was important to not forget who and, more importantly, what they were.

Bodie slowed his pace as he approached the swamp. He loved the different textures and scents of the marshland as the ground transitioned from mostly firm earth to the soft, spongy texture of the marsh and then the swamp itself. Quicksand was abundant throughout this peripheral border along the three sides of his home. Young tigers and newcomers were taught how to spot it, but more importantly, how to escape its deadly hold before being given access to any of the land where it could be found.

He heard the hiss of a snake as it coiled to strike and smiled inwardly as he heard it uncoil itself and slither away to safety. Copperheads and cottonmouths were abundant within the swamps, as were alligators, snapping turtles, and wild boar. The latter three made for good hunting, but all of the creatures of the swamp posed a threat to most who entered its area, especially those who were not knowledgeable of those dangers.

Bodie loved the swamp. Navarro always told him that he was a true Louisianan. Bodie knew that many found swamps creepy and uncomfortable and believed they should all be drained. He was not among them. They were a vital part of the ecosystem and possessed subtle shadings of color that emphasized their delicate beauty and serenity. Spanish moss dangled from the limbs of trees that had been in existence since before the War of 1812, the war in which New Orleans had played a vital role in the defeat of the British Invaders. Bodie knew that some saw the swamp as intimidating, dangerous, and full of despair, but to him it represented strength, beauty, and resilience. While the swamps could be a death trap, they could often provide the solace needed for the soul to seek its own truth and to act as a guide to a better place on the other side.

The swamp was also the place Bodie most often found the answers—sometimes to questions he didn't even know he had. There was a clarity to the swamp alongside its murky appearance that had evolved over millennia. Most of the time, Bodie knew himself and his path. He could act boldly, doing what needed to be done and acting in the best interests of the clan. But there were other times, in the darkness of the soul

found only in the still of the night, that confusion reigned, and he could feel something reaching deep inside him with its tentacles, wrapping around his heart and lungs, threatening to steal away his life force and leave him with nothing.

It was at those times she appeared. In the beginning she had only been a vague and shapeless form in the miasma that seemed to hang in the air that permeated the swamp. Over time, that form had developed an outline and then substance. Bodie knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he would recognize her the moment he laid eyes on her.

She was taller than average, but still small in comparison to him, with a perfect hourglass figure. Some might have thought her to be carrying a bit more weight than was currently the trend, but Bodie liked his women to look like women from a distance, the sensual curves calling to him in a way that an athletic body just didn't. He didn't think there was anything wrong with any woman's figure—they each had their own beauty—but for him, the feminine forms found in Renaissance paintings and sculptures were his ideal. He could well imagine fisting a handful of the long, black curls he felt certain she would have. Even the thought of her made his dick begin to swell.

Bodie loped through the swamp, avoiding the quicksand and places he knew were fragile and could be crushed by his weight. An alligator thought to challenge him until Bodie turned his way, drawing his lips up and away from his teeth as he hissed at the alligator. Apparently, alligators were good at determining the odds of their winning in a fight. The gator whipped its body around, dove beneath the surface of the water, and propelled itself out of Bodie's strike range with a powerful lash of its tail.

In the center of the swamp, Bodie ascended a small atoll, lifted his muzzle to the sky, and roared his anger at those who stood between him and his fated mate. He was more convinced than ever that she was near. He needed to find her before the cartel did. Gutierrez was a ruthless man and would think nothing of harming or even killing Bodie's mate to gain an advantage over him. The problem was, the capybara had not

even an inkling of an understanding of what a fated mate was. If the cartel harmed so much as one hair on her head, Bodie would never stop until they were all dead. The Sicilians may well have defined and codified the notion of a vendetta, but only a tiger could make the capybara understand the depth of revenge he would enact.

Shaking off his reverie, Bodie inhaled deeply. Detecting nothing amiss, he turned toward the mansion and made his way back. Arriving, he re-entered his study and engaged the remote that would close and lock the doors and close the blinds so he could shift in privacy. Once he stood in the soft darkness, he could feel the spirit of his ancestors. He acknowledged their strength, skill, and intelligence and then bade his tiger to recede until the man took his place.

Bodie pulled on his clothes and made his way toward the kitchen. Shifting always left him horny and hungry. He wasn't in the mood to alleviate the former with his hand, but he was sure there was food to be found in the kitchen. He smiled in sympathy for his future mate. She was not yet a tigress and so would not understand the emotions, instincts, and needs that drove him, but she would come to understand and embrace his need to fuck her on a regular and frequent basis. Had she been present, he would already be on top of her, his cock buried deep as the barbs released so he could rake her tender flesh and make her yowl with pleasure.

"I knew you would come to my kitchen," said Maurice, the chef they had stolen away from the tiger clan in Paris, when he had left them to come to New Orleans.

Poor Maurice had made the mistake of choosing the art of cooking over the art of war and had then fallen for the alpha's daughter. Her father had been enraged and had attacked them, succeeding in killing his daughter and leaving Maurice for dead. As night had fallen, Maurice dragged himself and his beloved's cold corpse from the estate, burying her in a secret place and immigrating afterward to America. It had been more than two decades since the young lovers had been so cruelly torn apart, but Maurice had never shown any interest in any female—tigress or otherwise—since.

“I heard you calling to her from the swamp. I think you are one of the few who truly understands what I felt for Fleur,” he said in his heavily accented voice.

Bodie nodded. “I do, even though my fated mate has yet to reveal herself to me. I was just thinking about you and Fleur. If you ever want to retrieve her body and bury her here at *Force et Honneur*, I will help you do so.”

Maurice smiled. “Strength and Honor. I thought it an odd name for an estate, but I soon came to understand it was the code and description of those who lived here. I know you have made the offer before, my alpha, but I always turned you down, thinking it was too dangerous a task just to indulge my fanciful and romantic notions. I know now that it is not. When we have banished Gutierrez and his cartel from our midst, I think I would like to bring Fleur here. I believe she will rest easier, and when my time has come, we can rest together in a place and with a people who would have embraced us.”

Bodie nodded. “I made the offer because I believed it was the right thing to do for one of my people. But knowing that my own fated mate is near, I understand what a comfort it would be to know she did not lie hidden among those who had murdered her. We could still seek retribution when we go after her.”

“No, my alpha, her father is long dead and her brother who rules there now was only a boy and had no part in what happened.”

“Do you think he would allow us to remove her body without a fight?”

“Doubtful. They say the knowledge of what her father did drove his wife to murder him in his sleep before taking her own life. I would think her brother carries far too much anger and grief to let her go without a fight. Better we slip in, retrieve the body and depart without anyone the wiser. Do not think to exclude me. You will never find Fleur without me to show you the way, and there may well be those who would indulge an old man’s wish to be reunited with his beloved and not challenge us.”

Bodie nodded. “Again, something I would not have understood until now. Now, what do you have for me?”

Maurice chuckled. “When I heard you roar, I was glad I had started a big pot of jambalaya cooking when I first got up.” He took down a big bowl, heaped red beans and rice and then ladled the jambalaya over it. “I know that traditionally it is served over white rice, but I find our clan prefers dirty rice or the red beans and rice.”

Bodie took a big spoonful, savoring the taste. “Don’t kid yourself, Maurice, there’s not a one of us who wouldn’t devour your jambalaya if you served it over brussels sprouts.”

“You do know there are those who enjoy brussels sprouts.”

“Never tell me their names. I might be inclined to banish them. I’m going to take this back to my study. I want to go over everything Navarro has managed to gather on both Gutierrez and my mate.” He stopped at the kitchen door. “About what happened with Larisa...”

“Do not trouble yourself, my alpha. That she dosed you with catnip is known by all. The majority feel you were most generous in allowing Navarro to remain and take her to mate. She will need to do more than a little fence mending to find herself welcomed back into the fold. The fact that you have forgiven her will make others think twice about wanting to hold her accountable. Catnip is a toxin as well as an aphrodisiac to our kind. She could very well have killed you or gotten herself killed by you. Navarro made a wise choice in allowing the sounds of her punishment to be heard by all. That, too, soothed their ire. You are loved by your people and anyone who strikes at you strikes at us all.”

“Remind those who speak of it that Larisa was not here by her choice and that she was desperate and alone. I do not hold her responsible for what happened, only myself. She is now Navarro’s mate, and she will be accorded the respect she is due. I would personally appreciate her being afforded the grace the rest of us are given when we fuck up.”

“I will see that your wishes on the matter are known to all.”

Bodie smiled. He and Navarro might be seen as the ranking members of the clan, but they both knew Maurice had the love and respect of everyone. He was not only a master chef, but someone whose trust and counsel could be depended upon.

He re-entered his study and sank down into his comfortable leather desk chair, swirling it around so he could eat his jambalaya and look out over the lawns, to the dunes and beyond to the Gulf.

Many had questioned whether Gutierrez would try to invade Bodie, or *El Tigre's*, territory. It made some sense. After all, the Port of New Orleans was one of the country's major ports, and combined with the Mississippi River, it provided an excellent means of transportation into the United States' heartland as well as the rest of the world. The Crescent City provided an easy and economical way to link the consumptive economy of the U.S. with the cartel's extraction economy of drugs and other raw materials. This new drug of Gutierrez' posed a threat not only to New Orleans, but to the world, as well.

As far as Bodie was concerned, his syndicate was playing a critical role in shutting down Gutierrez once and for all. Finishing his jambalaya, Bodie took a deep breath and turned back to the paperwork on his desk. Some of it was routine and only required a cursory glance and a signature. But some held interesting tidbits of information that required more scrutiny and consideration.

One such item was a small newspaper in the Crescent City. There above the fold was an item regarding corruption in the awarding of various defense contracts out of the Navy and Air Force's joint reserve base in Belle Chasse. The reporting was good, and the prose was well-written. But it was the journalist's byline, which included her picture that drew his eye. Recognition hit him like a thunderclap on a sunny afternoon.

Grinning, he whispered. "There you are."

CHAPTER 6



QUINN

Quinn's article on the corrupt defense contract bidding had hit the front page of the Gazette this morning. She'd already fielded several calls from other journalists around the country as well as the Associated Press. She was feeling on top of her game as she entered the bullpen and was greeted by a standing ovation not only from her fellow reporters, but Levi, as well. The editor walked out of his office smiling and laughing.

"Well done, Forrester. Well done. I'm already fielding calls from Belle Chasse and Washington," cackled Levi. "Your evidence of the corruption in that last round of bidding is bulletproof. The commander out at Belle Chasse is demanding the name of your source. I told him to go pound sand, and if the guy had felt he could go through the chain of command, he would have."

"I don't know that he didn't have an ax to grind, but I have another source out there who won't give me anything but will confirm anything I get."

"Those kinds of sources are worth their weight in gold," said Rosie.

"I suppose you think you've secured your spot," said Dave.

"Actually, that piece was almost done when Levi talked to me."

"That's just run-of-the-mill reporting for a journalist of Quinn's talents," said Levi. "I can't wait to see what she

comes up with next. The rest of you had best be at the top of your game. So far, I'd say Quinn has secured her spot. Before you get settled or head back out, Quinn, pop into my office."

"Will do," said Quinn nodding her head ever so slightly.

What the hell is up now?

She handed a copy of the corroborating evidence to Yvette, who filed it away in a locked, fireproof file room. It was as safe there as it was in a bank. Nevertheless, Quinn had duplicate files for everything saved in a secure cloud storage unit, as well as flash drives containing her backup locked away in a safe deposit box at her bank. She had learned her lesson years ago.

Returning to her desk, she checked her messages and emails, set up her laptop, and grabbed a cup of coffee before heading into Levi's office.

"At the risk of making you nervous, shut the door," he said. "Take a seat. I meant what I said out there. You are at no risk of losing your job. I do think that piece lit a fire under the ass of the others, though, and it really pissed off the military."

"Sorry about that."

Levi waved it off. "Don't be. I haven't had this much fun in years."

Quinn grinned. "You're a sick sonofabitch."

"Yes, I am," Levi agreed with an amused snicker. "Now, tell me, what's up next on your agenda."

"I keep hearing rumors about the Gutierrez cartel and a new drug he wants to bring to market, specifically through the port here in New Orleans and up the Mississippi to the rest of the country."

Levi nodded. "It would make a great story, but a dangerous one. Gutierrez is old school. If he gets wind of this before he can be apprehended or driven from the country, he could well come after you. He's ruthless."

"Do you know if the DEA or New Orleans PD is chasing this down?" asked Quinn. "I've only heard rumors, but

nothing I can pin down and I'm hearing speculation, nothing substantive."

Quinn had to admit she was thriving here at the Gazette. She found it incredibly supportive to be able to talk over story ideas with Levi, and sometimes Rosie. The rest of the reporters she didn't trust to not try to steal her ideas.

She continued, "I've also heard that *El Tigre* is not happy about Gutierrez trying to infiltrate his territory."

"I wouldn't doubt that. Bodie Lambeau takes that kind of thing seriously and has a rather protective, if not benevolent, affection for this city."

"You almost sound as if you like him."

"I do," said Levi, "and more than that, I respect him."

"He's a gangster."

"That he is, but an honorable one. His family has resided at *Force et Honneur* for centuries. They have been a part of this community since its founding. When the idiots at FEMA were running around with their thumbs up their asses after Katrina, it was Lambeau who stepped up, rescuing people and finding them safe places to stay, food, water, and the like. You weren't here back then, but I've been in war zones that were safer and better organized."

"He's still a gangster."

"But one who doesn't run drugs or sell arms to those who might use them against this country."

"So, he's a patriotic arms dealer," Quinn teased.

Levi ignored her. "He also runs legit gambling houses, and by that, I mean he doesn't tolerate cheating of any kind. He doesn't run hookers and ensures that those who do don't abuse the sex workers working for them. He smuggles booze, cigars, and other contraband, but no narcotics of any kind. I know more than one medical clinic that gets their drugs—antibiotics and the like—from Bodie because it's cheaper and they know it won't be tampered with. So yes, the man operates outside

the law, but sometimes he's the best source for what you need and the only way to get justice."

"Revenge."

"Sometimes they're the same thing. He doesn't kill indiscriminately. And he also sponsors several of the public Mardi Gras balls. Besides, in all honesty, he's the reason that most of the cartels and many of the worse syndicates give New Orleans a wide berth. I'm not sure if anyone has gone up against Lambeau and not come out worse for wear, if they manage to come out at all."

Quinn nodded her head. She had pretty much heard the same thing since she'd arrived in New Orleans. She had to admit that she found the idea of a gentleman gangster who was pretty much beloved by all and all but ignored by the police intriguing.

"Do you think he'd talk to me?"

"No. He avoids the press like the plague."

"Might he be willing to talk to me off-the-record if I find something out about Gutierrez?"

"Doubtful. Lambeau is old school and is not inclined to put women in danger. You can get as annoyed as you like, but that's the way he is."

"So, he's a chauvinistic gangster. Good to know."

Levi chuckled. "If you ever do get a chance to speak with him, give me a heads up. I'd pay good money to see the two of you spar. I'd like to order you not to pursue this story on Gutierrez, but I know better. You're going to do it anyway. I'll just caution you to be careful. If you get into real trouble, go to The Refuge. Lambeau owns the place. Ask for an angel shot and then ask for Lambeau and tell them who you are. They'll get you to safety. So other than putting yourself in the crosshairs of a sociopath like Gutierrez, what else do you have planned for the next few days?"

"Actually, I thought I'd put down my mighty pen and enjoy some of Mardi Gras. What's your pick for the best party?"

“Depends on what you like. If you’re just looking for a drunken free-for-all, any of the street parties along the parade route will do. On the other hand, if you’re looking for something a bit more tame, the Beignet Ball on the riverboat is a lot of fun. It’s lively without being crazy; there are several live bands on board, lots of dancing, and good food. Besides, it’s safe and security personnel are there to ensure nothing untoward happens. I will warn you, it is formal—black tie for men and long gowns or feminine tuxedos for women, no exceptions. Masks are not required, but most people wear them as it makes whatever you decide to get up to a little more anonymous. Besides, there will be lots of Navy and Air Force brass, as well as city and parish officials in attendance. You might be able to pick up some additional tidbits about your story.”

“Sounds like I’ll be attending Beignet Ball. I’m going to go need to buy something appropriate.”

“Head to Celeste’s off Bourbon Street. Tell her you’re with the Gazette. I’ll call her and let her know to charge everything to the paper. Consider it a bonus for the Belle Chasse story. We’ll write it off as a business expense.”

“I’ve heard of Celeste’s. It’s expensive.”

“It is, but her stock-in-trade is fashions for girls with dangerous curves—that’s her motto, not mine.”

Quinn shook her head. “Thank you. As I said, I’ve heard of it, but avoided it because of the expense, but as you’re buying... wait, can we afford it?”

“Don’t you worry about the expense. I’ve got it covered. You go on and enjoy yourself—maybe get a manicure and pedicure.”

Quinn looked down at her nails. Levi was right, they could use some work. As she rose from the chair and headed back out into the office, she lifted her fist to her lips to stifle the giggle that was threatening to erupt at the thought of the stodgy Levi noticing and being offended by the shape of her nails. Quinn had a rule: journalists didn’t giggle. They could laugh, guffaw, and even snort, but they didn’t giggle. She

picked up her gear and headed out. As the elevator doors closed behind her, Quinn allowed herself the luxury and release of the girliest giggle she'd ever manifested.

Three hours later, she left the nail salon with beautifully manicured hands and a gorgeous pedicure. Quinn had been a little ashamed to admit that it had been seven years since her last mani/pedi. After she'd lost everything, she focused on spending only the money she needed to. She'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be pampered. Her nail technician also did formal up-dos and makeup, and offered to come to her studio after she found her dress and help her get 'gussied up' for the party.

Heading into Celeste's, she was glad she'd stopped to get her nails done before entering what felt like a rarified space.

"You must be Quinn," said a woman in her early fifties with a thick, aristocratic Cajun accent. "Levi said you would be stopping by. So, you're going to the Beignet Ball?"

"I am."

"Good. It is actually my favorite of all the parties. It's formal, because that's fun, but it doesn't take itself too seriously. You have a lovely figure. Let me get your sizes and we can get started. I have a friend who has beautiful shoes. Once we know what dress you're getting, we can look at shoes and other accessories. Anything you know you like or don't?"

"Not really. I just want to look good without looking gaudy, and I want the dress to be fun so that when I look at it, it makes me smile."

"*Bien*. Let's get your measurements, and then I'll start pulling things for you."

Quinn spent the next two hours getting her measurements and zeroing in on what she wanted. Celeste was good company and was the sixth generation of women named Celeste who had operated the store.

Quinn was trying to decide between two when Celeste suddenly said, "Wait. I know just the dress. It arrived

yesterday and I've had it hanging to let it breathe and find its shape. I think it's perfect for you."

Celeste trotted out of the dressing room and was back in a flash. "Close your eyes. I don't want you to see it until it's on you." At this point, Quinn was pretty much up for anything and complied. Once the dress was settled around her, Celeste turned her back to the three-way mirror. "*Voilà!* I was right; it is perfect for you."

Slowly, Quinn opened her eyes and gasped. Celeste was right. It was perfect. It was a lightweight black knit that wasn't snug anywhere but clung to her curves in all the right places. It had a black background and then in a reverse pattern to the animal that inspired it, ombre orange tiger stripes started at the single shoulder strap and following the neckline of the gown, moved diagonally across her body. The stripes had shimmering sequins, giving the dress an elegant and refined sparkle with a nod to its inspirational animal—the tiger.

"I think only shoes and statement earrings. I had my friend bring up several pairs of shoes, and unless you want stiletto heels, I have the perfect pair."

Quinn was at a loss for words and merely nodded. Celeste returned, helping her into a pair of black patent-leather, strappy sandals with a moderate heel. They were comfortable and looked as if they'd been made to go with her gown. To complete the outfit, Celeste added a pair of dramatic hoop earrings made from blackened sterling silver with white crystals shimmering amid gold stations. The overall look was dramatic, simple, sophisticated and stunning.

"I'll take it," she whispered.

Celeste gave both of her upper arms a gentle squeeze as she peeked from behind Quinn into the three-way mirror. "I predict you will steal the heart and soul of a man at the party tonight. Take care that you cherish him. Now, let's get you out of here so you can get home and have your hair and make-up done."

"I think I will arrange for a taxi..."

“Your transportation has been arranged. You have nothing to worry about except having a good time.”

Impulsively, Quinn turned around and hugged the older woman. “Thank you, fairy godmother.”

“It is my pleasure. If I were you, I would go home, take a nap, and then a shower. You don’t want to be falling asleep at the ball, do you? After all, there is no magical spell that will break at the stroke of midnight.”

Celeste would not tell her what anything cost and only assured her it had all been taken care of. Taking her dress in a garment bag and her shoes, earrings, clutch purse and a black sequined and feathered mask in a small, handled store-brand bag, Quinn re-entered the world of a bustling New Orleans.



Bodie

Bodie paced back and forth in his study. He’d spent the past six hours going over everything they knew about Gutierrez, his crew, and their plans. Navarro was right; he had everything well in hand, and they were as prepared as they could be.

His cell phone rang. “Lambeau.”

“It is done, my alpha,” said the female voice on the end of the line. “Your mate will be at the ball. She is beautiful, kind, and witty. You have chosen well despite her being human.”

“I would remind you; the choice was never mine. Quinn Forrester is my fated mate.”

CHAPTER 7



QUINN

Quinn all but skipped home. Skipping and giggling. No one who knew her—past or present—would have believed it. It was as if the world had finally spun around and come back on its axis. She trotted up the stairs to her studio and opened the door. What she had once found as evidence of all she had lost, she now found as evidence of her strength and determination. The studio might be small, but it easily accommodated her needs and her renovations had left it stylish and comfortably elegant. There wasn't a single surface she hadn't touched. No doubt the so-called friends she'd left behind in New York would see it as a huge step down, but Quinn disagreed. For her it embraced and embodied her rise from the ashes.

