

A photograph of a Black woman, Nia K. Foxx, posing in a forest at night. She is nude, with her arms crossed over her chest. The background shows dark, silhouetted trees against a moonlit sky. The lighting is soft, highlighting her skin.

Loose Id

TO THE *V*ICTOR  
GOES THE *S*POILS

NIA K. FOXX

# TO THE VICTOR GOES THE SPOILS

Nia K. Foxx

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# **To the Victor Goes the Spoils**

**Nia K. Foxx**

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## Chapter One

Amanda did her best to quiet the deep, satisfied purr that started in the pit of her stomach and vibrated outward.

You're not out of the woods just yet, she reminded herself.

Ironically enough, it *was* to the woods that she intended to retreat to in under a week. Reclining in her leather office chair, she stared sheepishly at the on-screen confirmation that listed the itinerary for her two-week respite. There would be fourteen days and thirteen nights of nothing but her, a cozy cabin overlooking a spectacular lake, and far-off mountain landscapes. The serene remoteness of Alaska was exactly what she needed. It would be wonderful, and a far cry from home life with her Pride. The estate was busier than Grand Central Station. Two additional lionesses had been welcomed into the fold since her departure ten years ago, and she'd lost count of the number of cubs adopted or born into the family. Ultimately, they were all kin, a Pride joined by new mates and children. The alliances forged would be everlasting, and her family now looked to her to grow those bonds further. Luckily for her, Pride males didn't actively pursue females. Although lately there didn't seem to be a shortage of arrogant males parading around the estate under the pretext of business.

Please. She wasn't stupid. Like any self-respecting lion would bother with such trivial matters personally when they had women to take care of the day-to-day things for them. She wasn't fooled, nor was she interested.

When Amanda enlisted in the army some ten years earlier, she'd done so to escape Pride life and hopefully dodge the future her father had mapped out for her. Her surrogate mother had been instrumental in convincing the family patriarch to let her join the armed services when her own mother had protested the decision. Twenty years old at the time, Amanda was certain her father would veto the idea, "encourage" her to

settle down in a Pride of her own and begin popping out cubs the same as her two older sisters.

She had been both surprised and elated when he'd given her his permission to join the services, until learning he'd only done so to make her a more marketable commodity.

*"You'll be considered a warrior, a huntress. A true prize for any lion,"* he had boasted as they pulled up in front of the military's satellite office, which also served as a recruitment center. Amanda's heart had sunk at his comment. He still hadn't understood, but like the many other disappointments she had suffered because of her parents, she let it roll off her back.

The army proved to be her calling. She was the epitome of a perfect soldier and moved quickly up the ranks in her years of service. Having received three medals and two commendations by the time she had completed her first tour of duty, she signed up for another stint and was recruited into Special Forces. In 2003, her unit was one of the first to be deployed to Iraq, where they served two twelve-month tours. By the time she had completed her second four years of service, she'd earned the rank of second lieutenant and agreed to spend an additional two years in service recruiting and training others in elite units. The day she signed her discharge papers had been a solemn one because she'd come to think of the army as her second Pride.

Now, after three months of being "home," Amanda was ready to pull her hair out. There was little privacy on her family's sprawling estate, which was rumored to rival the Kennedy Compound. Even her allegedly private quarters offered little solace. The guesthouse had been promised to her if she agreed to return to her family's home instead of securing an apartment. What she hadn't been told was that her younger brother was already in residence. Apparently, the twenty-five-year-old needed quiet space to entertain his many female friends. The three bedrooms should have been enough for the two of them. Unfortunately, the guesthouse also served as a sanctuary for all the other budding adults on the property who wanted to escape their father's lecturing and mother's snobbery.

Amanda wasn't the least bit surprised when her aforementioned brother strolled into her bedroom without so much as a knock to the closed door. She would be well within her rights to bitch him out for the mistake, but what would be the point? Leonard, Leo for short, was the epitome of a lion, which meant he had little regard for others' privacy. As far as he was concerned, anything within a hundred yards of his presence was fair game. She gave a quick thought to her impending trip before reaching for her wireless mouse to click off the confirmation page.

"You need something, Leo?"

"I came to check on you. You've been holed away in this room all day."

She smiled at the sentiment. Her little brother might have his lion shortcomings, but he was also a genuinely caring person, which made living with him easier. "Just finishing some things that couldn't wait."

"Oh. Would they happen to be military related?" A light brown brow rose in query, causing her to smile even more. Leo thought everything she did revolved around the military and was convinced that she was a part of some covert branch of the government.

Seeing a perfect chance to explain her impending absence, Amanda jumped on the opportunity. "As a matter of fact, it is. I'll be going away in a few days on assignment."

Seemingly intrigued, Leo stepped farther into her room. His bulky frame looked as if it would take up the entire interior. "Where to?"

She cocked her head to one side. "You know I can't say."

He nodded his understanding, but it didn't deter his next question. "Is it a matter of national security?"

"You know, you watch too much TV."

"Fine, keep your secrets, but I have to say I envy you. I wish I could go into the service or do anything that isn't directly related to the Pride for that matter."

"You can."

He gave her a disapproving look. "The L and M would never go for it." His voice was laced with disappointment as he used the nickname the older children had coined for their father. Short for Lord and Master, the abbreviated version came into being to make it easier for the younger siblings' usage.

"Pretty soon you'll be L and M of your own Pride. Don't you think it's about time you started making those decisions for yourself?"

"Easy for you to say. You've been gone for ten years while the rest of us stayed under his thumb."

"You forget I did my time too."

"True, and you're no worse for the experience. Although I must say the L and M isn't going to like hearing about your trip. He expects your answer soon."

"Well, even he can't override the government."

Leo chuckled. "I wouldn't be surprised if he gave it a good shot."

Amanda silently hoped not. Her father was well connected, but she doubted even he knew what channels to go through to protest her bogus assignment.

"So when do you ship out?"

"In a few days, just enough time to attend Sasha's mating ceremony."

Leo frowned and Amanda could have kicked herself for being so thoughtless as to remind him of his childhood sweetheart's upcoming nuptials. He'd had his heart set on marrying the girl from the moment they had hit grade school, but their father hadn't deemed her stock worthy of his family. Unfortunately for the two lovebirds, Sasha was only half-shifter and as such impure by their old man's definition. Amanda cringed inwardly at the prejudiced thought. Her father's Pride was one of the oldest in North America, and he was a man determined to see the bloodline remain "strong." It was

funny if you really stopped to think about it. Their father had five mates of various ethnic persuasions and enough children to make up a poster for the United Nations, yet he was completely against cross-species mating.

To look at Leo and her, most would be hard-pressed to find any physical similarities or even assume a blood connection between the half siblings. Where he had sun-kissed bronze skin, blondish-brown hair, and golden eyes, Amanda had skin like espresso with even darker eyes and a near-black curly mane that displayed thin streaks of light brown throughout. Amanda was tall and medium in build with a body toned by her years in the military. Leo was a veritable giant and as broad as he was tall. By the time he had turned twelve, his body had exchanged its awkward, lanky form for a more muscular build, and she'd lost any physical advantage over him. Even with her advanced training, she was certain it wouldn't be easy to take him down. His sheer size combined with shifter strength made him a force to be reckoned with. But all that was a moot point; he was still her baby brother.

"But I have you for a few days?" Leo asked with an innocent tone that didn't fool her. He was up to something. Amanda quirked a brow in response, and a broad smile spread across her brother's lips.

"Whatever you're thinking about, the answer's no."

"Oh come on. You're like a stick-in-the-mud now. I remember when you used to be so much more fun. Is it because you're an old lady?"

"Thirty isn't