She carefully hung up her new dress and put her accessories out on the kitchen counter where they would be safe and easily found. She meant to take Celeste's advice to heart. She stripped out of her clothes and not bothering to even pull on a sleep shirt, set her alarm, rolled into bed, and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep within seconds of her head hitting the pillow.

Sometime later, the alarm rang shrilly on the bedside table. God, she hated alarms, truly loathed them. As her mind swam up from the deep, unconscious state in which she'd slept, she remembered she was going to a party in a beautiful gown and accessories. Realizing she had little time before the stylist arrived, she made her way into the shower, turning it on and allowing it to come to the desired temperature as she bowed

her head and let the water beat down on her neck and shoulders.

She was out of the shower and had just finished blow-drying her long, dark locks, when the security buzzer for the building squawked the announcement of a visitor. She looked into the video player and saw Kim, her nail technician from before, waving up to her. Buzzing her in, Quinn wrapped herself in her favorite robe and then met her.

“Celeste’s?” Kim asked, spying the bag. Quinn nodded. “Good choice. She has gorgeous things. I need to see at least the neckline of the dress.”

“Shouldn’t I put it on?”

“Not yet. Let me get your hair and makeup done and then I’ll help you into it.” Quinn unzipped the bag. Kim gasped. “That is amazing.”

For the next two hours, Quinn was primped and styled to within an inch of her life. Finally, her buzzer rang again, and she went to see who was there.

“Good evening, ma’am. I’m your driver and will be taking you to and from the Beignet Ball.”

“I’ll be down in just a minute. I’m almost ready to go.”

Kim did the final spritzing of her hair, and they went down to the waiting limo.

“Would you mind terribly if we gave my friend a lift home?”

“Not at all. My instructions were to drive you wherever you wanted and see that you were safe.”

Quinn laughed. “I’m going to a fancy party, not invading a foreign country.”

“Depending on the party,” quipped Kim, “it can be the same thing.”

The driver helped them into the car and then took Kim home before returning to the city and delivering Quinn to the riverboat. There was a long line waiting to board. A gorgeous

man who had to be part of the security team by the look of the tall, muscular body encased in his tuxedo approached them. “Ms. Forrester? I’ve been sent to escort you aboard.”

“Escort me aboard? My ticket is for general boarding, which is over there,” she said, indicating the long line.

“No, ma’am, that’s been taken care of. Your ticket has been upgraded. I’ve got your VIP pass. If you’ll come with me,” he said politely, directing her toward the VIP boarding.

Wow. Levi had gone to a lot of trouble to make this evening special. I must have really pissed off the brass at Belle Chasse.

Quinn was conducted to a private entrance into the ball and up onto the main promenade deck. She was offered and accepted a glass of champagne and watched as the other partygoers made their way onboard and to various parts of the ship. Looking at the program for the party, she could see there were three decks where passengers were free to roam. On the deck closest to the water, there was a jazz band; the second deck contained a small group of musicians playing big band era songs; the top deck sported a traditional Irish four-piece band. Quinn headed to the elevator to get to the top deck.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, Quinn chose to move away from the crowd that was drawn to the music and had begun to thicken. She stood where it would be difficult to spot her. She didn’t want company at the moment; she just wanted a little time to herself where she could let her mind drift and enjoy the slight breeze, the motion of the boat as it moved through the water, and the rising of the moon.

Quinn could hear the Irish band’s fiddle, tin whistle, Uilleann pipes, and the Bodhrán

—a circular frame drum. It didn’t take long to figure out they were masters of their craft.

If you listened closely, you could hear very faint strains of both the big band sound and the jazz band, but only if you tried and it took nothing away from the music that was so close.

“It’s a special kind of dampening system combined with the sound of the paddle wheel,” said a tall, elegantly muscled man as he stepped out of the shadows. His lean body only hinted at the strength Quinn knew was there.

She was glad she had on her mask, although she wasn’t sure how much it hid or even if he knew who she was.

“I was just wondering about that. This,” she said gesturing toward the glittering party as the steamboat began to make its way up the Mississippi, “is amazing.”

“It is. It’s not the fanciest of the Mardi Gras balls, but it is my favorite. It’s nice to see people get dressed up, but most everyone here is here to have a good time.”

“Aren’t all partygoers at a party to have a good time?”

“Heavens, no,” he laughed.

She liked the strong jaw, full lips, and even white teeth that showed below his black mask.

“Some parties are held only to impress the competition,” he explained. “Some to raise money for one cause or another. Some to conduct business—legal or not. And still others to cover up something that is going on in another part of the city. This is New Orleans and while we all believe in letting the good times roll, it is also a city with many secrets—some good, some not so good.”

“I would think any one of the others might hold a greater interest for you.”

“Sometimes they do. I received invitations to all the parties and celebrations that would be taking place tonight.”

“With so many to choose from, what made you decide on this one? It must have been difficult.”

“Not at all. Once I knew you were coming to the Beignet Ball, the choice was easy.”

Quinn turned to face him directly. “You know who I am?” she challenged him.

“Yes. You are Quinn Forrester of the New Orleans Gazette, although I’m glad to see you aren’t displaying your press credentials. They would have clashed with your dress, which by the way is almost as beautiful as the woman wearing it.”

“Why doesn’t it surprise me that *El Tigre* would like a dress that is marked like a tiger’s coat pattern?”

He chuckled. It was a deep, dark, melodious sound that she could feel gliding over her skin before sinking through the pores and settling in her bones. “So, we each know who the other is. That’s good, I think. Would it surprise you to know this is my party? I was flattered it was the one you chose. Your name and occupation would have gained you entrance into most any of them—except perhaps the one sponsored by the Naval Air Base out at Belle Chasse. You put quite a twist in their knickers with that article. I hope Levi Bennet has assigned some kind of security detail to you.”

“Security? You think the commander at Belle Chasse or some of his subordinates are going to come after me? That’s ludicrous.”

“Not at all. The commander will find a way to wiggle out from under all of this, but heads will roll, and they may well decide to come after yours. But on a more immediate level, I was thinking of those businessmen who are about to lose millions in defense contracts. I can guarantee you that you won’t be on their holiday card list.”

“It’s just business. It may be commonplace amongst gangsters to take out someone who ruins a deal for them, but businessmen just count their losses and move on.”

“That is far too naive for an experienced journalist such as yourself to believe. Some of the most ruthless men I know clothe themselves in the appearance of respectability. I far prefer an opponent who challenges me openly than one that slips a knife between my ribs to stab me in the heart.”

“On that cheery note, I think I’ll go enjoy the band.”

As she moved forward, his hand shot out, blocking her way with his muscular arm. Instead of hiding it, all his well-

cut tuxedo did was emphasize the strength it contained. Before she moved back, his other arm blocked her retreat.

“I can scream.”

“You can, but you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t frighten you. I might infuriate you and drive you crazy, but you would never be afraid of me.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re a gangster, a benign one—whatever that means—according to Levi.”

“For the simple reason that you know I would never harm you.”

“Interesting that you chose the word harm as opposed to hurt.”

“I choose my words carefully, Quinn.”

“As do I.”

Without asking for permission, *El Tigre* lifted her up so that she was sitting on the raised portion of the deck behind where the wheelhouse was located. She knew they couldn’t be seen and for reasons that seemed to escape her at the moment, she wasn’t afraid in the least—aroused and intrigued, maybe, but not afraid.

Bodie Lambeau, *El Tigre*, leaned down, fusing his lips to hers. Her entire body went on alert—tightening up as she fought down the urge to flee. If he was *El Tigre*, she most definitely was the prey. The urge to run passed quickly, though, as his tongue parted her lips and delved deeply into her mouth.

He parted her legs, rucking up her dress so that it was up around her thighs. She couldn’t have closed them if she wanted to as he moved between them. His hands slid up the outsides of her legs with a soft, seductive feel. She stifled a sigh, reminding herself this man was a gangster and most likely the target for her next investigative piece.

Quinn forced herself to disengage when all she wanted to do was to sink into his body and hold him close. She forced herself to stare into his stormy eyes that seemed to mirror the color of the Gulf of Mexico. She inhaled, smelling his scent—not just his aftershave, but the man himself. Heat and lust rolled off his body in gentle waves, washing over her.

One hand came up to fist her hair, making a mess of the intricate design Kim had done for her. Quinn knew he didn't care; he meant to hold her in place and angle her head in the precise way he wanted. His other hand moved up her ribcage to brush against her breast. Her nipple stiffened immediately and seemed to be drawn to him as if it was steel and his hand an enormous magnet.

Bodie lowered his mouth again, closing on hers and causing arousal to surge through her system. His lips captured hers and his tongue slid into her mouth, sweetly inviting hers to dance with his. Persuasive, coaxing, seductive. Bodie Lambeau knew how to kiss a woman and seemed to want nothing more than to explore her mouth and her response to him. His hand left her breast and moved back down past her waist and to her thigh.

“Give in to me, Quinn; you won't regret it.”

She sighed her acquiescence and the tenor of the kiss changed in a heartbeat. From coaxing and sweet to dominant and overwhelming in the blink of an eye. His hand tightened in her hair and angled her head and mouth precisely where he wanted it. He might choose his words carefully, but his tongue had no such restraints as it explored her mouth like a predator taking down his prey.

He held her within his grip—captured—not physically, but in some kind of seductive trap she wasn't sure she could evade or even if she wanted to. Bodie wasn't just kissing her, he was possessing her, staking some kind of claim she didn't understand.

His fingers slid along the inside of her thigh, moving up to tickle her most intimate flesh. He dragged them past the hot, wet entrance to her core to come up and play with her clit,

circling it before giving it a gentle tug. He moved his hand back to her breast as he stepped closer letting her feel the enormous erection contained by his fly.

“Yes,” he murmured, “I want you that much. But I won’t let our first time be behind the wheelhouse at a Mardi Gras party.”

“No, please...”

He kissed her again, this time reassuringly. “Do not fret, *chère*; I will see that you are well pleased this night.” His hand reached between them, and his thumb slid over her clit, pressing down as his tongue invaded her mouth and tangled with hers. With his thumb resting lightly on her swollen nub, his fingers parted her labia and began to play with her pussy.

This is madness! I’m on a boat in the middle of a party where anyone could see us, letting the most notorious gangster in New Orleans have his way with me. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Don’t worry, Quinn, no one can see us.”

“That isn’t true, anyone could see us.”

He released her hair and smoothed it back. “No, they can’t. I have a man stationed on either side. Trust me; we are alone.”

“You planned this?” she said incredulously.

“I leave very little to happenstance.”

Fisting her hair again, he slid his hand back between them to play with her clit, before moving it lower. She couldn’t quite stifle the moan as his fingers penetrated her core and curled up. He began to stroke her pussy, curling up as he stretched her. Again and again, he thrust his fingers up inside her, fucking her so that her body arched up and she came with a scream that he swallowed down with his mouth.

Quinn was still trembling when Bodie removed his fingers, sucking them clean, before reaching his arm down behind her knees and lifting her from where she’d been sitting. He strode toward the side of the boat, and she saw there was indeed a

man standing between them and anyone who might have come looking.

“I don’t think...” she started.

“Good. I think it’s best if you don’t for the rest of the night,” he rumbled seductively. “George, call down and have them ready the speed boat. We’re going home.”

“Yes, Alpha.” The man tapped the comm unit in his ear. “We are on the move. Ready the speedboat. The target has been acquired, and we’re headed home.”

Target? I’m a fucking target?

“He misspoke, *chère*. You know you are safe with me.”

She wanted to protest; knew she should protest but couldn’t find it within herself to do so. Quinn knew there was nothing more that she wanted than to be with Bodie Lambeau tonight. She hadn’t had sex with a man in more than two years. She very much wanted to break that drought with the man the world called *El Tigre*. As they made their way down to the waiting powerboat, she couldn’t help but think she’d been set up. Well, that was what she thought when she could manage to think. The problem was, not only couldn’t she think, but she also didn’t want to.

Quinn could feel the strength not only of his body, but of the essence of who he was as *El Tigre* stepped down into the boat with her still cradled in his arms. She knew her life had changed forever, and she didn’t care.

CHAPTER 8



BODIE

He held her close and made her drunk with his kisses. Every time she thought of protesting, he kissed her again, not allowing her mind to form the words that would make him stop. Bodie knew he was being unfair, and he didn't care. She was his fated mate and she would be his. He had been prepared to be patient, no matter how hard his dick argued that doing so would ruin it forever, but he was having trouble with that resolution. His dick tended to be something of a drama queen.

As they stepped off the boat onto the dock at *Force et Honneur*, she buried her face in his neck and made no further protest or attempt to remove herself from his arms. Bodie wouldn't have allowed her to do either, but still it was reassuring to know she had capitulated to their mutual need. Had they been alone on the powerboat, he would have ramped up her arousal and kept her there until he could get her home, but she was his mate, and he would share her with no one.

Bodie strode up to the house, various people opening the front doors and removing obstacles in his path. He had one destination and goal—to get Quinn upstairs, naked in his bed. Taking the stairs two at a time on the main staircase, he reached his bedroom, where Navarro stood to open the door. Bodie entered his room and the door closed silently behind him.

Setting her on the floor, he captured her mouth with his, fisting her hair to hold her in place while he unzipped the zipper hidden on the side of her dress and pushed the one

shoulder down her arm to let the dress puddle on the floor. When she tried to protest, he merely growled into her mouth, silencing her. Quinn kicked off her shoes as he reached up and unhooked her bra.

“Have I mentioned how much I like the fact that you don’t wear panties? Because I do; you are such a naughty kitten,” he said as he lifted her again and delivered her to his bed, laying her down reverently before removing his clothes and throwing them out of the way.

Stretching out on the bed beside her, he kissed her with an undeniable passion in a long, luxurious exploration of her mouth. There would come a day when he wanted her this badly, that he would simply roll over her or draw her up on her knees before him and mount her with a quick hard thrust and begin pounding into her. Today, though, he would give her foreplay. Their tongues tangled together in an age-old duel before she softened and gave over to him with a moan.

He rolled over on top of her, giving her his weight and insinuating his legs between hers. Her legs were spread, and he could smell her arousal and knew she was wet and primed for him, but he wanted her to come at least once more. Kissing her again, he began to move down her body, nuzzling her as he went. When he came to her breasts, he treated each of her nipples to a thorough tonguing before sucking one into his mouth, suckling for a moment, and then giving it a brief nip.

Quinn’s hiss finished with a sigh, and her hips began to undulate against him. His mate was a responsive and wanton vixen, and he had the rest of their lives to find all the ways he could make her come. He continued his downward trajectory, lifting each of her legs over his shoulders before he slipped his hands beneath her, grasping the globes of her ass and settling his mouth on her sex, giving her clit a brief kiss and a nip. The smell of her arousal called to the most primitive part of him, and he had to fight to keep from flipping her over, pulling her hips up into position and thrusting into her with little to no finesse before taking her in a maelstrom of fire and passion.

He began to devour her pussy. His tongue penetrated her over and over, spearing into her as he dove in and then

flattening out to lick up all her honey. It coated his tongue, and he knew he would never taste anything as sweet. Quinn's body arched up as she came again, her body clenching and shaking with need before relaxing.

Bodie slid up her body, sliding his hard cock over her clit—once, twice, before thrusting up into her, making her cry out and cling to him. God, she was all he'd ever wanted or needed. He wanted nothing more in this world than to hammer her pussy, making her call his name before emptying himself into her. But his mate deserved better. She needed to know that he would see to her need before easing his own.

He pulled back and then surged forward again, burying his cock up to the root in her warm, wet heat. He began to stroke her with a strong, steady rhythm that seemed to be just what she wanted. Quinn cried out, her nails raking his back as she climaxed. That was what he'd wanted, and he allowed himself the luxury of pounding into her, dragging his cock over her G-spot again and again, as another orgasm swept over her, and she lost herself in his sensual spell.

Thrusting harder and faster, he finally felt his balls drawing up and sending his seed down his staff, as he gave over to the mind-bending climax that claimed both of them. Her pussy pulsed all along his length, milking his cock for every last drop.

“This was a mistake,” she whispered, in a terrified voice.

“No *chère*, it was not,” he said reassuringly as he rolled from her body, dragging her with him until she was cuddled close to his side.

“Look, Lambeau,” she started, pushing at him to create some space. “I’m a crime reporter and you’re, well, you. You’re a gangster.”

He chuckled, lacing the sound with a purr that only she could hear. “I am who I am, and you are my perfect and fated mate.”

“That’s bullshit. I mean the sex was great, but seriously this can’t happen again.”

Bodie rolled up onto his side to look at her. “It will happen again—two or three times a day minimum. There will even be days I keep you in our bed to enjoy you over and over again.”

“That’s not happening. I am not becoming some kind of sex toy for El Tigre.”

“Why ever not? I fully intend to be your sex toy as well. I mean for us to thoroughly enjoy each other. There will be very few times you initiate sex that I will turn you down.”

“What if I turn *you* down?”

“I will put you face down over my knee and turn your pretty ass the most lovely shade of red until you beg me to fuck you.”

The myriad of emotions that flashed across her face were intriguing. There was anger and residual passion, but also the hint of renewed arousal when he informed her he would spank her. He thought his mate would do well as a tigress and respond to his dominance and discipline.

“That’s not going to happen,” she protested with little conviction.

“It will, and I suspect more often than not as you settle into your role as first lady of the clan.”

“I’m not the first lady of anything. And why the hell would I be the first lady? It’s not like I’m going to be married to you... Shit! You aren’t so delusional as to think that what happened between us is anything more than sex, are you? Because I can tell you right now, that isn’t happening. No way; no how. We barely even know each other and I have a job—one which I’m proud of and I’m good at.”

“Then you may keep it and ply your trade as long as it pleases you, provided you stay safe. When it is warranted, you will have a bodyguard.”

“Hot news flash, it would be hard to do my job and be inconspicuous dragging around some meathead.”

“Nevertheless, I will ensure your safety.”

She sat up in bed, but Bodie ensured she couldn't leave it by wrapping his arm around her legs and pinning her in place.

“You act like this meant something.” Now she was just being spiteful. “It didn't. As I said, it was pretty spectacular. After all, you have a big dick and know how to use it, but I'm not some bimbo who gets laid and falls madly in love with a gangster.”

“Perhaps not at first, but I assure you, you are mine now and forever, just as I am yours.” He reached up and dragged her back down into their bed and beneath him. “Come *chère*, we will begin again.”

Before she could protest, he reached between them to ensure her readiness and then thrust up into her with no preliminaries, making her catch her breath as her body responded to his possession by orgasming. Yes, the key to his mate's happiness was to keep her well-sated. He suspected her transition to tigress would be easy—she already had the disposition of one.

Bodie lost himself to the rhythm of fucking her, reveling in her pleasure as he found his own. Over and over again he made love to her throughout the night until finally just before dawn, she reached for him. Spent and sore as she had to be, she wanted the ecstasy she knew she would find in his arms. As he had promised, he did not turn her down, but he did make her beg. When he finally joined their bodies as one, she sank her teeth into his shoulder to keep from calling for him as she came.

He forced her to come twice more before he gave a last, ferocious thrust, burying himself deep and holding her close as he spilled his seed inside her.

“You're a bastard, and I should hate you,” she whispered.

“But you don't. We are, however, going to have to work on your pillow talk, *chère*. I will expect better from you,” he teased.

“This is all kinds of wrong.”

“Sometimes what others believe is wrong, is actually the best thing to do for everyone. You will see I am right. You belong here with me. And here you will stay.”

“Not happening. I’m not saying I’m not open to spending the rest of the night with you...”

“Unacceptable. There is very little of the night left.”

“You’re not listening. This,” her hand gesture included both of them, “is impossible, and while we both know I enjoyed it, sore or not, come tomorrow morning, I’m going back to my flat.”

“No *chère*, you will not. Come tomorrow morning, after I have ravaged you thoroughly, we will have breakfast in bed and come up with a rational plan to keep you safe.”

“And who will keep me safe from you?” she whispered, for the first time sounding afraid.

“There is no keeping you from me, but I will ensure both your happiness and safety.” He pulled her protestingly into his arms. “All will be well, *chère*. I swear it, and you know we mafia types take those kinds of vows very seriously.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I don’t like it.”

“I would never make fun of you. I might tease you from time to time, but never with ill intent.”

He dragged her back down to hold her close.

“I don’t want to fall for you,” she said.

“Too late,” he teased, coaxing a smile from her.

“I know,” she said as she settled herself in his arms, with her head on his shoulder.

He listened as her breathing deepened and she drifted off to sleep, the smile still evident on her face. Bodie didn’t discount the difficulties they faced, but he knew they were both where they were meant to be. He allowed himself to close his eyes, wishing that this night would never end, but knowing that it was already slipping away.

CHAPTER 9



QUINN

Quinn woke to the sound of water. It was disorienting until she became awake enough to discern there were two sources of sound—one was a faint lapping of the Gulf of Mexico from outside the French doors; the other was much closer and came from the shower in the attached bath.

Rhetorically she asked herself what had she done. The little voice inside her said, *You slept with a gangster—a probable target for your next story—and you loved it.* The little voice was right, she had found herself experiencing ecstasy that she'd never believed could exist. They found a rhythm that felt more like a long-term committed couple rather than a one-night stand.

Not a one-night stand, the start of something wonderful.

She told the voice to shut up.

She couldn't even blame what happened on being drunk or on not knowing who or what he was. She'd damn sure known exactly who he was, and she had been stone-cold sober. What the fuck was she supposed to do now? She knew a kick-ass story on the illusive *El Tigre* could do wonders for the paper and for her career, but she had compromised all that by sleeping with the enemy, so to speak. Could she spin it to be she'd been working undercover? Was there a way to turn this to her advantage?

Did she want to?

Quinn knew she'd spoken the truth when she'd told him she was afraid she was falling for him. He'd done nothing

after that to make her regret her honesty, other than the whole falling in love with a gangster thing. He'd been fairly open with her, and they'd lain cuddled together in the dark talking about their pasts. Bodie Lambeau had a lot going for him—strong, powerful, rich, and drop-dead gorgeous. He was also intelligent, charming, and funny. He was also a gangster, and she was a crime reporter.

He was in the shower. She had to make a decision. That wasn't necessarily true; she could see what evidence she could gather and then decide what to do with it. Slipping from the bed, she pulled on his shirt from the night before and began to quietly rummage through his things. Nothing in his wallet—well, nothing except a whole lot of cash and a phone number that looked vaguely familiar. His pockets were empty, but she spotted a laptop on a small desk beside the French doors.

Opening the lid, she was surprised to find it on, and when she touched the screen, it opened. There was a myriad of financial data, some of which made no sense at all. One spreadsheet looked like something he was thinking of investing in. There was a grainy video of what looked to be men offloading something from a boat. It was impossible for her to tell when and where it had been shot.

Quinn was so engrossed in what she was finding that she failed to hear the shower being cut off and the sound of someone coming up behind her. It was only when his hand connected with her backside that she realized he'd caught her red-handed.

“Exactly what do you think you're doing going through my laptop?” he snarled.

She whirled around. “That hurt.”

“Good. Now, answer my question.”

“I don't think I will.”

The feral grin that began to spread across his face should have frightened her. This was *El Tigre*, a notorious gangster who was known to dispense with his enemies, leaving no trace

of them behind. She should have been terrified, but she wasn't. Instead, what she felt was the kickstart of her libido.

Bodie Lambeau was perhaps the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. His height made her feel petite, which took some doing as she was taller than average. He had a model's face with dark hair and stormy eyes. His neck was muscular without being thick and flowed gracefully into broad shoulders and a chiseled chest. He had a trim waist, defined by a set of eight-pack abs that included the indentation along the lower sides that defined his abs from his hips and pointed straight to the promised land. Which in Bodie's case, was a long, thick cock that was beginning to tent the towel he had haphazardly wrapped around his waist.

"Answer me," he growled seductively.

Quinn felt arousal flash through her system as he stepped into her personal space. She moved backwards as far as the desk would allow her to go and raised her chin. "No."

The grin widened. "Wrong answer."

She could feel his emotions rolling off him in the same way the Mississippi River rolled into the Gulf of Mexico—they were palpable and unending. There was anger, lust, and something deeper. Something that frightened her more than being in the room with a furious gangster who'd just caught her rifling through his computer. If the rumors were true, he'd killed men for less than that. But it was his underlying need and desire for her that was the most frightening; mostly because she felt the same regardless of whether she wanted to admit it or not.

Quinn sidestepped in an effort to evade him, but he moved with her, and she realized too late that not only had he been waiting for her to do so, but she was now where he wanted her. He stepped forward again and she stepped back, only to find a solid wall at her back and on one side. The trap was now complete, with the desk on her other side and *El Tigre*, himself, directly in front of her.

Staring into her eyes, Bodie reached up and grasped either side of his shirt just under the neck and ripped it down and

away, popping all the buttons off and exposing her body and her stiffened nipples. The grin on his face went from feral to predatory, and she heard a low, rumbling sound that reminded her of some kind of purring. He pushed the shirt off her shoulders, and she couldn't seem to find the willpower to stop it from puddling at her feet.

“Mine,” he purred as he lowered his head to take possession of her mouth.

Quinn could not summon the strength to resist him and sighed into his mouth as he pressed her back against the wall, sliding his hand along her bare thigh before insinuating it between them to slip between her legs and find her engorged clit. He circled it with his fingers before resting his thumb atop it as his fingers explored the wet folds that lay beyond.

“Bodie” she moaned, unsure if it was a sign he should stop or an invitation to continue.

As the sensual rumble continued, Quinn felt it washing over her, surrounding her in a sensual web and making coherent thought impossible. She couldn't think straight. Hell, she couldn't think at all. His continual exploration and claiming of her mouth stole away her will to resist him and threatened to take her soul. Quinn feared he'd already captured her heart. She'd never felt this way about a man before. Never.

She could do nothing but feel—his touch, his body, his emotions—all of it blended with hers and amplified her own need to feel him inside her again. Her nipples were past the point of painful, and as he ripped the towel from his body and wedged his thigh between hers, she was fairly certain she was going to start dripping all over him.

Bodie lifted his head for only a moment before stepping back and bending her body so that he could take a stiffened nipple in his mouth and begin to suckle, rhythmically. Her body began to undulate in a perfect and harmonic symphony. He no longer had to hold her body in place; Quinn wrapped her arms around his neck and offered herself to him. One hand slipped lower to caress her backside while the other slipped

between them again to part her lower lips before plunging in and out of her quivering pussy.

Quinn clutched at his back as the last rational part of her brain faded away, leaving her with nothing but passion and need.

“Please,” she whimpered, hating the sound of her own voice.

“Yes, my mate, you please me well,” he rumbled.

Pressing her into the wall, he gave her breast a last suckle before nipping it and then lifting his head to retake her mouth, kissing her possessively as he brought his hands up to play with her breasts, rolling and pinching her nipples between his fingers. She could find no way to resist or defend against the onslaught of their mutual need.

When he'd kissed her breathless, he lifted his head and allowed her only enough space so that he could spin her around before pressing her back against the wall. His hands covered hers as he raised them against the wall. As he trailed his fingers down her arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake, Quinn tried pushing back, which only resulted in him swatting her backside before putting her hands back where he wanted.

“They stay where I put them,” he purred low in her ear before nuzzling her neck and bringing his hands down to skate along the outside of her body.

Quinn's body trembled—not from fear, but from need. When had her one-night stand become something so much more? His strong arms wrapped around her body—one hand going up to play with her breasts and nipples and the other skimming down to cup her mons, before pulling her away from the wall. His hard cock throbbed against the cleft of her backside.

The enormity of the moment wasn't lost on Quinn. She knew that he meant to fuck her here trapped against the wall, but she couldn't seem to fight her body and soul's need to capitulate to this man. Kicking her legs further apart, he stepped closer and moved his cock into position to take her in

what she instinctively knew was some kind of primal claiming. One part of her wanted to deny him, but she knew to do so would be to deny the inevitable and would leave her bereft. As much as he seemed to need her, she needed him more.

Bodie rubbed the plum-shaped head of his cock in the cleft of her ass, before probing for and finding her slick, heated core. Positioning her just where he wanted, he thrust up into her with a powerful push, taking complete possession of her. Quinn cried out in disbelief and ecstasy. She knew he had no trouble making her climax and seemed to take great pleasure in his ability to do so. It was the speed and power of the orgasm that caught her by surprise.

Had he not had an almost painful grip on her hips, Quinn was sure her knees would have buckled, and her legs given way. She had never responded like this to anyone before. She felt as if she couldn't breathe, and her heart was pounding in her chest as her pussy spasmed all along the hard cock that was now plundering it.

There was no room between them as he pounded into her, his pelvis slamming into her buttocks. The world around her had floated away and all that was left were the physical sensations, emotions, and the sounds of flesh slapping flesh as Bodie grunted and groaned with immense male satisfaction.

Even if she'd wanted, his vice grip on her hips prevented any escape. His fingers dug into her soft flesh as he hammered her pussy over and over again.

"You are mine, and I will not be denied," he said as he stroked her rougher and faster than ever.

"No," she wailed.

"Yes," he growled as he thrust into her with greater urgency.

Her body responded to his need, and she was stunned by the force of her second orgasm. She barely had time to breathe before feeling the ferocity and fever that seemed to be barreling down on her again. She flashed back to a time she'd

fallen out of a raft in white water and had struggled not to go under. Like the white water, Bodie was a force of nature, and she could either surrender to her need for him, or risk being drowned.

Quinn barely had time to process what she was feeling or allow her body to recover before it was striving again to reach the ultimate release she had found only in Bodie's arms. She felt the moment her body surrendered to his dominance. There was no part of her that remained unscathed. Even now as he fucked her hard, her nipples ached for the feel of his hands and her pussy demanded to feel even more of his strength and power.

She couldn't hold back the scream as another powerful orgasm shook her to her very core. Her sheath pulsed in rhythm to the pounding of her blood. As she recovered enough to catch her breath, she realized Bodie had stopped moving and was buried to his root.

"You are mine, Quinn. No other man will ever touch you again."

Although still reeling from the furious coupling he'd subjected her to, reason started to return. She brought her elbow back into his ribs, forcing the breath from his body. Good, let him be breathless for a minute. Instead of swatting her backside or pinching a nipple in retaliation, he nuzzled her neck and trailed his fingers down her body to circle and play with her clit, before drawing back and beginning to stroke her once more with long, sure thrusts. Quinn had never experienced this feeling of complete and utter rapture in any other man's arms.

He drove into her repeatedly and with a strong, steady rhythm as his hand came up, tickling the back of her neck as he parted her hair and pushed it until it fell in front of her shoulders. Bodie continued to pummel her pussy, ramming himself into her over and over. One hand reached up to cup and play with her breast. He continued to surge in and out even when she climaxed again, feeling her need coat his cock as he continued to ravage her cunt.

Bodie nipped the back of her neck—once, twice—the third time he bit down viciously. He held her tight, not only in his grip, but in his jaws. She tried to duck away, but she was trapped and couldn't move. He thrust into her sheath again and again, until she felt his cock swelling in preparation of filling her with his cum. It burst forth as his cock exploded with the power of his release. This time, her orgasm was so intense as he pumped his essence into her that she nearly passed out as she screamed again in release and triumph.

Somehow, Quinn knew everything had changed forever. Bodie collapsed against her, groaning as a seemingly never-ending stream of his seed filled her to overflowing.

What the hell had just happened, and what was she going to do about it?

CHAPTER 10



BODIE

Leaning against her, still buried within her, Bodie tried to catch his breath. Bending his head, he kissed the claiming bite.

What the hell did I do? Not only had he claimed a human without her informed consent, he'd done it in the heat of passion and with her not even knowing shifters existed. That she would stay with him was not in question. He had never intended for her to leave him. She was his mate. She would be at his side and bear his children. They would be happy.

He was going to have a lot of explaining to do, and he hadn't even allowed the barbs that covered his cock to come out to play. Given her response without them, he was quite certain his mate would yowl for him on a frequent basis.

"Did you just bite me? Get off," she snarled as she gave him a sharp jab in the ribs with her elbow.

This time he swatted her backside. "No. I will remain inside you until I decide to do otherwise." Bodie felt her shoulder move forward, no doubt in preparation to send her elbow back into his ribs for a third time. He nipped her neck. "The next time you try to do that, you'll feel the sting of my hand on your very pretty backside until you find sitting uncomfortable. And yes, I bit you."

"Why?"

"Because you are mine, and I claimed you as such."

Bodie was trying to be understanding. After all, she knew nothing about their kind. But she may as well learn from the get-go that her life had irrevocably changed. No longer would she be human. She would be a human/tiger shifter—stronger, faster, healthier.

He felt the fight go out of her. She hadn't surrendered to him, but she was on the point of breaking, and he couldn't allow that. Gently he withdrew from her, spinning her around so he could pick her up and carry her over to the comfortable chair that sat by the window. Sitting down, he held her close in his lap.

“What have you done?” she whispered.

“I have done only what needed to be done—what would have been done in the fullness of time. I got carried away, and for the timing alone, I apologize. There is so much that I need to explain to you. But know this, I have known since I drew my first breath that you were out here, somewhere, waiting.” She shook her head. “Yes. I know you probably don't believe in soulmates, but among my kind we have a deep belief in what are known as fated mates. One soul that travels with yours throughout all time. Sometimes we don't find each other in one life, but most often we do.”

“And I'm supposed to believe we are these 'fated mates?'” she scoffed.

He chuckled. “Yes, my hard-nosed, journalistic fated mate, we are.”

She shook her head again. “I don't know what you've been smoking, but I'd like to have some. Right now, all I know is that I've pretty much thrown the career I worked so hard to build a second time right out the window. Who's going to believe that the biggest badass gangster's girlfriend is a legitimate reporter and can be trusted to report the truth? My professional integrity is pretty much shot. Damn.” Her eyes welled with tears. “If you care anything about me, how could you do this to me?”

“Because you are my fated mate and I had no choice but to claim you as mine.”

“No. I won’t agree to this. You said no one saw us last night. Good. I’ll get my things, go home, and we’ll pretend it never happened. We’ll never speak to each other again, and I will never make you the target of one of my investigations. If you can trust your people to keep their mouths shut, I still might be able to salvage my career.”

She struggled to get up, but Bodie held her fast. “Enough. You will remain where I put you. Right now, I want you in my lap.” He waited until she stopped. “Better. You are not going anywhere. People will see us being happy and raising our children together.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m on birth control. There’s very little chance of you getting me pregnant.”

“Your becoming pregnant is a matter of when, not if. But that is beside the point at the moment. I have searched most of my adult life for you. Now that I have found you, I will not give you up.”

“That’s not your call. You may be *El Tigre* and have people bow and scrape to you, but I’m not one of them.”

“No. You are my mate, and you will be treated with respect and bask in my loving care.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “You are seriously delusional.”

“I am not. I will send some of our people to your flat to fetch your personal items. Other than your clothes or toiletries, if you know some things off the top of your head that you want, give me a list and they’ll be brought as well.”

“Listen up, Lambeau, you can’t just walk into my life and steamroll me like this.”

“As much as you aren’t going to like my answer, I just did.” Anger surged through her body. “Before you do something you’ll regret, answer me two questions: have you ever responded to any man the way you did to me?”

“I’ll admit that the sex was pretty spectacular. You’ve got a big dick, and you know how to use it.”

He chuckled. “Do not think to provoke me, mate. You may not like how I respond.”

“Stop calling me mate; I don’t like it.”

“You’ll need to get used to it. My second question is, if you search your feelings, do you not feel the truth of what I say?”

She was quiet for a moment. “That’s not the point.”

“That is most definitely the point. You know I’m right. You can feel the truth I speak.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have no intention of ending up as your personal sex toy.”

“You will be so much more than that. You will lead the ladies of this clan and be equal to Navarro in rank, answering only to me.”

“Why do you call it a clan?”

His mate had a sharp and focused mind. Bodie could almost hear the wheels turning and the gears clicking into place.

“Don’t you people usually call yourself *la familia* or a syndicate or a mob?”

“*La familia* is usually reserved only for the Italian mob. And while law enforcement officials may see *El Tigre* as the leader of a syndicate or a mob, my people see me as the alpha of their clan. Unlike a lot of gangsters, there is no one who works for me who is not a member of my clan. Most reside here, where they are safe and provided for.”

“Can they leave if they want?”

“Most can, but don’t want to. I ensure their lives are as good as I can make them. Having you at my side would help ease the burden of leadership.”

“Can the women leave?”

He’d known at some point the sovereignty of the tigresses would come up. Bodie had hoped it might be a ways down the road. But he refused to outright lie to her.

“Technically I could tell you that some do leave, but not to just live on their own. Ours is a somewhat closed society and we do what is needed to protect them from those who might want to harm them.”

“Then in other words, no, they can’t leave. Do you have any idea the trouble I could make for you if I went public with that information?”

“You will not do so.”

“You let me leave here and never bother me again, and I might be persuaded to do so.”

“I will not make deals with you that involve your leaving. Besides which, I do not believe you would leave our females to suffer if you truly believed they were being abused, which they are not. You’ve already incurred the wrath of some of the human traffickers with the story you wrote last year about women who are smuggled into this country to be sex workers. By the way, your article led me to those who were the masterminds behind that trade. They are no longer active in the Crescent City.”

“If your women can’t leave and you plan to keep me regardless of my feelings on the matter, what makes you any different than they are?”

“I am not like those men, and you know it. I do not abuse women, nor do I tolerate it in my territory. Even if they are not of my clan, I try to keep those who would harm our citizens at bay. I do what the law cannot.”

“But you won’t let me leave and there are women in your clan who are kept here against their wishes.”

“Females, of all kinds, can be fractious and often need a steady hand. If they cannot find happiness here, I will find them a clan where they can. What I will not do is allow them to run amok and get themselves hurt or worse.”

“Who died and appointed you god?”

“Quinn, you are being difficult.”

“Damn right, I am. So why don’t you let me go and be rid of me.”

“I will not give you up. That is the end of it. I will ask Maurice to send up some breakfast. Maybe some food in your belly will see you to a better mood.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

“You will remain in our rooms until I can show you the house and grounds myself. It is my hope that your good nature and common sense will return to you.”

Bodie allowed her to rise from his lap and then stood.

“Can I use your computer?” she asked.

“No, but I will see that there is one that you can use. You will not be allowed to communicate with the outside world, but I will allow you to use the internet.”

“You’re just too good to me,” she said sarcastically.

“I am, and you will come to see that.”

“What about clothes? I can’t exactly hang out in your room in my evening gown.”

“That is not your only alternative.”

“Your clothes are too big for me.”

“I didn’t have my clothes in mind. As far as I’m concerned, you are fine the way you are.”

Quinn looked down and realized she was still naked. “You jerk.”

He watched as her rather lovely backside disappeared with the rest of her luscious body into the bathroom. “You are welcome to any of my things, including the robe in there and anything else you find in the closet or chest of drawers. We can talk about redoing this room if you like.”

The door cracked open. “I won’t be here long enough for that.”

“We shall see, my mate. We shall see.”

Bodie left their room, summoning one of his security team to remain in the hall and positioning another beneath his balcony. Quinn was upset, but he supposed that was to be expected. He bypassed Navarro and headed for the kitchen, stopping long enough to dispatch someone to Quinn's apartment to bring her clothes and personal toiletries.

"Maurice, please see that a tray is taken to my mate."

"Of course, Alpha. Do you have any idea what she likes?"

Bodie smiled ruefully. "None whatsoever. Just take her a variety of things." He turned to Navarro, who had followed close behind him. "Have you had breakfast?"

Navarro shook his head. "Not yet."

"Good. Maurice, have something made and bring it to us in my study. We have things to do."

Navarro closed the door behind them. "I was a bit surprised to see Quinn Forrester with you last night and even more surprised to find you moving her in here. I had thought she'd be a bit harder to bring around to your way of thinking."

"Bringing her around to my way of thinking might take a bit more time."

"But you're having them bring her things."

Bodie nodded. "I am. She cannot be allowed to leave the compound, at least not for a few days. It would be—" he paused "—unwise."

"What happened last night? What did you do?"

"I claimed Quinn as my mate."

"As in you took her neck in a claiming bite?" Bodie nodded again and Navarro groaned. "What were you thinking? You can't have possibly obtained her informed consent."

"I am not the only tiger who claimed his mate without her consent."

"True enough, but the rest of us weren't turning a human."

“She will be fine. She just needs to get used to the fact that her life has changed.”

Bodie hoped he sounded far more confident than he felt. It wasn't that he doubted their connection; nor did he fear she would not make a magnificent tigress and first lady of the clan, but he had no doubt she was going to give him hell over the whole thing.

He needed to deal with Gutierrez, and then he would deal with his spirited mate. One thing was for sure; she couldn't be allowed to run around the city making trouble and provoking those who might want to kill her. He would see that she was safe.

CHAPTER 11



QUINN

Quinn stood under the pulsing shower, trying somehow to wash thoughts and memories of Bodie Lambeau down the drain. Her efforts were a complete failure. The worst part was, she knew if she was being honest, that she felt the connection as deeply as he did. She had never felt as connected to anyone as she did to Lambeau, and she'd known him less than a day. She sure as hell had never responded to a man the way she did to him. While it was true, he had a big dick and knew how to use it to pleasure a woman, that wasn't the reason she had craved him like she'd craved no other.

She beat her head against the tile wall. *Damn! Damn! Damn!* What the hell was she going to do? She was not giving up the career she had worked so hard to build. She had to get out of here. Quinn knew herself and Lambeau's capabilities well enough to know she couldn't just run. She needed a solid plan. She wasn't like the heroines in films and books that had an infinite number of skills they could use. She was in fairly good shape, but Lambeau and those on his security team would be able to run her down in a New York minute.

He'd cut her off from communicating with the outside world, but had sent up a computer that she could use for research. It was set up so that she could not send any kind of information out, but she could research whatever she needed. That was the key. She would find information about Gutierrez that was useful to Lambeau and then make a deal for her freedom and that of the other women who were here and wanted to go. He was right about that; she would never leave them behind.

Perhaps she could even parlay this into some kind of deal where she could get a good story out of it. She had no doubt any story she tried to write about *El Tigre* would be compromised by what had happened the night before. She would prove she was more valuable to him on the outside and then, when the time was right, she could leave New Orleans, which seemed unfair, but she didn't see many options. She loved her life here but had no intention of making and raising babies with a gangster.

Grabbing the robe hanging just inside the door to the bath, she wrapped it around her. The sash was actually long enough to go around twice. Quinn was by no means petite and carried a little more weight than she would have liked. But New Orleans was a foodie town and she loved to eat. That was something she'd noticed last night—Lambeau made her feel soft and dainty, which oddly didn't demean her in any way—except for the whole me Tarzan/you Jane routine.

A laptop and small printer were brought to her room, and the young man who set it up was most helpful but did caution her that it had been set up to receive information only and not to transmit anything. In other words, she could read her emails, but not respond. More importantly to Quinn, she could conduct research via the internet.

There was a knock on the door. Quinn had locked it from the inside, knowing full well Lambeau probably had keys to the damn thing or for that matter could just kick it in. But she was making a point. If he could lock her in, she could lock him out. Unlocking the door, she opened it just a crack and her nostrils were assailed by the most delicious aromas.

“I am Maurice, Milady. The alpha asked me to bring you a selection of things for breakfast.”

She opened the door and stepped aside. “Did you just call me ‘Milady?’”

“I did, as will everyone but the alpha, unless you wish it to be different.”

He had a lovely French accent that spoke of his roots. “Why?”

He shrugged in a way that indicated he didn't really understand the question. "Because you are the alpha's fated mate, and it is a sign of respect."

"Well, I don't like it. Please call me Quinn. I don't know what you brought me, but it smells divine."

"A little bit of everything, but of course, if there is something in particular you would like I would be most happy to make it for you." He set the tray down on the small table next to the large chair in the corner, lifting the cloches off several things. "We have a bananas Foster French toast, lemon ricotta pancakes, crawfish and avocado toast, and a smoked salmon hash as well as various types of breakfast meats, breads, and pastries."

The man wasn't kidding; the whole thing looked amazing, and she was hungry. Apparently, fucking a hunk with a big dick all night had worked up an appetite.

"This looks and smells wonderful. What do you suggest?"

"If you like your breakfast sweet, the French toast is excellent. If you prefer a more savory offering, you can't go wrong with the smoked salmon hash. I could also prepare you an omelet with your choice of fillings, a waffle, poached eggs or some kind of Benedict."

"No. I'm sure this will be fine, and that smoked salmon hash looks divine. Can I just take that and the English Muffin?"

"Most assuredly, but I will leave a little taste of the rest so you can tell me what you like. Normally the clan eats breakfast and lunch as a group in the dining hall buffet-style. Dinner is a bit more formal and is served family style at each table. When you are ready, I would be delighted to go over any food selections you would prefer."

"I won't be staying that long," she said shaking her head. "But thank you."

"The alpha is a good and honorable man, but his rule is absolute. You are his mate, and you belong here at *Force et Honneur*."

“I see the chauvinism runs deep here. I don’t know how to tell you this, but it doesn’t wash with me. I don’t care that your alpha is *El Tigre*. I don’t care that you think he can do no wrong and can bend the world to his way of thinking. Last time I checked, this was the twenty-first century, and women were allowed to choose their own fate.”

“Perhaps in some societies, but not in ours. Our ways have worked for millennia, and you will find, if you allow yourself to, that they will work for you, as well. Eat your breakfast and consider carefully how you behave. The alpha has no use for females who do not know their place. He is a benign and benevolent ruler, but he rules with an iron fist in a velvet glove.”

Maurice set the dishes aside that she had chosen and then retreated from the room. She wasn’t sure how, but she got the distinct impression she’d just insulted him. No matter; she would apologize before she left.

Although she wasn’t sure why she felt the need to bother. It wasn’t like she was going to be living here with these people, and it was nothing to her if they had different opinions on the matter.

After eating her breakfast and deciding Maurice could give any of the famous chefs in New Orleans a run for their money, she sat down at the desk and opened her email, staring at it for the longest time. Deciding she had nothing to lose, she hit the button to try and send a new email. The result was a warning notice that informed her if she tried again, Bodie would be informed. There was no direct or specific threat, but it was there, nonetheless.

Quinn scrolled through her email, looking for the correspondence she’d had with one of the low-ranking port authorities. He had been a reliable source of good information in the past and had contacted her about one of the warehouses being used by men he thought might be in with the Gutierrez cartel.

Alvaro was of Hispanic descent, and he had a healthy dislike for the cartels and anyone else who used their power to

hurt others. Oddly enough, he had only good things to say about Lambeau. Considering where the area the sex traffickers had been operating the year before was located, Quinn had to wonder if he might not have tipped off Lambeau about their whereabouts.

Quinn spent the next several hours going over what Alvaro had sent her, printing out the pertinent emails she felt would be useful in making her case to Lambeau. If nothing else, her time in New York City had taught her how to sell a story idea to an editor inclined to turn it away. Once she had completed that, she began searching through public records and news articles regarding the warehouse Alvaro had pointed out to her.

The records certainly gave credence to Alvaro's belief that whoever was leasing the warehouse didn't want their identity known. Quinn was able to trace the people leasing it back through several shell corporations before finding a final one in South America, and more specifically, in the region from which Gutierrez hailed.

Alvaro had also spotted several smaller boats coming in and out of the Port and docking by the warehouse. Long ago, Alvaro had realized most of his bosses were corrupt and for the right amount of money would turn a blind eye to whatever was going on. He'd learned to use those in law enforcement and the media to turn up the heat on illegal activities.

Quinn leaned back. She was pretty damn sure Alvaro was on to something. She needed to get a message out to him. She walked to the door and opened it to a guard who made Bodie look small. He was the size of a house.

"I need to get an email out. I know the alpha said no, but if I write it out, can someone send it for me, and make sure it looks like it came from me? I'm trying to run down some information about the Gutierrez cartel that I think your alpha will be interested in."

"If you write out the information, I will ask the alpha if we can send it for you."

"It's important that it looks like it came from me."

The man grinned. “That won’t be an issue. We have an excellent technology group. I’ll see that it gets to the alpha as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you.” Quinn rushed over to the desk and scribbled out the note for Alvaro and gave it to the guard. She thought about locking the door but decided it had been silly to think a locked door would even slow Lambeau or any of his men down.

Quinn knew that she should have tried to put something in there that Alvaro might recognize as a cry for help. But getting away from Lambeau for the moment wasn’t what she had in mind. If she was right, and every journalistic instinct she possessed said she was, it might not be the worst thing to team up with *El Tigre*. Gutierrez was a brutal man, and no doubt would kill some nosy reporter sniffing around whatever he was up to. Lambeau was right in that she would be safe here, and maybe she wouldn’t mind going another couple of rounds with him and his big dick.

Perhaps they could come to some kind of agreement and work together. The trick would be in keeping their relationship, or whatever anyone wanted to call it, quiet so as to not jeopardize her professional reputation. Quinn stretched and went out onto the balcony. It had a commanding view of the Gulf of Mexico and the fine lawns, dunes, and beach that lay between the house and the water. On either side, the landscape that was not manicured faded into sawgrass and beyond that the swamp.

She stood for the longest time watching the waves, the sky, and the birds that flew free, wondering how she’d managed to get herself in this situation, and why it no longer seemed so important that she get away?

El Tigre was a dangerous man. Quinn was coming to believe he was far more dangerous to her, but not in the way he was to others.

CHAPTER 12



BODIE

*B*odie and Navarro spent the morning going through everything they had learned about Gutierrez and his crew. Bodie called Randall Beckett and Nolan Hamilton, both of whom had encountered Gutierrez in their territories and sent him packing.

There was a knock, and one of the techies stepped in with a piece of paper, handing it to Bodie as he said, “Your lady requested that we send this email for her and ensure it appeared to come from her email.”

“Did she try to communicate with anyone?”

“One simple attempt to this recipient. I don’t think she expected it to work, and she didn’t try again. It felt more like she was just testing it but wasn’t determined to try and find a way around the algorithm. The email itself seems straightforward with no hidden message.”

Bodie read over the note, quirking his eyebrow as he did. “Hmm. I would agree. I think my mate may be onto something. Go ahead and send it but ensure that we intercept the answer.”

“Yes, Alpha. I’ll see that it’s done immediately.” The techie scurried back through the door. Bodie wondered how it was that a tiger-shifter could actually scurry, but it seemed all of those who were responsible for the technology they used had that ability.

“Do you think that’s wise, Alpha?” asked Navarro.

Bodie nodded as he stood and stretched from side-to-side. “I think if I can persuade her that she can pursue her story from here in greater safety, she will be more likely to settle in and be happy. Quinn is not so foolish as to think she would be safe if she plans to take a swing at Gutierrez. Besides, it would appear we are pursuing the same thing, but from different angles. We might even be able to help each other.”

“I know she’s your fated mate, but you seem to be quite enamored of her already.”

“Were you not enamored of Larisa even before she spent a night in your bed?” Bodie asked, wryly, knowing full well the answer.

“Your point is well taken.”

“We have put in a good day’s work. Send word to our people watching Gutierrez. If Quinn and her source are correct about what is going on at the dock, Gutierrez has to be close to making his move.”

“Do you think the source knows it’s Gutierrez?”

“Doubtful. He seems very open and above board with Quinn. I believe it is my mate who is playing her cards close to her chest with him, and I suspect everyone else but me.”

“Why do you say you?”

“Because she had to know the text of the email would be brought to me before it was sent out. I think I will go share lunch with Quinn in my room.”

“Might we expect to see the two of you this evening?”

“I will see if she is feeling well enough. If the transition is beginning, she might prefer to remain alone with me.”

Navarro chuckled. “If she realizes you’re responsible for that and what it is you’ve actually done, she might prefer to take your head.”

“You might be right about that,” chortled Bodie. “I’m having trouble figuring out just how one tells his mate that he is not human and that because he couldn’t control his more primitive urges last night, neither is she any longer.”

“I wish you the best of luck with that, my alpha. I think you’re going to need it.”

Bodie headed toward the door, stopping in the opening. “I fear you may be right. I’ll stop and talk to Maurice and take lunch up with me.”

Knowing that Navarro was most likely correct in his assessment of Quinn’s reaction to being told she would no longer be wholly human, he hoped Maurice might have something to offer that she would enjoy.

As he entered the kitchen, Bodie was reminded why he loved to visit. The space, except very late at night, was always humming with activity, happy voices, and delicious smells. Maurice ran a tight kitchen, but he was no tyrant, and he had instituted a training program for those who were interested in learning the culinary arts. They worked closely with those who raised livestock, fruits, vegetables, and other staples to provide the clan with the freshest selections available. Maurice and the farm manager worked closely to make the clan as close to self-sustaining as possible and had ensured that if some catastrophe were to strike, they would be able to provide and care for themselves.

“Alpha, you honor us with your presence,” called Maurice who was tasting something. “May we get you anything?”

“I know you’re busy and I hate to interrupt, but I plan to have lunch with my mate and was hoping she might have indicated to you what she would like for lunch.”

“You are, as always, in luck. Quinn, as she asked me to call her, called down and asked if my jambalaya was on point...”

“I hope you told her yours was the best in all of New Orleans.”

“I did, and she laughed. She asked if there might be some available for lunch. I assured her I would see that she got some.”

“Excellent. When you have time could you send up a small pot of jambalaya along with regular white rice, red beans and

rice, cornbread, and something for dessert?”

“It would be my pleasure. One of the boys took her a pitcher of our iced tea, sweetened with lemonade, and she has been enjoying that all morning. I’ll send another up with your lunch. Might I say, Alpha, that all of us who have had a chance to speak with her believe your fated mate should have been born among us and will make an excellent first lady for the clan.”

“I think Quinn may have a unique take on the role of First Lady, but I have every confidence in her ability to lead the other tigresses of this clan. I will leave you and your staff to your normal duties and appreciate the added burden of preparing something separate for Quinn and I.”

Maurice nodded and then turned back toward the bustling kitchen. Thoughtfully, Bodie headed back out the door and started up toward his room and his mate. The thought of her, the memories of her response and the sounds she had made as he claimed her in all ways, made his dick begin to swell. She was the most gorgeous creature on earth. Becoming a tigress would only enhance her beauty and sensuality.

“You and the guard beneath the balcony can stand down until further notice. I take it she’s been behaving herself?”

“She has been no trouble whatsoever and ensured I was supplied with something to drink. She’s asked a couple of questions about the estate. They seemed rather innocuous, so I answered them.”

“What was she curious about?”

“Mostly the way the clan operated in terms of what she sees as communal living, how Maurice works with our other people to utilize the land to keep us primarily self-contained. Was I wrong to answer her?”

“No, not at all. I don’t trust her yet with the codes to get past security and want to ensure for now she remains in our room, but I also don’t want her to feel any more trapped than she does, and she may feel more comfortable asking you than me. I appreciate you taking good care of her.”

“It is my pleasure. Let me know when you need me to come back.”

“Will do,” Bodie said, feeling grateful for the way his people seemed to have already embraced Quinn as one of their own.

Turning the knob, he pushed open the door, only to duck and roll as a heavy book was lobbed in his direction.

“You bit me,” she snarled.

Bodie got back to his feet and closed and locked the door. She was wearing one of his cashmere sweaters, which hung to mid-thigh on her. Granted, her dress the night before had been stunning, but with her hair loose and his sweater clinging to her luscious curves, she was magnificent—a true tigress at the height of her powers, although she didn’t know it yet.

“I believe we covered that earlier,” he said, summoning his patience.

“Earlier I hadn’t seen the marks on either side of my neck.”

“Is there any redness or swelling? There shouldn’t be, as I cleaned and disinfected them and added some antibiotic ointment, just to be safe.”

“No redness or swelling, just two big holes as well as two smaller ones, and all four of them hurt.”

He approached her cautiously—not because he was frightened of her, but because he didn’t want to add to her stress. The earliest stages of the transition often included heightened fear and paranoia and could exaggerate a person’s flee or fight response as well as a general kind of anxiousness. For only the briefest of moments, he damned himself for having given into his more primal urges, but then dismissed it as there was nothing to be done about it except try to support Quinn through the transition.

“Let me see,” he said gently.

Quinn picked up another book. “Stay away from me,” she threatened.

“I don’t want to do anything but help you. However, I will not allow you to threaten either me or any of our clan.”

“They are not *my* clan.”

“They are, and it is best that you begin to accept that.”

She lifted the book threateningly. “Stay away from me. How the hell did you do that? It looks like I was bitten by some kind of large predator.”

“That’s something of a long story.”

“How about you give me the bullet points?”

And now they were here. He either concocted some fabrication to mollify her until he had time to introduce the fact that shifters existed and that she was now a tigress, or he told her the truth without any shading to minimize the enormity of what had happened to her and that he alone was responsible for it.

“Put the book down.”

“No.”

“If I have to take it from you, I’ll tattoo my displeasure across your backside for having to do so.”

Quinn hesitated for only a moment, and that was all it took for Bodie to close the distance between them and wrestle the book from her, before wrapping her in his arms. He bent his head to nuzzle her and was rewarded with a sharp blow to his face as she snapped her head back and at the same time stomped on his instep.

Bodie released her for a fraction of a second, before he was able to grasp her wrist and jerk her back into his embrace. He held her against his left arm, preventing her from moving as he peppered her ass with a round of stinging swats, making her dance.

“Had enough?” he asked.

“That hurt.”

“So did the head butt and the stomp on my foot. I asked you if you’d had enough. If not, I’ll take you to the edge of the

bed where I'll sit down, raise my sweater—which you look lovely in—to bare your pretty little backside and spank it until it has a nice glow all around it. What's it to be, Quinn? Do you ask your questions and let me answer them? Or do I put you over my knee and then give in to my more feral side and take you back to bed? Your choice.”

He thought she might give in to tears, but instead, she wiped away the ones that threatened to fall. “I suppose I'd prefer asking questions to getting spanked. The first question is, will you tell me the truth?”

“I will, but I would ask that you hear me out before deciding to bolt. You can be angry and call me all kinds of names—most of which will be deserved, but I need you to hear the whole explanation.”

She nodded. He had to admit this was going better than he might have thought. Now, to make her believe and accept, if not embrace her new reality and her future with him.

CHAPTER 13



What the hell was he talking about? Confusion seemed to swirl all around her. Quinn could make no sense at all of him or her feelings for him. He'd carried her off that steamboat for what she thought would be an amazing one-night stand or maybe even a weekend. Truth to tell, she probably would have tried to spy on him and then spin what she'd done as a way to get into his house.

He'd just spanked her ass. The flesh he'd smacked had become warm and sensitized, but the strike had also sparked arousal and heated her blood as it coursed through her system. Quinn had never admitted to anyone that her Kindle had more than one book with D/s or spanking themes. She found the idea intriguing and exciting but had never even considered indulging, let alone allowing someone to actually do it. But then again, Bodie hadn't asked, he'd just done it. So why had she felt each strike of his hand against her backside deep inside her pussy? Again, confusing.

Then the sonofabitch bit her, and not just some little nip, but a full-on savage bite. But how? She'd examined the wounds using a handheld mirror to look at them in the mirror over the vanity in the bath. There appeared to be four puncture wounds—two on each side of her neck. From what she could see and feel, they were deep and looked as if some kind of predatory beast—a wolf or large cat—had made them. Bodie didn't have teeth like that. So, what the hell had happened?

Confusion.

All of her thoughts swirled with arousal, pain, and heat, and she felt herself wobble. Bodie caught her.

“Easy, Quinn. I’ve got you.” He wrapped his arm around her and helped her over to the large reading chair, where he sat down and pulled her into his lap.

She didn’t want to lean on his strength and really didn’t want to *like leaning* on his strength, but she needed to, and she did. She curled into his lap like it had been made for her and she had been doing it for years. It felt soothing and right. When she let her defenses down, everything about Bodie felt right, and as if this was the one place she truly belonged.

“I’m sorry. I’m not usually woozy like that.”

“It’s all right. You’ve been through a lot, but you’re here now with me, and I promise you everything will be all right.”

“But you don’t know that…”

“But I do,” he purred.

It wasn’t so much that she could hear him, but she could feel a kind of soothing rumble coming from his chest that seemed to surround her like a comforting shawl made out of spun silk. Her breathing evened out, and equilibrium was restored. Quinn knew she should try to move away from him, but it was so peaceful just sitting in his lap with her head resting on his shoulder.

“It will be all right, Quinn; I promise you.”

She said nothing, but snuggled closer to him, letting his heat and reassuring presence surround her in a protective cocoon.

“I’m sorry. I’m not usually so moody. I mean, I have a bad temper, but I don’t normally just want to curl up in some gangster’s lap.”

He chuckled, the sound skittering along her skin, tickling it so that she couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s good to know. I’d hate to have to go out and kill all the other gangsters who have given you comfort and solace over the years.”

“Does the bite have anything to do with the waves of dizziness that have bothered me all day?”

“Yes, but as I said, you need to let me explain to you what happened.”

“I know what happened, you bit me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“How did you do that? I looked at that bite mark and it looks like it came from some large predator and not a man. I’m pretty damn sure I would have noticed if you weren’t a man.”

“You’d be surprised what you might have missed in the heat of passion. And you, my mate, were most definitely caught up in passion.”

Quinn could feel the color rising in her cheeks. Sitting in Bodie’s lap, even being with him, was something she hadn’t done in a long, long time. There had been no sex with a partner in quite a while, and before that, it had been mostly a string of one-night stands after she left New York.

“That was pretty intense in a very good way. So how did you bite me?” she lifted his upper lip to reveal a set of clean, white, even teeth. “I know everyone has canine teeth, but you sure as hell don’t have fangs.”

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the door, and it cracked open. “Alpha?” said Maurice.

“Maurice, come on in. Why don’t you set our lunch out on the balcony?”

As he entered, Quinn inhaled deeply and moaned as she turned to Bodie. “He said he made the best jambalaya in New Orleans, but I didn’t believe him. Now that I can smell it, I think he may have been telling the truth.”

Bodie helped her up and they both followed Maurice out onto the balcony.

“He was telling the truth. That is a trait we value at *Force et Honneur*.”

“Strength and Honor, right?”

“Precisely,” he said, holding her chair. There was something old world about Bodie Lambeau and all those he called ‘clan.’ “Thank you, Maurice.”

“My pleasure, Alpha.”

The chef gave her a knowing and devilish smile before retreating. “Does everyone here know I spent the night with you?”

He took the napkin Maurice had set out for her, opened it with a flourish and placed it in her lap before sitting down. “Yes. They also know you are my fated mate and that I expect them, with the exception of helping you escape, to be as helpful as possible and to treat you with respect.”

“So, you do admit you are holding me prisoner.”

“No. I am ensuring your safety, and that means keeping you here with me.”

“A rose by any other name.”

He chuckled. “I will have to learn not to engage in a war of words with you. I fear I will lose.”

“Don’t feel bad. Words are my stock and trade. I use them and my nose for a good story to make a decent living.”

Bodie took a bowl from those laid out. “Basmati rice, or red beans and rice.”

“I’ve only had jambalaya served over white rice, but I love red beans and rice.”

“As do I,” he said putting a portion into the bowl before ladling the Jambalaya over it. Bodie lifted another lid and put a square of what looked to be very moist cornbread on the side of the plate before handing it to her. “I think you’ll like this. Maurice also makes the best cornbread.”

“This really looks delicious, and it smells heavenly.” She brought the spoon to her mouth, blew on it, and then tasted. “Oh, my god. That tastes even better than it smells, and I love it with the red beans and rice.”

“Good. I will tell Maurice.”

She picked up the cornbread and dipped it in the sauce of the jambalaya, bringing it up to her mouth to take a bite. “Now, about that bite.”

He told her a tale about a great city that had once existed where the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi Rivers had met and how it had fallen to ruin. Overpopulation, an earthquake, and an unknown disease had laid waste to it. Quinn vaguely remembered reading an article about the city and the theories surrounding its demise in *National Geographic*.

“Knowing there was nothing more that she could do, the last of the priestesses mixed her surviving magick with the winds that blew across the prairie. In so doing, she released the guardians: a great leopard who went north; an enormous and powerful tiger to the south; and a lion that remained in between.”

“That’s a lovely story and I read about the city and its devastation, but the part about the priestess releasing some kind of predatory cats that, as far as I know, never existed on this continent and to do what? Protect something? I don’t recall that part of the story.”

“Protect those that remained behind or migrated to the north and south. And that part was not included in the common legend.”

“Okay, so let’s say I buy into your magical priestess. What’s that got to do with you biting me?”

Bodie leaned back. “I am the descendant of that tiger, as are the majority of my clan.”

Quinn began to laugh. That was ludicrous. He couldn’t actually expect her to believe that story, could he? She noticed he wasn’t laughing.

“Don’t be a jackass, Lambeau. You said you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“And I have. That it is outside of your knowing does not alter the truth. The great tiger that the priestess sent south settled here at *Force et Honneur*. The actual name he gave it

has been lost in the mists of time, but the motto he assigned to our clan was Strength and Honor. After the War of 1812, my ancestor codified those words and used them to give this place a name.”

“You are batshit crazy,” she said taking a sip of the lemonade-sweetened iced tea.

“That is debatable, but nevertheless, it is the truth.”

“Funny, I don’t see any stripes, a tail, and don’t tigers, like all felines, have barbs covering their cocks, which is what makes female cats yowl when they’re being bred, which in turn is why male cats bite the back of the neck...” Her words drifted off.

“I can suppress the barbs if I choose to, but I think you will come to revel in the unique sensations they provide.”

“You are not a tiger. I’m sitting here looking at you. I saw you naked last night. I lost count of how many times we fucked and you made me come. You’re... you’re human.”

“In this form. The uniqueness of the great cats the priestess released into the world is that they were, and to this day are, able to transform or shift from man to beast and back again.”

“Like during a full moon?”

“A convenient explanation to help those with limited understanding accept the existence of our kind. The fact is that shifters, at least most of us, can shift at will.”

Quinn shook her head. “That is absolute bullshit. I would have noticed if you’d changed into a tiger last night while you were fucking and biting me.”

He reached across the table to take her hand, but she jerked it away.

“Calm yourself, Quinn. When a feline shifter goes to claim his mate, the fangs of our altered self emerge to allow us to do so. I was wholly human when I made you mine, with the exception of the fangs, which secreted a kind of virus into your bloodstream.”

She jumped up, turning her chair over. “What the fuck, Lambeau? You infected me with some kind of disease?” Quinn placed a hand on the table to steady herself.

“What’s done is done. Getting overwrought won’t change anything. You are beginning to transition much more quickly than I thought you would.”

“Transition?” she asked, her foreboding and panic mixing in a toxic cocktail. “What the hell do you mean by transition?”

“Just what you think I mean. The virus has entered your system and is overwriting your original human DNA to make you one with me.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You can’t just rob me of my humanity. No, wait! This is all some bullshit story you made up to explain however it is you bit me.”

Quinn turned to flee into the bedroom. Bodie rushed into the room and made it to the door before she could.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, but I didn’t want to lie to you, and I wanted to give you a frame of reference for what was happening.”

She backed towards the bath. “Stay away from me. Tell me how to reverse whatever it is you’ve done.”

“There is no way to reverse it. You are becoming a tigress. You will be stronger, more resistant to illness and injury, faster, and live a slightly longer life with better health.” Bodie held out his hand to her. “I promise you; it will be all right.”

She spun away from him and ran toward the balcony, unsure of why she would do so. The miasma of confusion filtered into her brain, making her lose a step.

“Quinn, stop!” he commanded.

‘We are one,’ whispered a large tiger who seemed to spring out of the darkness of her mind, charging toward her as a mist of color, lightning, and thunder surrounded her, swirling around as if she were caught in a tornado.

She continued on toward the edge of the balcony, leaping up and over it—only seeing her arms and hands had become

powerful legs and paws that absorbed the shock of her hitting the ground. Quinn was in full flight mode as she rushed away from the house.

Behind her she heard the roar of a tiger—her mate. No wonder they called him *El Tigre*.

CHAPTER 14



BODIE

Shit! How the hell had that happened? Her transition had been swift and complete. He'd never heard of a human transitioning this quickly. Leave it to his mate to do things her way and at her pace.

This was not going quite the way he planned. He'd expected her to be a bit freaked out. After all, as he'd said, she had no point of reference. But the last thing he'd expected was her tiger to come forward, take control, and leap from the balcony. Bodie held his breath as she hit the ground, fearing she might injure herself, but apparently her tigress was in full control—she barely broke stride as she landed on the lawn and galloped toward the beach.

He saw several of his men start to give chase. “Leave her. She is mine,” he growled as he called forth his own great tiger who was all in favor of chasing his mate down.

The maelstrom of the change was more violent than usual as his tiger was eager to begin the chase and Bodie's own emotions were more prevalent as the spinning electrical storm swirled all around him, encompassing him until he emerged as his altered self.

Bodie leapt from the balcony as his mate had done and gave chase. He bounded across the lawn as she disappeared into the sand dunes. His mate was clever, and her tigress had shown great daring as she leapt over the railing. Neither Quinn nor her tigress knew the land that lay before them and yet they had boldly leapt into the unknown. Leave it to his mate to have a tigress of stunning beauty and courage.

He still had the advantage, he was bigger, stronger, hadn't just transitioned and knew this land like the back of his hand—or in this case, his paw. Running from the threat of an enraged mate in an area unknown to her, Quinn's tigress most likely would keep to the path, taking her down to the beach or up to the headland. The beach would be easier; tigers of both sexes were excellent swimmers.

Taking a shortcut, Bodie charged toward the Gulf, bypassing the path normally taken by those who lived here. Quinn's tiger almost barreled into him as he tried to cut her off. She veered to the left, which would take her to the beach. All things considered, he thought the beach to be a better place to confront her. If he had to take her down, the sand was softer than the rocks that made up the bluff.

He had to stop himself from watching the grace and power with which she moved. Most people, when they shifted for the first time, were awkward and had trouble even trotting and dealing with a tail, but not Quinn. No, her tigress flew across the ground like some kind of land yacht in complete control of the wind. She used her tail like a rudder to help her move with precision and speed.

Bodie had to remind himself that if he didn't quit admiring how beautiful she was, she might get herself hurt. He roared as he picked up the chase and raced after her. He barely noticed the differing textures of the grassy dunes as they gave way to loose sand and then hardpack.

Quinn seemed to spot the dock which jutted out into their cove and currently had two sailboats and a powerboat tied up. He couldn't take the chance that she could make it to the boats and put on a burst of speed. Her tigress had shown cunning and the ability to take advantage of Quinn, not knowing what to expect. His mate would need to learn to control her inner beast. He had the advantage of being on a straighter trajectory to get to the jetty. He was also bigger, stronger, and had been a tiger-shifter all his life.

Just as her paws hit the end of the dock, covered with sand, Bodie leapt and landed in the middle of her back, driving her down onto the ground as he reached up and grabbed the nape

of her neck with his teeth in order to subdue her. Quinn did not submit. She roared in defiance and tried to twist around in order to use her lethal claws. Bodie had anticipated this move and held her in his teeth, shaking her savagely.

Quinn growled and slashed at him with her back feet, trying to get enough purchase to toss him off and get away. He had no intention of doing that. Again, he shook her, growling as he did so. She would learn to submit, and she would learn it now. He allowed his anger and primal lust to roll down the bonding link, overwhelming her.

Shift! He told her through the link. *Shift!*

The tigress beneath him stilled and after a moment's pause, she became his human mate. Bodie relaxed his hold, shifted back, and then stood over her, offering her his hand to get up. He didn't realize the vulnerability of his balls in relation to the position of her foot until it was too late. Quinn kicked up with her foot, ramming his ball sac up into his body cavity. Bodie tried to reach out to grasp her hair as she jumped to her feet and began to run down the dock.

He dropped to his knee, his hand trying to massage injured body parts. "Damn it, Quinn, come back here," he shouted.

"Fuck you, Lambeau," she called over her shoulder as she ran for the powerboat.

He groaned as he got to his feet and began to run after her, his balls informing him they wanted nothing to do with her, although his dick was arguing vehemently in favor of taking her on the dock. He had expected to sire children on her. His balls argued they might never recover. His dick called his balls pussies, which only made him think of her pussy and how it had felt when she was impaled on his cock.

The fact that his dick was still hard was something of a miracle. He would have imagined it would have wilted and tried to go into hiding with his testicles, but no, all it wanted was to have at her again, this time with its barbs in all their glory. He couldn't help but notice how truly gorgeous she was as she ran, her backside still showing the faintest hint of pink from the brief spanking he'd given her up in their room.

His cock throbbed to get his attention and remind him that if he didn't get his ass in gear, his mate was going to get away. Bodie could not allow that to happen for a whole myriad of reasons. Mostly, his dick reminded him, because he really wanted to fuck her. He didn't care how mean she was or how savage her tigress, Quinn Forrester aroused him in a way no other ever had.

Bodie began to run down the dock, gaining ground on her with each stride—despite the protestation of his dangly parts. She didn't understand the danger of her position. Not only would the cartel want to kill her, but there were those among the shifter community who would consider a freshly transitioned human who had been turned without her consent to be a threat to shifters everywhere.

Stretching, reaching, he fisted the tail-end of her locks, skidding to a halt and dragging her back to him. She whirled with a fist ready to punch him in the nose. She looked confused. No doubt she'd tried to call her tigress forth and failed. That wasn't unexpected—it took tremendous energy to shift and especially for the uninitiated and unprepared, the first shift could leave them wrecked and ravaged.

Working his hand up her hair so he had a better grip, he hauled her into his chest. “When I tell you to stop or return to me, you do it.”

She tried to bring her knee back up into his privates, but this time he anticipated her move.

“Nasty tempered she-cat. The next time you approach any of my dangly parts with anything other than loving intention, I'll spank you so hard you won't sit for a week.”

His cock throbbed against her belly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she snarled with a downward glance.

“Hey, the heart wants what the heart wants.” He needed to ratchet down the emotion running up and down the tether.

“Hot news flash for you, El Tigre—that isn't your damn heart.”

Without letting loose of her hair, his other hand slipped down and cupped her ass, holding her close as he explored and enjoyed the silky feel of her skin. Bodie was torn between letting nature take its course and proving to his mate here and now that he was the dominant partner by sinking his hard cock deep into her soft, wet heat.

The primal predator in him wanted to listen to his cock, throw her down on the ground and slam into her without any further ado. He wanted to pound into her over and over until she was screaming his name loud enough so everyone at *Force et Honneur* could hear her surrender to him. But she deserved better than that. She deserved a mate who could dominate her without resorting to brutal force.

No. He could make his point by hoisting her over his shoulder and taking her back up to the house like some kind of naked Viking berserker returning to the village with his prize. Oh, he meant to fuck her, he reassured his dick, but not until he had her in their bed where he could ravage her with all the windows open.

His mouth came down on hers for a brutal kiss that provoked at first another flurry of trying to get away, then resistance and rigidity, before she moaned and sagged into his body, allowing the kiss to morph from dominance to sensual exploration in the space of a heartbeat. When he lifted his head, she was staring back at him with a kind of wonder that he thought boded well.

Bodie's hand came up to smooth back her hair and brush some sand from her cheek. "You were incredible. Your tigress perceived me as a threat and moved to protect you even though you had no way to know how to call her forward."

"No," whispered Quinn, "she just said we were one and then charged me. There was some kind of storm-like phenomenon..."

"The shift."

She nodded. "Yes, the shift... and the next thing I knew we were flying off the balcony and when we landed, I realized I wasn't human any longer."

“Most people have trouble doing anything more complicated than walking during their first shift, but the grace and power you showed was truly a marvel.”

“I can tell you’re pissed—I mean, that wouldn’t be difficult to notice, but I can actually feel it.”

“That would be the bonding link. It, too, was initiated by my claiming bite.”

“The purring noise that I can feel, but can’t hear?”

“The link, or the tether. It allows us to reach out to our mates. It is especially strong between fated mates.”

“I had thought to throw you down on the ground and fuck you right here to prove my prowess...”

“Have you ever actually done that? Fucked someone on a beach? You get sand in all kinds of places that were never designed for sand.”

Bodie chuckled and continued speaking as if she hadn’t interrupted. “And then I planned to throw you over my shoulder and take you back to our bed to make you scream my name with need. I was, by the way, going to ensure all the windows were open so our people would know that you now understand your role.”

She shook her head uncertainly. “Bodie, please.”

He laid his finger on her lips. “But then the honorable part of me finally got a leash on the primitive part, and I decided that was no way to treat my mate if I was going to make you understand that this is about so much more than sex.”

“So, what happens now?”

“I suggest we get something to cover you up with...” he laughed as she looked down and realized she was stark naked... “No, clothing does not survive a shift. Precious metals and jewels do. There should be something aboard the sailboat.”

Bodie swung Quinn up in his arms and walked down to the sailboat, taking her aboard and down below, where he found a pair of sweatpants for him and a seriously sexy raspberry

maillot with a plunging neckline and crisscrossing straps in the back. The cut and cling of the material both covered up and showed her figure to its best advantage, and the color suited her alabaster skin and hair the color of a raven's wing.

He helped Quinn into the swimming suit before giving her nipple a tweak and then swinging her up in his arms. Instead of squirming or fighting him, she wrapped her arms around his strong neck as he carried her back up to the main deck and off the boat, and then made his way back to the house. Their people clapped and cheered as he entered the house, calling to them both as he carried her back to their bedroom, kicking the door closed behind them.

“Now my mate, I shall hear you yowl.”

CHAPTER 15



QUINN

*B*odie had been as good as his word, introducing her to the pain and pleasure of his barbed cock. Over and over, he had stroked deep, the barbs laying down and gently rippling along her inner walls as he pushed in, and then becoming erect and rigid as he drew back, scoring her most tender flesh.

As the small nubs rubbed along her inner channel, Quinn could feel not only the physical sensation, but something far more emotional and deeper begin to blossom. She could feel the tether, or bonding link, as he'd called it strengthening with each powerful thrust. He fucked her with a hard and primal rhythm that made the rest of the world recede until only the two of them remained. She quite enjoyed the sensation of the barbs when he drove forward, but the feeling of their rigidity as he pulled back, creating friction and furrows, was something else altogether. She wouldn't call it pleasurable, but she wouldn't call it painful, either.

He'd closed the French door and drawn the drapes, so they were cocooned within their room—within their own little world. She would have to tell him that she had something of an exhibitionist streak and really didn't care if anyone heard them.

Bodie's hands slipped under her, grasping the globes of her ass as he hammered her pussy harder and faster until at last, he thrust deep, holding her tight against him so the barbs seemed to dig in and take hold.

Their mutual release was explosive and overwhelming—better even than their first night. His cock pulsed as her pussy spasmed all along his length and he poured himself into her in what seemed like an unending torrent of cum. She felt, as well as heard, the seductive growl become a sensual purr as she shivered—her heart, mind, body, soul, and tigress recognizing his mastery over her, and she felt her will surrender to his.

Bodie collapsed on top of her, giving her his full weight while she stroked his back, as reluctant for him to withdraw as it seemed he was to do so. Finally, she felt the barbs release and he rolled from her body, pulling her close.

Before she could speak, he shushed her. “You have to be exhausted. Sleep. Let your body and spirit recover. I will be here when you wake.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I told you, but perhaps now with the bonding link you will believe me. You are my fated mate, and I have waited all my life for you.”

“You know,” she said, yawning and nestling closer to him, “you’re kind of a big romantic for a badass gangster.”

“Just how many gangsters have you slept with?” he teased, watching her eyes close.

“None. Well, none except you.”

The last of her words trailed off as sleep began to overtake her.

“Dream of me, my mate,” he whispered.

“I will,” she responded as her breath deepened and slowed, and she lost herself to the land of dreams.

Bodie eased himself from her embrace after indulging his desire to rest in her arms and falling asleep. When he woke, he checked the balcony for food. There was none and it was probably best if she had something fresh when she awoke. He called down to the kitchen. He knew her nap wouldn’t last more than another hour or so.

“Maurice, how about some of that pasta dish you make with andouille sausage and pepperjack cheese. And thank you for ensuring the food on the balcony didn’t go to waste.”

“It was my pleasure and I think the pasta is a good choice for when she wakes. How about I dish up some bourbon bread pudding as well?”

“Excellent. I’m not sure if we will be down for dinner, or not. It will depend on how Quinn is feeling.”

“May I share with the rest of the clan that she seems to be accepting of her new role?”

Bodie chuckled. “I don’t know that I’d go that far, but I don’t think she’s likely to bolt again, and even if she did, I do not believe she would do or say anything that would endanger our kind.”

He returned to their bed and spooned his front to her back, smiling as she laid her hand over his, seeming to accept his presence even in her sleep. Quinn was just beginning to stir when there was the lightest tap on the door.

“Please tell me that’s Maurice, and he’s brought food. I’m famished.”

“Then you should have eaten your lunch,” he said, kissing her gently.

Making sure she was covered up enough to be decent, he called to Maurice to enter.

“Yeah, well the whole tiger thing, you know. By the way? Threatening to fuck me in front of people from afar or carrying me somewhere naked—not as big a threat as you might think.”

He laughed, and Maurice grinned. “Good to know.”

Quinn sat up, letting the sheet puddle in her lap before Bodie pulled it up to cover her.

Quinn laughed and looked to Maurice. “I fear your alpha is a bit of a prude.”

“No, his alpha doesn’t share well with others, especially the thing he holds most dear.”

She grabbed his face with her hands and kissed him deeply. “You really do say the sweetest things. Has he always been this romantic, Maurice?”

“No, Milady. It seems he reserved all of that for you.”

“Whatever that is, it smells delicious. Can I ask you to bring me some? I’d come get it, but *El Tigre* here is kind of a possessive sonofabitch.”

“But of course, Milady. The alpha requested this just for you. It is one of his favorites. It is pasta in a mild pepper jack cheese sauce then mixed with andouille sausage. I also brought you some more tea sweetened with lemonade and for dessert a bourbon bread pudding I think you will like.”

“Well, it all smells divine, and I’m starving.” Maurice approached her cautiously, keeping his eye on Bodie who was having a hard time not growling at him. “Oh, stop. He adores you and would never make a play for me or do anything that might hurt you.”

“You don’t know that,” Bodie grumbled in a belligerent tone.

“Of course, I do. Anyone can tell that, and I’m a journalist, I have great instincts about people.”

He started to protest, pointing out that she’d had no idea of who or what he really was, and Quinn silenced him by stuffing a forkful of pasta in his mouth. She was really quite impossible, and he knew he was falling madly in love with her.

After Maurice left, he sat down on the bed with his back against the ornate iron headboard and his legs stretched out. Quinn climbed into his lap and began to share her pasta with him.

“Will I always be that exhausted after I shift?”

“No. In time it will be as natural as breathing and won’t cause you any undue stress. For now, though, take it easy. You surprised me with how quickly you transitioned and how quickly your tigress came forward to protect you.”

Quinn laughed. “Yeah, about that. I don’t think she likes you too much. She was pretty pissed about the whole turning me without talking to me first.”

“Your tigress talks to you?”

“Not talk like you and I are doing, but more along the lines of that whole bonding link thing. It’s like there’s another voice inside my head, telling me things. She is not at all happy with you.”

“You should know, turning a human, even if she is your fated mate, without her fully informed consent is frowned upon.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Because the thought of you not being one with me was unacceptable. When I saw you going through my things,” again he placed his finger on her lips, “I allowed my anger to override my head and used it as an excuse to release my more primitive side. Don’t worry. I want you to rest. I know you want a story, and I know you’re after Gutierrez, as am I. I have already told my beta, Navarro, that I do not believe you would find happiness in the traditional role of First Lady to the clan. We will find a way to make it work.”

“Bodie, I can’t explain what I’m feeling. It makes no sense to me. I just know that I am horribly conflicted about all of this. You’re a gangster. I’ve spent my entire career bringing guys like you and corrupt officials down. My credibility is going to be zip when people find out, and they’re going to find out. I should hate you for even getting me into this situation, but to be honest, I can’t bring myself to hate you. Like I said, I don’t know what I’m feeling, but I know it isn’t hate.”

She could hear the sadness in her voice and could feel the effect it had on him.

“And for now, I will settle for that. But I promise you, we will find a way. I will not live without you, Quinn, and I no longer believe you want to live without me. You may not believe that, but I do. Give it... us... me... time. We will find a way. I swear it.”

“Another one of those gangster vows?” she teased.

“It’s the only kind I know how to make,” he rejoined.



Gutierrez

On The Yacht Paloma

Just Outside the US

Territorial Waters

“So, *El Tigre* has taken a mate,” said Gutierrez with a feral gleam in his eye. “He and his compadres, Beckett and Hamilton, have cost me much. I think it only fair I visit some of that sorrow on him. Who is she?”

“A reporter for the New Orleans Gazette,” said his second-in-command as he stood observing his alpha. “Her name is Quinn Forrester.”

“Quinn Forrester?” he asked, looking at his second. “Isn’t she the one who reported on the corruption in the bidding process at Belle Chasse?”

“One and the same. She’s human, as far as anyone can tell. Why would *El Tigre* take a human mate who could expose us all?”

“Why indeed,” said Gutierrez. “The only explanation I can think of, given he is a tiger-shifter, is that he believes her to be his fated mate.”

“Would he risk everything based on some fantasy some of the more predatory shifters choose to believe?”

Gutierrez nodded as he brought the glass of Sangria to his lips. “I have seen that those who believe would risk everything. And that means that *El Tigre* finally has an Achilles heel, and one we can exploit for our own means and ends.”

The leader of the capybara-shifters rose from his seat and looked out the window towards the waters within the United States' territory, raising his glass. "You have exposed your weakness, my striped friend. It may well be the last thing you ever do."

CHAPTER 16



QUINN

They finished the pasta and sat quietly together, simply finding a peace she had never known with anyone before.

“I hate to break this up, but I’m not really one to just sit around doing nothing. Besides I have something to talk to you about,” she said, struggling to get off his lap. Struggling because Bodie had his arms wrapped around her and seemed disinclined to let her up. She tried again and failed.

“You will stay where I put you,” he said in a stern tone of voice.

Quinn wriggled around, trying to find a way to get loose, but he seemed to have her trapped without putting much work into it.

“You’re being an overbearing jerk, Lambeau,” she said, still squirming.

He said nothing, but Quinn could feel his amusement rumbling down the link to her.

“Be still,” he said quietly.

After one more attempt at breaking free from the tensile strength in his arms, she settled in his lap, and he released her, helping her off the bed and swinging his legs over the side to sit on the edge of the bed.

“If you were going to let me up anyway, why didn’t you just let go?”

“Because you need to learn to stay where I tell you. You have to learn to trust that I will always ensure your safety and happiness. There may come a day that trusting me is the only way for you to keep safe.”

“I’m used to taking care of myself, Lambeau.”

“That is no longer necessary. Before you berate me for my overbearing tendencies, you need to understand that they will not change. I was born and raised to be alpha of this clan and to lead our people. I have been taught all my life that alpha is a position of responsibility and duty to one’s clan, not some free-for-all that entitles you to do whatever you want. Mine is the final word with our people. You have not been raised that way and no doubt see it as restrictive and from your point of view, it may feel that way.”

“Just because something has always been done one way doesn’t mean it has to always be done that way.”

“Nor does it mean it shouldn’t be, and that new or different is necessarily better. I told you we will find a way, but we will do so together.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that is going to end up with me getting what I want.”

“No doubt,” he said. “Nor will it result in my getting everything I want, but for me, I can live with the rest if what we *compromise* on is important to you, and if that gives you greater happiness and peace of mind.”

She leaned her head to one side, trying to take in the meaning of his words and not just listening to the surface. “That’s important to you, isn’t it? My happiness, I mean.”

“Yes, but within reason. I need to be convinced that something is truly what you want and not just something you want because you want your own way. Then I need to be sure that whatever it is will not cause you harm and is in your best interests. And last, but not least, it must result in your happiness being by my side. Understand me, Quinn—you are my fated mate, and I will not let you go.”

“But you do see that I’m not cut out to just sit around here and be the pampered first lady of the clan. I get that you, and your...”

“Our,” he corrected.

She smiled and shook her head slightly. “Our people have been trying to show me how easy and nice life can be as your mate, and I have to admit, that has its allure. But I know myself well enough to know that I would never be happy not doing what I was trained to do and in my own little way helping people.”

“As I said, give it time and we will find a way—together.”

“Okay, then hear me out. I gather from what my boss and others say about you and what I’ve learned myself that the Gutierrez Cartel has developed some new drug that acts like ecstasy but is far more addictive and has some side effects that make those from Angel Dust look like a picnic.”

“That’s what we’ve heard, as well. Highly addictive but with a high incidence of overdose, violent outbursts, and psychosis. I will not allow it to enter this country through my territory here in New Orleans and then head up the Mississippi River.”

“The information I have is he tried to test the waters in Chicago and St. Louis and got his ass kicked.”

Bodie smiled. “You are well-informed.”

Deciding to trust the burgeoning feeling between them, she sank down on her knees before him. “I am, and I have a contact at the Port who’s been feeding me information.”

“How do you know it is legitimate?”

“Because he’s never steered me wrong. Every scrap of information I’ve ever received from him has been completely reliable.”

“Do you know why he’s been feeding you info?”

“I do. His father worked the docks as a longshoreman and took a stand against some mafia or cartel people. That’s the only thing he’s ever been a little bit vague about. His father

was killed for voicing opposition and trying to shed light on what was going on. So Alvaro—that's his name—left New Orleans, got a college education, and then worked his way up to his position on the docks." She laughed. "The first time we met, he told me he'd approached other 'bigger, more successful journalists,' and the cops. The reporters wouldn't give him the time of day and the cops just ignored him. He came to me because he knew about the supposed demise of my career in New York and figured I'd be desperate enough to work with him—he wasn't wrong."

"Alvaro Fuentes?" She nodded. "His father was a good man who stood up for the longshoremen and in opposition to those who were trying to horn in on my territory."

"If it was yours, why didn't they know better or, forgive me, why didn't you step in?"

"The clan was in a time of transition. It was about the time my father was dying, and I was too preoccupied with ensuring his last days were comfortable, stabilizing the clan, and keeping our business intact. It fell through the cracks, and I only became involved after Fuentes was dead. I should have done something to prevent it; I did ensure that those who actually pulled the trigger paid for it, and ran the others out—or at least I thought I had." He snorted. "The foolishness and arrogance of youth."

Quinn reached across to him and squeezed his hand. "You had a lot on your plate, and for what it's worth, both Alvaro and my editor speak highly of you."

"That's nice to hear. Neither of them has any reason to."

"But they do. Both describe you as honorable and basically a good man."

"Wise men, indeed. You should listen to their counsel."

"Neither said I should fall into bed with you and let you change me into a tiger-shifter."

"Pfft," he said with a wave of his hand, "what do they know?"

Quinn rocked back on her knees and regarded him. He wasn't at all what she expected, the whole tiger-shifter thing notwithstanding, but she did believe that at his core he was a man who took care of those he cared about and was most likely a formidable enemy.

"We could work on my story together and once I have what I need..."

"No."

"You can't just tell me no."

"I just did."

"I shared my source with you. I never reveal my sources. Even Levi doesn't know who Alvaro is. In fact, Levi doesn't even know that he has been my source on more than a few of my stories."

"Why would that matter?"

"Because many times when someone is your source on more than one story, they have an ulterior motive that has a nasty habit of coming up and biting you in the ass."

"If you know that, why keep going back to Alvaro?" he asked, seeming to take a genuine interest in what she was saying.

"Because he's never steered me wrong, and my gut tells me the thing that drives him is making things better—that somehow that goes a little way to making how his father died easier for him."

"Most likely."

Quinn rocked up onto her feet and grabbed one of his shirts from the closet, putting it on before she confronted him. Somehow, she didn't think doing so naked would be as effective.

"You need to let me place a couple of phone calls. I won't tell anyone where I am, and you can even be listening when I make them."

He leaned back and regarded her. “Why would I do that? Who is it you need to talk to?”

She thought about challenging his need to know and what sounded like a tinge of jealousy in his tone of voice. Then she thought about not answering him at all. Quinn quickly surmised that neither would do her a damn bit of good.

“Levi. I need to tell him I had a great time at the party last night and that I’m going down a rabbit hole in terms of a story, so not to expect me in the office for a few days. And I need to call Alvaro.”

“Why not just email him again?”

“Our pattern has always been an email, two phone calls, another email and then a text. If I break the pattern, he’ll know something is up and will most likely presume either they’re onto us or they have me. I promise you, I’m not doing anything more than trying to pursue my story.”

“You think Alvaro will meet you here?”

“I know he sees you as a benevolent force, but I’m not sure he’d want to meet with you—especially about this.”

“Are you looking more fondly on me?”

“The jury is still out.”

“Let me guess, but it would put another check in the ‘good guy’ column if I allowed these phone calls.”

“Two checks—one for each phone call. Seriously, Bodie, what would it hurt?”

“The phone call to your boss is fine, but what is it you and Alvaro are working on?”

“The same thing you are—taking down Gutierrez.”

“And now we come to the reason Alvaro has been grooming you.”

“Grooming me?”

Bodie nodded. “All the other stories have been to legitimize this one, to lure you into thinking he was some kind

of crusader for justice. I suppose in his own mind, he's just that—and perhaps he is.”

“I don't understand.”

“Of course, you don't. Did you ever check with any of the other reporters he tried to talk to?”

“I'm kind of *persona non grata* in most news stations and at other papers. They treat me a bit like a leper.”

“I very much doubt Alvaro contacted anyone else. I'll bet he waited until you were establishing yourself at the Gazette, and then he came to you.”

“Why me? His information has been gold.”

“Because you weren't here when his father was murdered. You wouldn't know enough to question his motivation.”

“You make it sound like he's setting me up.”

“He is, but not in the same way as you were set up in New York.”

“I had no way of knowing about New York. I mean, maybe I should have done more to verify the information, but the documents looked so real.”

“You were a lot younger, a lot greener. It looked like the story was legit and, in all honesty, it might have been, but you got played. I'm sure Alvaro thought he could do the same. The difference is, as you say, Alvaro's information up until now has been solid.”

“You don't know that this information isn't, as well,” she said getting to her feet and beginning to pace.

“True, and it could be. I'm simply suggesting you don't accept it at face value based on your history. Alvaro has shown he is willing to play the long game. His father was murdered when he was a kid and he does everything in his power—the right education, the right jobs—to put himself exactly where he needs to be to strike at those he holds responsible for his father's death.”

“Granted, I don’t have all the information yet, but you don’t know that what I have isn’t just as solid.”

“That’s true enough. And it may well be. In fact, it might even be more bulletproof than anything else. What I do know is something I very much doubt Alvaro has told you—the one piece of info that would make you question him.”

“And what information is that?” she asked, beginning to fear that what lurked in the dim recesses of her mind, might well be what Bodie was about to tell her.

“Care to speculate which cartel and who it was who ordered the death of Alvaro’s father?”

Quinn paced the room and Bodie let her do so, keeping watch but not trying to stop her. In the corner of the room by the French doors, she sank down, her eyes never leaving his.

“Riccardo Gutierrez,” she whispered.

Bodie nodded.

CHAPTER 17



QUINN

Quinn felt as though she'd been punched in the gut. She'd been used again. This one hadn't blown up in her face, and she had taken nothing at face value. Bodie crossed the room without her hearing him and squatted down beside her.

She looked up at him, damning the tears that filled her eyes. "He lied to me," she whispered.

"No, *chère*. He just didn't tell you everything."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"No, it doesn't," he said as he scooped her up in his arms and strode out to the balcony, sitting down and holding her in his lap. "I agree that he should have told you, but I understand why he didn't. It's the same reason he didn't approach the others. He knew his name would taint anything he had to say. Was he using you? Yes, but you have to admit that with his help you have been able to put a stop to more than one dirty deal and hold those responsible accountable. You yourself have said, his information was the jumping off part for each story."

She nodded, finding great comfort in just being held by Bodie. "Yes, and I used him to verify information I got that didn't come from him and vice versa. The problem is, if I go after Gutierrez, and it comes out that the son of one of his victims was my primary source, then I'm screwed, and Gutierrez might slip out from any kind of indictment."

"But if he does that, he is finished in the Gulf. He'll be too hot for anyone to want to deal with, and his own people or

those in other cartels may well end him for you and Alvaro.”

“My guess is that Alvaro doesn’t want Gutierrez dead; he wants to see him brought to justice for his father’s death.”

“Justice and revenge are often flip sides of the same coin. I can tell you for a fact, while justice may be sweet, revenge is often a whole lot easier to get.”

“That’s pretty jaded for a romantic gangster such as yourself,” she teased.

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t make it any less true. I’m not saying you can’t trust Alvaro or his information—after all, everything in the past has been legit. The problem becomes if you were to try to take on Gutierrez, he may get wind of it and come after you.”

“Isn’t that where you come in?” she quipped.

Nipping her ear he said, “True, but it doesn’t mean I will allow you to put yourself at risk. But the information Alvaro has might make it possible for me to step in and take the bastard down.”

“You mean kill him.”

“Not necessarily. At the very least I can run him out of New Orleans and make sure he stays there. But I will tell you this, if he tries to harm you in any way, I will end him. There will be no mercy. He will die.”

“Okay, this is really sick, but I find that intoxicating and arousing.”

Bodie laughed. “And so, my mate’s predatory nature comes to the fore.” He sobered for a moment. “You do realize that no one can know about your tigress. But saying that, if you are in grave jeopardy, you call for her.”

“How does that work? Last time she just came and went as she pleased. I was a little worried about that happening when I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Both situations were extreme and she acted to protect you. When she came forward, she believed me to be a threat.

When she receded, it was because she recognized me as your mate and knew she would not win a battle with me.”

“Of course we would win.”

“You would not.”

“Would, too,” she said, marveling at the fact that he wasn’t picking up on the one thing she now knew to be absolutely true.

“I am bigger and stronger than you. You might be a tad bit faster, but not by that much. I have been a tiger-shifter my entire life. This afternoon you shifted for the first time and were not in control of that.”

“Yes, but I have one great advantage over you that others do not.”

“What might that be?” he asked, sounding like he was becoming irritated with her.

“You would never hurt me. Never. You might tattoo your displeasure all over my ass or fuck me with less than gentle means, but you would never, ever truly hurt me.”

“You are sure of that?”

“More sure of that than anything else in my life.”

“Your point is well taken, and you are correct, but never forget in tiger society, men are dominant, and we have no trouble keeping our tigresses in line with the help of a hand or belt applied to a shapely backside.”

“Again, I’m not sure that’s the threat you think it is,” she laughed.

“You laugh all you want, my mate, but I would bet serious money on the fact that you will come to know the difference between a spanking done for fun or erotic reasons and one that is meant to express my anger at something you’ve done and to correct the behavior so I don’t have to do it again.”

“That’s the whole ‘stay where I put you’ thing, isn’t it?”

It was Bodie’s turn to smile. “It is, indeed.”

“This thing with Alvaro is important to me and not just me, but the paper. The paper is bleeding red ink, and Levi needs a sensational story to boost subscriptions, as well as attract more advertisers. This story might not win a Pulitzer, but there are other prestigious awards, and if I can write it right, and help bring down the cartel and stop Gutierrez’s new drug from entering the U.S., then it might be considered for the big P.”

“Is that important to you?”

“It’s a distant fourth to stopping Gutierrez, helping Alvaro see justice done for his father’s death, and saving the Gazette. That would be a nice symmetry for me—Levi saved me. He gave me a job when no one else would even talk to me. I’d like to save his paper, if I can.”

“Those are lofty goals for noble reasons.”

“Will you help me accomplish them?”

“To a degree. I will not see you put in harm’s way.”

“We can work together...”

“Maybe, but maybe not. I want you here at Force et Honneur. If for some reason you need to leave, you will either be with me or a security detail.”

“I can’t exactly sneak around with a bunch of guys with guns following me.”

“Those who would try to take you from me will have guns, as well. Do you have your next meeting with Alvaro set up?”

“No, that’s what the second phone call is about, remember?”

Bodie nodded. “I do.”

“Will you let me make those calls?”

“Yes, but I want them on speaker, and you will remain with me.”

“Thank you,” she said, kissing him and enjoying the silken feel of his lips on hers.

“No objections?”

“None. I already offered to do it that way. I know what I’m going to do, and more importantly, I know what I’m not going to do. I’m not going to do anything that jeopardizes you or your—I mean our—people.”

“Then make your calls. Would you prefer to join the rest of the clan for dinner or dine upstairs by ourselves?”

“Would you mind terribly if at least I stayed up here? I don’t think I’m quite ready to face everyone, and I’m really comfy in your shirt and nothing else.”

“Have I mentioned to you how beautiful and sexy you are in my shirt?”

“No, but I’m glad you don’t mind.” She glanced at the clock on the wall—a beautiful piece done in filigree iron with a French flair and pendulum that hung below in an ornate cage and lazily tick-toked in a rhythm that seemed to reflect the lapping of the Gulf of Mexico along the shores.

Bodie let her up and followed her back inside, reaching for the vintage internal phone to let Maurice know they would be dining alone in their rooms. After he was done, he handed Quinn her cell phone, which had been in his pocket. She put it on speaker and used it to call Alvaro.

“Alvaro? It’s Quinn.”

“Quinn, are we still going to meet? I hope you’re not getting cold feet.”

“That’s the last thing that’s going to happen. The Sassafras Tea? Say tomorrow at ten?”

Ten o’clock in the morning on a Sunday was usually a good time to meet. As much as New Orleans was known as a party town, the vast majority of its citizens—more than seventy-five percent—attended church, which meant for those who didn’t, coffee houses and restaurants were relatively easy to get into.

“I’ll look forward to it. Quinn?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful. Things are heating up down at the docks, and the rumor is Gutierrez may either be here now, or he is close. I will understand...”

“No way, Alvaro. We’re going to make him pay for what he did to your father.”

“My father? How did you know?”

“I’m a reporter, Alvaro. It’s my job to know,” she said, covering her slip.

“I... I should have told you.”

“Yes, you should have, but I understand why you didn’t.”

Quinn ended the call and then turned to Bodie. “One down; one to go.”

She dialed the Gazette’s office, hoping to catch Levi still at his desk. The man was an even more notorious workaholic than she was.

“Levi Bennett,” he answered.

“Levi, it’s Quinn.”

“How did Cinderella like the ball?”

“I had a great time. Thank you. I’m working on my story and should have it to you on time.”

“Are you all right? Are you free to talk?”

“I am. Why do you ask?”

“You were seen leaving the party with Bodie Lambeau,” said Levi, evenly.

“I wondered if someone might have seen us. No matter; I’m here with him now. We have a mutual goal, and he has offered to work with me on my story. He’ll be deep cover background.”

“Is he with you now?” growled Levi.

“He is,” Quinn answered.

“Let me talk to him... privately.”

Quinn handed him the phone and Bodie left her to step out onto the balcony, closing the door behind him.



Bodie

“You wanted to speak to me? I assure you Quinn is safe with me, and I am not ready to tell her about playing her fairy godfather.”

“I’m still not sure how comfortable with that I am.”

“You had no choice, she is not hurt and there is nothing you can do about it now, except upset her and that I will not allow.”

“If I find out your intentions are less honorable than you convinced me they were, or you’ve hurt her in any way...”

Bodie laughed and turned to see Quinn regarding him with curiosity. “Do you really think you could take me in a fight?”

“Oh, hell no, but I could damn sure hire people who could.”

That made Bodie laugh even louder. “I hear you, old man. I promise you; she is safe in my care.”

CHAPTER 18



QUINN

*B*odie was chuckling as he re-entered the room. It was astounding how much that single gesture or one of his grins could change the shape of his face. Normally it was all harsh angles, and you could easily guess at his iron will, but when he smiled or laughed, the lines softened and the man he might have been had he not been born to be alpha of his clan was revealed.

The weird thing was, she was beginning to fall in love with them both.

Bodie treated her to a wonderfully romantic evening, including a horse-drawn carriage ride around the estate under a starlit sky where the moon sailed through the clouds like the ghostly apparition of one of Jean Lafitte's pirate ships.

It was easy to forget that he was a gangster; easier still to forget he was a tiger-shifter, and now, so was she. Quinn was surprised at how easily she had accepted there were such things in the world living in plain sight with humans. It was, she reminded herself, difficult to discount not only what she had seen with her own eyes but experienced for herself. It was funny, if she stilled her mind and closed her eyes, she could see her tigress curled up by a large fire, grooming herself but ever watchful and attentive to Quinn's needs.

"She's still not happy with you," she said as they stood on the balcony watching the waves dance with the shoreline.

He leaned down and nipped her shoulder. "She'll get over it. Like her mistress, she revels in our lovemaking."

Quinn laughed. “I don’t know that she sees that as negating the whole ‘you turned me without my consent.’”

He stilled. All the warm purring and affection she felt coming down the link suddenly stopped. “What about you, Quinn? Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Ask you? Because I didn’t know how you would react to even knowing our kind existed, and I sure as hell wasn’t willing to risk you saying no. What would you have said?”

“That’s the funny thing. I don’t really know. I think believing it would have been difficult unless you shifted. It would have been kind of difficult to refute it when there was a tiger staring back at me. And even when we were on the steamboat, I knew my life was about to change irrevocably, but I couldn’t have imagined the enormity of that change.”

“And now that you know?”

“Before I answer you, tell me, Bodie—what is it you feel? Sometimes I feel like there’s something you’re holding back—something you don’t allow to flow down the tether.”

“You are a very intelligent and empathic mate. I do hold something back, but I haven’t wanted to add to your distress.”

“Tell me,” she urged.

“I love you, Quinn. I know it’s too early for you to feel the same, which is why I didn’t let it show. But I’ve always known my fated mate would be the love of my life, and I grew up knowing you were out there, and that I just had to find you.”

“I don’t know that I can say that with the same certainty you did, but I do know I have strong feelings for you—feelings that I’ve never had for anyone. Is it love? It scares me to put that name on it, but I know the fear of what it is hasn’t prevented those feelings from taking root and growing. I know I would regret not having known you, and I’m not at all sure I want to find out if I could live without you. I’m sorry if that isn’t what you want to hear.”

“It’s honest, and that’s really more than I could hope for at this point. It is also very close to a declaration, and you will find your mate can be a patient man.”

She turned so that she was between Bodie and the railing. “Except when going all primal predator on me and claiming me without my consent.”

“You are never going to let me forget that, are you?”

“Never,” she said, turning back around to stare out into the distance. He wrapped his arms around her.

He nuzzled her hair. “Curiously, I like hearing you say ‘never’ as if you’re planning to be here with me for a long, long time.”

She leaned back into him, sighing contentedly. “I think that’s a fairly safe assumption.”

“At the risk of you and your tigress contemplating all the ways you can kill me in my sleep, you should know I will be going with you to meet Alvaro.”

“He’ll bolt if he sees you—”

“No, he won’t. I won’t let him. I will make sure he understands that I am now a part of your life and will be keeping you safe.”

“Well, I can tell him that, and I think I can reassure him that we can trust you.”

“And here comes the part where you try to ensure I will never have the ability to father children. You won’t be going. You will be staying here.”

She whirled around and kicked him in the shins. “I’m thinking higher until I decide if I’m going to let you father my children.” She kicked him again. The kicks weren’t overly effective as he was wearing jeans and her feet were bare. “This is my story, and you cannot just block me from being involved.”

“Do not kick me again,” he growled low. “I will keep you safe regardless of what you think about it. You will mind me, Quinn, I will make Alvaro understand, and I will bring you the

information. If you like, I will take him a burner phone which should help keep things quiet.”

“He knows you. He knows you are *El Tigre*. He thinks you’re part of the problem.”

“You don’t know that he thinks that. There are many in this city who understand that a lot of what I do keeps them safe.”

“Perhaps, but it’s a kind of lesser of two evils.”

“That might be true, but they also accept that I am, for the most part, to those who are not breaking the law, a benevolent force for good in the Crescent City.”

“You truly are delusional. I’ve fallen in love with a crazy man. You’re a gangster...” Bodie was grinning from ear-to-ear. “What?” she snapped.

“You said you love me.”

“No, I said I’d fallen in love with a crazy man. It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes, it is, and you know it.”

“Fine. I love you, but that is not the point of this discussion.”

“It’s all the point I need,” he said, sweeping her up and carrying her back to their bed.

As he laid her on the bed, he ripped open the shirt she was wearing and followed her down.

“I am not through arguing with you,” she snarled.

“You are if I can keep your mouth busy doing something else. I love you, Quinn, and you love me. You know we are fated to be together, and I will keep you safe.”

“No. And you are not going to overwhelm me with lust and longing so that all I want to do is feel you inside me.” She felt a silken cord slip around her wrists. “What are you doing?” she said as he tied her wrists above her head to the intricate wrought iron of the headboard.

“Ensuring that I get a decent night’s sleep,” he said as he shucked out of his clothes. “I’m going to fuck you long and hard at least a couple of times tonight and then we’re going to sleep. In the morning, I’ll come up with a better way to ensure you stay where I put you, and then I’ll meet with Alvaro. I am not about to let you bedevil our men. I need to know you are safe so I can figure out the best way to end this.”

She watched his face as he stared down at her. This wasn’t about him being a gangster, and it wasn’t about his being the dominant partner in their relationship. This was about an alpha male protecting his mate. She smiled up at him.

“Can we just not argue anymore tonight?” he said in a weary voice. “Can we just take this one step at a time?”

Knowing she really didn’t have a choice at the moment, she nodded. “Yes, Bodie. Untie me and we can make love.”

He chuckled, the sound skipping over her skin like sunshine on a beautiful, breezy day. “No, I think I’ll sleep better if you’re tied up.”

“You are one fucked up bastard.”

“I know, but I’m one fucked up bastard who has claimed you as his mate.”

He got into bed beside her, his cock already erect, and began to make love to her until she was yowling and screaming his name. He was an infuriating man, but he still had a big dick and still knew how to use it. When he was done, he lay beside her, resting his head on her tits and snuggling in for the night.

She hadn’t meant to tell him; hadn’t even really admitted it to herself, but there it was. He was a crazy, delusional, tiger-shifting gangster, and she loved him. She waited for panic to filter in, but it didn’t. All she could feel was the love he had for her rolling down the link. She opened herself to him and let all she felt for him roll back along the tether to surround and reassure him.

Quinn awoke slowly, stiff and a bit sore. Sometime after the last time he’d made love to her, he must have untied her

because her hands were free. She was glad. Quinn hated to think how stiff her shoulders would have been if he hadn't. She turned in his arms and laid her head on his chest, opening her eyes slowly to let them adjust to the sunlight that streamed through the French doors.

Bodie pulled her close, drawing her against his side and letting his hand stroke her back before he caressed her backside.

"You don't fight fair," she said with an oddly resigned tone.

"Not always, but I do fight to win. In this case, winning means you stay here where I can keep you safe."

"What makes you think I won't just steal one of your cars and drive myself to the meeting place? It would be so much easier and safer if you just let me come along."

"I have no doubt in my mind that you would try. I also know I can't trust that you will mind Navarro," he said as cold steel wrapped around her wrist and locked with a distinctive click.

"You sonofabitch," she snarled.

"So you say," as he clicked the other handcuff to the headboard. There was a length of chain between the two cuffs, long enough that she was pretty sure would reach to the bath.

He trailed kisses down her body. "I hate that I have to leave before getting to fuck you this morning, but you know what they say, business before pleasure. I want to be there before Alvaro and have our people in place."

"He's not going to talk to you," she said, sitting up as he left their bed.

"I wasn't planning on giving him a choice. One way or another, Alvaro will tell me what he knows, and I will pass on the information to you." He pulled on his clothes, sitting down on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. He leaned over to kiss her. "Try not to be too much of a pain in the ass while I'm gone. Make sure you get covered up before Maurice brings you something to eat."

“Bodie, please. You can’t cut me out.”

“I am not cutting you out; I am keeping you safe.” He stood and headed to the door while she heaved pillows at him, only one of them hitting him in the back of the head. He turned and tossed it back. “I love you.”

The door closed behind him, and she screamed in sheer frustration, but there was no sound from outside their room. She pulled at both handcuffs, but they were secure, as was the bed. She needed something to pop the lock on the handcuffs—a paperclip. There were paperclips in the desk, and the desk was between her and the bath. She knew she didn’t have long.

Quinn scrambled out of the bed and rifled through the desk until she found a paperclip. She unbent it so that she could pick the simple lock on the handcuffs. She only released the one from her wrist before stealing into the closet, grateful to find her clothes and shoes, and taking the handcuff and her clothing into the bath and shutting the door.

This way if anyone looked in, they would just think she was making use of the facilities. Once inside the bath, she locked the door before pulling on her clothes and shoes and then opening the bath window. She did so carefully as it was opaque, and she needed to see her options.

They weren’t good. The balcony didn’t reach that far and there was no trellis or drainpipe to climb down. *What self-respecting mansion didn’t have some way for the plucky heroine to save herself from the evil gangster?*

Okay, he wasn’t evil, she wasn’t plucky, and she didn’t really want to escape, but all of that was beside the point. She was not going to sit on the sidelines and crochet doilies while Bodie went off to fight the bad guys and have all the fun.

She would show her mate from the get-go that she was no tame tabby cat to be fucked, petted, and left to curl up on the bed. She was a tigress, and she was damned if she was going to be left out.

CHAPTER 19



This was so not fair. She'd managed to free herself from Bodie's handcuffs and even get herself dressed and the window opened. The problem was that their bedroom was on the second floor, and she could see no way down.

Maybe she could tie the sheets together? She hadn't seen a linen closet, and one set of sheets would not reach the ground. She could shift into her tigress and jump from the balcony. The problem there was that she would be easily spotted, and she had no doubt in her mind that Bodie's men had been told to stop her. She could try to sneak out through the main house. Again, she would be spotted and stopped. She stomped her foot. There had to be some way for her to get out of the house and off the estate.

Therein lay another problem. She had to find some kind of transportation. She had a vague idea of where they were in relation to New Orleans, but her destination was on the outside of the city at a little coffee house tucked away on the edge of a swamp. Quinn had seen the garage for the estate's vehicles when Bodie had taken her for a carriage ride. The keys, according to him, were hung up on a peg board with the car to which they were matched clearly identified.

Quinn paced back and forth, coming up with and discarding ideas in rapid succession. She went back into the main room, dragging the handcuff and connecting length of chain with her like one of Marley's ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*. She wanted to be able to put it around her wrist in case Maurice came with her breakfast. Sitting down at the desk, she

opened the laptop and began to search the net—for what, she had yet to determine.

There was a knock on the door. “Come in,” she called, placing the handcuff around her wrist.

“I brought your breakfast,” said Maurice in a cheery voice.

“Can you put it over by the reading chair?”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to set it up on the desk?”

“Not right now. Don’t worry; I am not Googling how to murder my mate.”

“Of course, you aren’t, but it does my old heart good to hear you refer to the alpha as your mate.”

“According to him, I’m stuck with the sonofabitch. We’re going to have such a row when he gets back.”

“He only wishes to keep you safe.”

“I am not some poor wee woman that needs his protection. I’ve been taking care of myself quite well for quite some time. But I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it.”

“If you need anything, just call down to the kitchen and we’ll see that you get it.”

“Thanks, Maurice,” she said over her shoulder, dismissing him.

Once he left, she clicked back on the tab that had the info she needed. A history of *Force et Honneur*. The grand old house had quite a history. It was one of the first great plantations of New Orleans. She began studying the sketches of the rooms and blueprints for the house. There it was, a wall that looked wonky in the bedroom. It was at the back of the closet. Most of these old homes had a way out in case people needed to escape.

Quinn went into the closet and began to feel her way along the built-in organizational system. Feeling along the underside of all the shelving, she was about to give up when she thought to check the drawers. There was nothing in the first bank, but in the middle drawer of the second bank, she felt it and almost

howled with glee when she pressed it, heard a click, and the entire unit cracked open.

She left the closet, closing the door behind her, and then went back into the bath, removing the handcuff that she hadn't locked when Maurice had brought her breakfast. She left the handcuff attached to the drawer pull of the vanity and then used the door between the bath and the closet to access it. She searched the closet until she found a flashlight. Hot damn! She was in business.

Slipping into the tunnel, she pulled the closet unit back into place, switched on the flashlight and made her way onto the landing outside the opening and then down the stairs and into the main tunnel, hoping there weren't a lot of twists and turns. Quinn closed her eyes to get her bearings and then headed in the direction she hoped would bring her up close to, if not inside, the garage.

The tunnel did have intersections where other tunnels connected with it, but she was fairly sure the main passage would take her to the garage. It finally dead ended. She could go left or right but could no longer go straight ahead. To the left, she thought she detected the faint odor of the sea. A boat might be faster, but she was sure Bodie would have people patrolling the beach. Right it was.

After a few minutes she found herself confronting a wall. Shining the flashlight over the surface, she looked for some kind of doorway and almost missed it. She unlatched the door and peeked to see what was on the other side, having a hard time containing her excitement. Her suppositions had been correct, and she had reached the garage.

She located the keys to one of the Jeeps and then turned to look at all of the vehicles that would be in hot pursuit. She had to disable them, but how? Quinn knew that most newer cars no longer had distributor caps, which really wasn't important as she had no idea what they even looked like. She could open all the hoods and jerk out a bunch of the wiring, but there was no way to know if it was the right wiring. Besides that would take a long time.

There was a small gym bag sitting on the table beneath the pegboard that held all the keys. Grinning, Quinn began pulling keys off and stuffing them into the gym bag. She was sure they had second sets of keys to everything, but that would take them time, and hopefully she would get away before then. When she was done, she hefted the gym bag off the table, which was surprisingly heavier than she had thought. Slinging the gym bag into the back of the vehicle, Quinn went around and got into the Jeep, adjusting the seat and mirrors to accommodate her.

God, she loved organized people. Clipped to the driver's side visor was a remote with buttons labeled *garage* and *gate*. Damn! She was in business. Starting up the Jeep, she hit the remote for the door and floored the Jeep, just racing under the door before it was completely raised. She could hear the hue and cry almost immediately and barreled down the drive toward the gates, which weren't even closed. Before the guard posted at the entrance to the estate could react, Quinn sped through them, making a fishtailed turn onto the main road with the tires screeching as she did so.

Take that, El Tigre!

She flew down the backroads that led away from *Force et Honneur* and realized she was closer to the meeting place than she'd thought. Quinn glanced at the dashboard clock and grinned. She just might make this meeting on time, but without enough time to give Bodie much of a chance to do anything about it.

Quinn made good time and arrived at the Sassafras Tea a few minutes before the designated meeting. She drove to the back of the coffeehouse and parked in her usual spot. She hadn't seen Bodie, or anyone else, for that matter. Alvaro's electric car was parked out front. Quinn eased out of the Jeep and made her way to the side entrance, staying close to the wall so she could keep an eye out for Bodie or any of his men. Alvaro was sitting at their usual table, with his back to her position.

The place usually wasn't busy on a Sunday morning, but Quinn had never seen it so empty. They must have had a

minimal crew on, as she didn't see their normal waitress bustling around. She slid with her back to the wall, trying to stay in the shadows and stay inconspicuous.

“Alvaro,” she hissed. He didn't respond, didn't even look around. “Alvaro,” she said a little louder.

What the hell was wrong with him? And where the fuck was everybody?

“Al-va-ro,” she called quietly, pronouncing each syllable of his name.

Still nothing. Glancing around, she made her way to his table and touched his shoulder. His body slumped forward. She raced around to find Alvaro's face firmly planted in his broiled grapefruit. She felt for his pulse, and feeling none, drew her fingers back and saw they were coated in blood.

Shit! It was then that she saw the happy, sunny waitress who had been so excited about getting into the art history school at New Orleans' famed Tulane University, splayed against the back wall by the door into the kitchen. She'd been shot, the force of it slamming her into the wall, splattering her blood behind her. Quinn was sure that no one else was alive, but she had to find Bodie.

She turned back to Alvaro, searching for his cell phone. She found it in his jacket pocket and pulled it out. As she started to dial 9-1-1 a hard muscled arm that ended in brown, aged male fingers reached over her to pluck the cell phone from her hand, ending the call before the dispatcher could answer, and then pulled the battery and SIM card out of the phone before crushing it under his foot.

Quinn had no idea where Bodie was, but she could feel his calm presence rolling down the tether. Not knowing what was happening, she turned to face the man she knew to be the head of the Gutierrez Cartel.

“Riccardo Gutierrez, I presume?”

He smiled—a single gold tooth just left of center glinting in the bright sunshine. “So, you know who I am.”

“I’m a crime reporter. I make it my business to know the face of every scum bag who thinks he can come into my country and sell his newest version of misery and death.”

Gutierrez backhanded her cheek so that she stumbled back into Alvaro’s body, and he fell off the chair and onto the ground. She stifled a startled cry.

“Your mate has yet to teach you to respect your betters,” snarled Gutierrez.

“Mate? Did you just call me *El Tigre’s* mate?”

“I did. I can smell that he has bred you, but not this morning. Perhaps he grows tired of you already. And why not? Human females are only good for one thing, but one cunt is the same as another.”

She sniffed the air, grimacing as she did so. There was something different to Gutierrez’s scent. Quinn was pretty sure he wasn’t human, but he didn’t smell like the tiger-shifters, either.

“So...” she drawled, edging toward the raised bed boxwoods that surrounded the courtyard at the restaurant, “... you aren’t human, but I don’t think you have the *cojones* to be a tiger-shifter.”

Gutierrez lashed out and connected with her cheek again.

“I would kill myself if I had to be one of them. And you little one, has he raked your cunt with his barbs, yet? You do know it ruins your pussy for any other man to enjoy, but perhaps before I kill you, my men would like to have a little fun with you.”

“If not a tiger, then what—a snake?”

He drew himself up, straight and proud. “I am capybara.”

Quinn laughed; she couldn’t help herself. “Capybara? You mean those oversized gophers from South America? Those things are so goofy-looking. That must be why you had to develop a drug that makes people wildly aroused and incapable of good judgment. God knows it would be the only way you and your little rodent buddies could get laid.”

“Down,” Bodie shouted. “Get down, Quinn.”

The yell became a growl as Bodie’s large body leapt from where he had been hiding, landing on and flattening one of Gutierrez’s men. They all seemed to start squealing, as Bodie and his men came from every direction, attacking Gutierrez. Quinn got down on the ground and was so busy crawling away, trying to get behind the planter boxes that she lost track of Gutierrez.

Bodie pounced on her, covering her with his body as the bullets started to fly. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled them out of the fray.

“You stay here. Do you hear me?” he growled.

She could do nothing more than nod and watch him charge back into the fray. In a few moments there was an eerie silence.

Quinn could see Bodie checking the bodies. “Gutierrez? Do we have Gutierrez?”

CHAPTER 20



BODIE

*B*odie's heart had stopped when Quinn arrived and approached Alvaro's corpse. They'd been too late to save him, but Bodie had vowed one way, or another, Gutierrez would pay. At one point, he might have settled for just sending him back to South America with his tail between his legs—if capybara had tails. Now the only way Gutierrez would get back to South America was in a body bag.

He'd been forced to watch while Quinn baited Gutierrez all while maneuvering herself into a position where she could dive behind the planter boxes. Once again, he was impressed by both her cunning and tenacity. The ensuing fight had been utter chaos—men shifting between their human selves and their altered egos and using teeth, claws, guns and knives to try to survive. In the end, those with him had suffered only minor injuries while Gutierrez's men had been devastated. Bodie wondered at the number of bodies. He and his men had been outnumbered by at least two to one.

Once he'd ensured Quinn was out of harm's way, Bodie had rejoined his men to finish them off—or so he'd thought until he'd discovered that somehow, Gutierrez had managed to get away. Damn it. He would deal with Gutierrez as soon as he had dealt with his mate.

He walked back to where she was crouched behind the planter boxes. He extended his hand to her to steady her and help her stand.

“You're really pissed,” she said, staring at his face.

“That, my mate, may be the understatement of the year. I told you to stay at the estate.”

“He was *my* contact, and this is *my* story.”

“You are *my* mate, and you will obey me where matters of your safety are concerned.”

Whatever else might have been said was lost in the sound of blaring sirens heading their way. Not only was he going to have to have a reason for the number of dead bodies, but he couldn't be sure just how much he was going to have to explain away.

Bodie pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to will away the sight of Quinn diving for cover when all hell broke loose. She shouldn't have been there at all. She had disobeyed him, and yet when he'd told her to get down, she had done so. She was safe, and he tried to focus on that.

“I want you to go with Donato. He'll take you back to the estate.”

“I want to stay with you.”

He reached up to touch her cheek. It was hard to believe that this time last week he hadn't known who she was, and now she meant everything to him.

“I know, *chère*, but I want you out of the line of fire—literally and figuratively. It will do no good for you to get mixed up in this, especially if another reporter picks up on the fact that you were involved with this or with me. Go with Donato. He will keep you safe.” He gestured to Donato. “Take her home. Keep her safe. I am entrusting her to your care.

“Bodie...” she started.

“Now, *chère*. You have been disobedient enough for one day. I expect you to be at home when I return. Is that understood?”

“Shall I lock her in her room and post guards to ensure she obeys you?” asked Donato, who was more muscle than brain, but loyal to the core and a fierce warrior. Anyone wanting to hurt Quinn would have to go through Donato.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. She’s going to behave herself, aren’t you?” he asked pointedly.

A small, sweet smile curled her lips. “I’ll try. It didn’t look like any of our people were hurt.”

Her use of the plural possessive made him return the smile. “A few minor nicks and scratches but nothing serious. I want you gone before the cops get here.”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

“Because I need to get this sorted out with the cops. It’s part of my job as alpha.”

“Then why send me home?”

He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “Because protecting you is not only part of the job as alpha, but it is a primary tenet of being your mate.”

Bodie turned her toward Donato and gave her backside a swat that conveyed both affection and that he expected her to follow his command.

“I’ll get her out of here, alpha. I’ll take her the back way. I don’t think they had anyone else with them that’s still breathing—with the exception of Gutierrez and his bodyguard,” said Donato.

“Keep a sharp eye out for a tail,” instructed Bodie. “Go on, now.”

After putting Quinn in the Jeep, Donato got behind the wheel and sped off in the opposite direction from which the police were coming. There was little doubt in his mind that Gutierrez had beaten a hasty retreat back to the city. Bodie would need to ensure that he and his men found Gutierrez before the cops did.

Watching her go, he felt a sense of calm coming from her down the tether. There was something reassuring in how well she had handled the battle and its outcome. She hadn’t cried or screamed or fallen apart. She had accepted that he and his men would handle it and that she was safe within his care.

As he watched the Jeep turn down the road that would keep the cops from seeing them, several cop cars showed up, and uniformed officers spilled out with their guns drawn.

“Take it easy, boys,” said Dwayne Thibodeaux, stepping out of an unmarked sedan. He stepped toward Bodie with his hand extended. “Bodie, what brings you to a murder scene in my parish?”

“I don’t suppose you’d buy we were out for a drive and stopped in for some sweet tea.” Thibodeaux snorted and Bodie shook his head ruefully. “No, I didn’t think so. The younger man over there in the jeans and the white shirt is Alvaro Fuentes. You might remember his father was murdered a decade or so back. No one was ever arrested.”

“I remember.”

“Fuentes contacted me about having some information on Riccardo Gutierrez. He was interested in finding out if I might help him.” The best lies were always those closest to the truth.

“Why would you?”

“Because Gutierrez’s cartel has developed a new ecstasy-like drug. Only this one is more addictive and has some nasty side effects. I’m trying to shut Gutierrez down and ensure it doesn’t find its way into New Orleans.”

“You think you can do that?”

“I think if nothing else, I can make him *persona non grata* in this part of the country and force him to go elsewhere.”

“You aren’t interested in trying to make him pay for what he did to Fuentes’ father?”

“Why would I be? I didn’t know the man. My sole goal is to get Gutierrez out of New Orleans and to ensure he doesn’t harm anyone close to me. What he does in other places is other people’s problem.”

Thibodeaux looked at him and Bodie knew he was trying to ascertain the veracity of Bodie’s words. He’d chosen them carefully in order to send a message to Gutierrez. Thibodeaux was on Gutierrez’s payroll and had been for years.

“It looks like you got the better of him—this time.”

Bodie nodded. Thibodeaux was a rodent-shifter of some kind—guinea pig, chinchilla—he couldn’t remember which. Bodie had only recently learned that the rodent-shifter was a rat. He might not be an actual rat, but the man had been on Gutierrez’s payroll for years. After the first time Bodie had run him out of the city, Gutierrez had retreated to South America to lick his wounds and plot a way to return and use the Crescent City’s busy port and access to the Mississippi to his own advantage. Bodie needed to convince Gutierrez that as long as he walked away now, there would be no reprisals on the part of *El Tigre*, regardless of how true that might be.

“Every man here will swear it was self-defense and that no one else was here.”

“A tragic, random act of violence,” said Thibodeaux.

“Exactly.” Thibodeaux would carry the message and Bodie and his men would never be charged with anything. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Bodie gathered his men, and they left the cops to the grisly work of identifying the bodies and cleaning up the mess. He watched as they zipped the body bag closed over Alvaro Fuentes. There was no way Quinn was going to let this go. No way.

Loading themselves up in the SUVs, Bodie called Navarro. “Has she arrived?”

“Not yet, but Donato called to let us know their ETA and that all of our people will be fine. He said that you gave no restrictions on her movements, except for staying on the estate.”

“Yes. I want one man with her at all times. I also want someone patrolling under the balcony. Do you have any idea how she got out?”

Navarro laughed. “Your mate is a clever woman. She found the blueprints to the main house on a historical site and worked out where the escape tunnel was. Once inside, she got to the garage and took the Jeep, and then she stole the keys to

all the vehicles to keep us from stopping her. Do you think there'll be repercussions?"

"I'm not sure, and I don't much care either way. Thibodeaux was the cop in charge. I sent Gutierrez a message via Thibodeaux."

"Riccardo Gutierrez is a ruthless, vindictive, and violent man."

"I am aware. I want someone observing the crime scene and someone listening in on Thibodeaux calls. I want to know where he goes and to whom he speaks. As far as I'm concerned, Gutierrez is a threat to my mate. He has to know she was the one Fuentes was talking to. And she saw what happened. He won't want her left alive. He might be willing to give up the Mississippi corridor, but he isn't going to leave her behind to tell the tale. He has no idea what she's found. Do we?"

"The techs have finally broken Quinn's encryption on her laptop. It looks like she has most of the supporting documentation she'll need to write a pretty damning article. She has checked and double checked and verified everything she's been told by everyone."

"I suspect Fuentes had the last of what she needed. He didn't have a laptop with him or in his car. Send someone over to his place to see what they can find."

"I'll see that it's taken care of."

"Tell Maurice and the others Quinn and I will be retiring to our rooms. I want to talk to her and spend some time with her."

"Maybe. But what you really want is to strip her naked, toss her on the bed, get between her legs, and rut like a stag with his doe."

Silence. "Well, that would be spending time with her, and I'm sure at some point, I'll talk to her."

"I'll make sure Maurice sends up something for you to enjoy," chortled Navarro.

“Anything will do. I intend to enjoy my mate.”

They continued on their way home. Once inside the estate, Bodie thanked his men for their courage and skill, then left the garage and headed up to his room in the house. He was tired—exhausted, really. He couldn’t remember a time he’d ever been so tired.

His people seemed to sense his mood and called soft greetings to him as he passed. Navarro wasn’t wrong. From the moment he’d detected that Quinn had somehow escaped from their home, he’d been anxious and on alert. Seeing her stand up to Gutierrez, he’d been proud, angry, and aroused—all at the same time.

Knowing she was safe had only increased the arousal part. It had been all he could do to keep from fisting her hair, dragging her to the Jeep, opening the back and pouncing on her. He’d never wanted anything or anyone as much as he wanted her.

He needed to keep his lust in check. He needed to make her understand he had to be able to depend on her to do as she was told. Her life could depend on it. He knew he was being a hypocrite. Quinn would always be in danger if she stayed with him. She made him vulnerable, and his enemies would know that, but he knew he couldn’t give her up. Not now. Not ever.

Bodie trudged up the stairs and walked down the hall to their bedroom. Donato was standing outside the doorway.

“You’ve done enough for today. Go downstairs and join the others. You did well today, and I am grateful.”

“It is my pleasure to serve the alpha and his lady. I will remain at my post.”

Bodie chuckled, remembering what it had been like to be that young. Bodie had been born old. He had been born knowing he would one day lead the clan and the syndicate. His lot had been one of privilege but also of service. He would always carry the burden of responsibility for his people. There were times it seemed like too much to ask. The one saving

grace had been the knowledge that he had a fated mate waiting for him.

And now she waited on the other side of the door. He opened the door to see Quinn sprawled on the bed—naked and resplendent and looking like some kind of fucking fertility goddess come down from the heavens to serve him, to help shoulder his burdens and to offer him solace and comfort. If having Quinn meant he had to face a lifetime of obligation and duty, he would make that choice gladly. He would choose Quinn—every single fucking time.

CHAPTER 21



QUINN

Quinn had felt his presence the moment he entered the house. She could have sworn she could hear him walking up the steps and coming down the hall. The look when he had opened the door and found her waiting for him had sent heat and lust spiraling along her skin, into her pores, and wrapping around her bones like barbed wire.

She'd been so angry at him this afternoon; angry that he had left her tied to his bed to wait for his return. But that anger had fled in the light of what had happened. Alvaro was dead; Gutierrez knew who she was, and worse, knew who she was to Bodie; and Bodie hadn't hesitated to get her out of the line of fire so that she would be safe, risking his life to save hers.

In the time it took for the heart to take one beat, he had gone from angry and tired, to full of primeval lust. This was her fated mate; the tiger who had claimed her and made her one with him. She could call him a gangster and a plethora of other names, but none of that mattered any longer. He was right. She needed to trust him and them as a couple. They would find a way to make it work.

She could hear him talking to Donato, who had spent the entire drive home extolling his alpha's virtues. She didn't let on, but she'd already come to the same conclusions. She couldn't hear what Donato and Bodie were saying on the other side of the bedroom door, just that they were talking. She could also tell that her mate was pleased with Donato.

He opened the door to their room, stood for a moment looking at her—she was posed ever so provocatively on their

bed. For a moment she thought perhaps she'd gone too far, but as the door closed behind him, nothing but need, lust, and arousal rolled down the bonding link, not to overwhelm her, but to envelop her in its heat.

The room had been cool before, bordering on cold. It had stirred her flesh, puckering her nipples and oddly beginning to make her pussy soften and produce the slick he would need to join them together. Bodie stood looking at her for the longest time.

“Mine,” he purred with a growl-like edge to the sound. Primitive and possessive... and all hers.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“I ought to blister your backside for that little stunt.”

“I'd really prefer you didn't.”

He laughed. “I'll bet you would. Give me one good reason not to.”

“I could give you dozens, but only one really counts.”

“What is that?”

“I love you, Bodie. I don't fully understand what's happened to me or why loving you is part of it, but it is. As part of that vow, I'll promise to do what you want me to do where my safety is concerned. On the drive back to the estate, I realized that Gutierrez most likely got away because you were more focused on ensuring I was safe than getting him. He killed him. Gutierrez took Alvaro's life. I keep thinking if I done something different...”

He shook his head. “No. No, nothing you did caused Alvaro's death. He was dead when we got there. We think someone was on to what he was doing. Gutierrez was going to kill him. If you really want to blame somebody, blame his father for incurring Gutierrez's wrath, or me for not killing Gutierrez the last time.”

“You couldn't have known,” she said, rising onto her knees.

“Could I have known? Maybe, maybe not. Should I have known? Definitely. I’m going to trust you with what’s in the works. There’s a cop who’s been on Gutierrez’s payroll for a while now. I sent Gutierrez a message via the cop that if he cuts all ties to New Orleans and the Mississippi, there won’t be any fallout.”

“You don’t mean that...”

“No. Gutierrez doesn’t have an ounce of honor. If I don’t kill him, he may well retreat, but he’ll come back and have you in his crosshairs—not because he fears you...”

“But to cripple you.”

“I see you figured it out.”

“I did,” she said softly. “Too late for Alvaro...”

“Don’t go there, *chère*. You are not responsible for any of this. If Alvaro hadn’t found you, he’d have found someone else—someone with less tenacity and intelligence. They would have both ended up dead. Thank god you were you and escaped that fate. Alvaro didn’t, and I will ensure that Gutierrez does not.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, reached out, and laid his hand on her breast—cupping and hefting it as if checking its weight. He began to lightly trace a pattern with his fingers, circling her areola around and around as her nipples stiffened further and seemed to be drawn to him like steel to a magnet. Bodie flicked the tightened peak with his thumb, making her moan and wish it was his lips instead of his hand.

Quinn could feel her body coming alight—her pussy softening and getting wet and ready to take him inside. Even his lightest touch made her adjust her legs so they were spread wider, and he could see and smell her arousal. Her mate—her warrior had come home, and she was more than ready to welcome him.

He tipped her onto her back, stripped out of his clothes, and moved to cover her body with his. She gasped as he settled himself between her thighs and pushed into her in a single, long pass. There was no swift possession followed by

his riding her hard until she was screaming his name. Bodie didn't have to say a word. Everything she needed to know rolled down the tether. What had started, at least for her, as a one-night stand had transformed into a great love, one that would be told around the campfires of their people long after they were gone. This felt like more than fucking, more even than lovemaking. This was special and sacred and would sustain them forever.

Bodie continued to press forward until he was deeply seated inside her. "You have always been my fated mate and you always will be. I love you."

Quinn wrapped herself around him, holding him close and intertwining her legs with his. He began to thrust into her, letting her body take his weight as she sank into the mattress. Again and again, he stroked in and out, their lips fused together as his tongue danced with hers. He was heavy and there would be no escaping him. She knew that now and wondered why she'd ever doubted that or had even wanted to try. His mass surrounded her, and she knew she had found her home and her true calling.

He continued to drive into her, surging forward with his whole body so that he caressed her clit each time he did so. Her hips moved of their own volition, and her body arched up, seeking a closeness that had never existed for her before. The tenor and rhythm of his thrusting changed as he sensed her impending orgasm. Over and over, he stroked into her until he gave a last, fierce stroke, driving deep and then pulling back ever so slightly so the barbs on his cock stiffened and caught in her tender flesh as he began to flood her pussy with his cum.

Bodie allowed himself to relax and cling to her for a moment before rolling to his side and dragging her with him.

"I still ought to beat your ass," he murmured into her hair.

"Nah, I like this so much better."

"Don't you think even for a minute that playing the wanton alley cat will absolve you of all crimes. At some point

down the road, I won't want to fuck you three or four times a day anywhere, anytime, and anyhow I want."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that, although she knew that passion ebbed with time and the white-hot flame between them would become something stronger and more permanent. "You think so?"

"Sure, give me a hundred years or so, and I'll probably only want to fuck you morning and night in our bed and maybe get a blow job in my office."

Quinn rubbed her head against him. "I'm going to hold you to that."



Bodie

St. Louis Cathedral was one of New Orleans' oldest churches and most notable landmarks. Its triple steeples towered over Jackson Square, and it was often said to be the heart of old New Orleans. The cathedral kept regular communion and confessional hours, and Bodie had learned that private communions could be arranged for certain individuals with specialized needs. Bodie could see where the cathedral would want to accommodate Riccardo Gutierrez—he was a known leader of a cartel, and since his arrival in the city he had made substantial contributions to the church's coffers.

Gutierrez was no fool, but he was an arrogant bastard who had several concubines he traveled with. They all hated him, but their fear of reprisal kept them from leaving or acting against him. Watching them as they resided in the Garden District, Bodie began to plan a two-pronged attack. One small team would enter the cathedral's private communion and confessional and replace the sacred wine with wine laced with ricin—a deadly poison made from castor beans with no known antidote. As soon as the wine had been consumed, it would be replaced with the original toxin-free wine. Gutierrez wouldn't die immediately nor inside the cathedral, but his death would

be brutal and would take place in thirty-six to seventy-two hours.

Two days after they dosed Gutierrez with the ricin, they planned to implode the warehouse where his people were making and storing the drug intended for distribution. Bodie's men had managed to track Thibodeaux to the warehouse that Alvaro and Quinn had been investigating and tie it to Gutierrez.

"You can't prove nothing," said Thibodeaux when Bodie confronted him.

"That's the beauty of being a gangster," said Bodie. "I don't have to prove what I know."

He held the corrupt cop by the scruff of his neck and made him watch as the building collapsed in upon itself, not causing any damage to the other buildings around it. The one good thing about the cartel's new drug was that it was highly flammable, and it would explode with enough heat, creating a fire that would make the components inert and the fumes and clouds it produced completely harmless.

As the building seemed to implode like some kind of toxic *soufflé* that had not been cooked properly, Thibodeaux said, "He'll kill you for sure now."

"He won't live to see another sunrise. He's been dying for the past two days or so. He may only just now be realizing that he has been poisoned. You tell those who remain that my quarrel with Gutierrez was just that—with him. If they leave and never return to the Crescent City, they have nothing to fear from *El Tigre*." Bodie tossed Thibodeaux aside as if he was nothing more than garbage, which he was. He stopped and regarded the man. "You need to never let me hear or see you again."

Bodie returned home and found his mate lounging poolside with Larisa. The two had formed an unlikely friendship. Quinn needed to work to make a difference in the way only a journalist could and intended to lean on Larisa to help her lead the tigresses and take on some of the more mundane tasks usually performed by the first lady of the clan.

The bright sun shone on his face as he made his way to her, stepping over the back of the chair and sliding down the back as he scooped her forward, so she was sitting between his legs.

“It’s done?” she asked.

“It is. On the way home, I received a call on a burner phone from Gutierrez’s son, Enrique. He thanked me for my assistance in helping him take over his father’s business and swore we would never see them on North American soil again. He plans to confine his business to South and Central America. He said his father had taken ill, and they would be flying home this afternoon.”

“Do you think he knows who killed him?”

“Enrique? How do you think we found out when Gutierrez would be visiting the cathedral, and who graciously disposed of the wine as a token of his friendship and good faith—his words, not mine. Do I think it was Enrique? Absolutely. But I don’t know, and I don’t care. As long as Riccardo’s dead and the Gutierrez Cartel never shows its face in my territory again, I’m good.”

He could sense a sliver of sadness that she was trying to hide from him. He nipped her earlobe.

She sighed. “I spoke to Levi this morning. He’s sold the Gazette, and the new publisher doesn’t want me anymore. I’m happy for Levi, as the sale set him up for life, but I really loved the Gazette and I’m going to miss it. I guess I understand, what with you being my mate and soon-to-be husband. I guess I’ll just write freelance, or maybe try to be a stringer for the Associated Press.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“I don’t have much choice.”

He handed her a pendant in the shape of a glass slipper hanging from a beautiful silver chain.

She looked at it curiously. “What’s this?”

“The way I always heard the story, the only thing that survived from Cinderella’s grand night at the ball was her glass slipper—the one she left behind as she fled at midnight.”

She smiled, wryly. “I get it, this is supposed to remind me of the night we met.”

“More than that. It is to remind you that you have a fated mate who loves and adores you and even before he held you in his arms took on the role of fairy godfather—which is only appropriate, as he is a gangster.”

Quinn laughed—her happiness lacing the sound with her joy as it rolled down the bonding link to him. “I take it you’re my fairy godfather?”

“Let anyone else try to fulfill that role and I will rain hellfire down on their heads. I’m a notorious syndicate master, you know.”

She wriggled around so she could face him but couldn’t manage to wrest control of their positions from him. Bodie felt her body go still before she wrapped her legs over the top of his thighs so that she was staring up at him. “You! It wasn’t Levi who paid for my night at the Beignet Ball. I wondered how he afforded that with the paper failing.” She slapped his chest. “I should have known it was you. It had your Machiavellian fingerprints all over it. I can’t believe you did that.”

Bodie fisted her hair dragging her head towards his. “Then believe this, my mate. You are no longer a journalist at the Gazette, because you are now its chief editor and publisher.”

“You? You bought the Gazette?”

Quinn burst into tears, confusing Bodie.

“I thought you’d be happy. I thought you could make the paper all you’d ever hoped for. A paper not beholden to advertisers and one that could prove to be a beacon for truth and justice.”

“I’m not sure how legit people are going to think it is...”

“Levi and Rosie...”

“Rosie knew? That ratfink. If he wasn’t the second-best reporter I know, I’d fire his ass.”

Bodie laughed. Perhaps this was going the way he wanted. “As I was saying, Levi and Rosie thought it would take eighteen months to two years to get everything squared away in terms of fulfilling existing contracts and the like. I figured it would take about that long for me to divest the clan of all our illegal activities. I still plan for *El Tigre* to protect this clan and the city, but I think the role of gangster has lost its allure.”

“You were never really a gangster. You were always my and a lot of other people’s superhero. Your gangster façade was just for the masses. So, I have a fairy godfather and a superhero—both of whom have a really big dick and know how to use it.”

Bodie lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her until everything else seemed to fade away into a kind of gentle mist, and only the two of them remained. He had been promised a fated mate and with a twist of that same fate, he found himself reborn in her love.

EPILOGUE



*S*ix Months Later

“This is all your fault,” snarled Randall Beckett as he tried to tie his bow tie for the fourth time.

“I can help you do that,” offered Bodie. “And how is it my fault that no one ever showed you how to properly dress for a black-tie wedding?”

“It isn’t the damn tie,” said Beck.

“Which leads me to ask again, why the hell are we dressing in formal wear for a beach wedding at the height of the summer in New Orleans? Your bride does realize we’re all going to melt, doesn’t she?” said Nolan Hamilton, who looked perfect in his custom-tailored tuxedo.

“Then what are you bitching about, Beck?”

“The whole ‘let’s all go legit thing.’ Damn it, Bodie, I like being a gangster. It was fun and exciting.”

“And now you’re a leopard-shifter businessman with a thriving clan to look after and a mate who is expecting his child. Do you really think you’d have time to be a proper gangster once Saylor delivers your son? And is that the life you want for him and all the little leopard cubs who follow?”

Beck stopped moving for the first time and regarded his two friends. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way. I know

it's never set quite right with Saylor—the whole me being a gangster thing.”

Nolan sat down. “I hadn't thought about it in those terms, either. All of us came from long-standing dynasties that ruled our clans. It never occurred to me to do anything else, or to run things another way. Loving Bryony made me see things in a different light. Her father, like most mafia bosses, saw her as an asset to be used to further his own ends. I don't want that for any of our children.”

Beck came and stood in front of Nolan. “Don't just sit on your lazy lion ass. Stand up and help me with this thing. Then help Bodie—his looks just as shitty.”

Once Nolan had helped his friends with their bow ties, they made their way down to the beach. It was a perfect summer day—not too hot and with a lovely breeze blowing in off the Gulf. The sound of bells jingled on the harnesses of the four horses that pulled the open-air Cinderella coach onto the beach where Levi waited to escort Quinn down the aisle.

Quinn was dressed in a sparkling lace dress encrusted with sequins and crystals with a plunging back. The lace featured Spanish moss, saw grass, and dune-grass-inspired patterns. Its delicate spaghetti straps led to a plunging V-neckline in the front and back, with sheer cutouts enhancing the elegant, but still beachy look. Layers of tulle created a full, frothy skirt with a sweep train. She paired it with delicate glass slippers adorned with Swarovski crystals.

Halfway down the aisle, she stumbled as the unstable sand gave way, and Levi had to catch her to keep her from falling.

“Fuck this,” she muttered as she stopped, trying to ensure the shoes were still on and that she could proceed. She glared at Bodie who was having a hard time not laughing. “I told you this wasn't going to work...” She removed the shoes and heaved one at him. “... but no, you had to have your fucking glass slippers. Well, what am I supposed to do now?”

Not content to wait for her to continue her perilous walk to meet him at the altar, Bodie sprinted down the aisle to her and swept her off her feet, swinging her around. He could feel the

toll the stress of having planned the wedding had taken. She was on the verge of tears.

“I seem to have lost one of my slippers,” she managed to say.

“Not to worry, *chère*, that’s what you have a fairy godfather for.”

Laughter began to bubble out of her, as tension was replaced by joy, and he carried her down the aisle to the driftwood wedding arch and into the rest of forever.

BONUS SCENE



Thank you again for reading *Twist of Fate (Syndicate Masters: Midwest)*! I have enjoyed writing these mafia shifters. I wrote the first one on a lark and now I can't believe how many books are in the series. For now this is the end of the Syndicate Masters series but you never know when a mafia shifter might show up again.

I have an EXCLUSIVE bonus scene for Bodie and Quinn 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](#)



ALSO BY DELTA JAMES

Paranormal Suspense

Mystic River Shifters (small town shifter)

[Defiant Mate](#)

[Savage Mate](#)

[Reckless Mate](#)

[Shameless Mate](#)

[Runaway Mate](#)

Otter Cover Shifters (small town shifters/ spinoff Mystic River)

[Suspicious Mate](#)

[Unexpected 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](#)

Northern Lights

[Alliance](#)

[Complication](#)

[Judgment](#)

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

Contemporary Suspense

Relentless Pursuit (Duet)

To Love a Thief

My Fair Thief

Club Southside (spinoff Mercenary Masters)

The Scoundrel

The Scavenger

The Sentinel

Mercenary Masters

Devil Dog

Alpha Dog

Bull Dog

Top Dog

[Big Dog](#)

[Sea Dog](#)

[Ice Dog](#)

Wild Hearts

[Stealing her Heart](#)

[Claiming Her Heart](#)

[Taming her Heart](#)

[Finding her Heart](#)

Wild Mustang

[Hampton](#)

[Mac](#)

[Croft](#)

[Noah](#)

[Thom](#)

[Reid](#)

Crooked Creek Ranch

[Taming His Cowgirl](#)

[Tamed on the Ranch](#)

Paranormal Suspense

Mystic River Shifters (small town shifter)

[Defiant Mate](#)

[Savage Mate](#)

[Reckless Mate](#)

[Shameless Mate](#)

[Runaway Mate](#)

Otter Cover Shifters (small town shifters/ spinoff Mystic River)

[Suspicious Mate](#)

[Unexpected 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

Northern Lights

Alliance

Complication

Judgment

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

Alpha Lords

Warlord
Overlord
Wolford
Fated
Dragonlord

Co-writes

Masters of the Deep

Silent Predator
Fierce Predator
Savage Predator
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>.

If you're looking for your next bingeable series, you can get a FREE story by joining her newsletter <https://www.subscribepage.com/VIPlist22019>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my Patreon supporters.

I couldn't do this without you!

Carol Chase

Latoya McBride

Julia Rappaport

D F

Ellen

Margaret Bloodworth

Tamara Crooks

Rhonda

Autumn

Suzy Sawkins

Cindy Vernon

Linda Kniffen-Wager

Karen Somerville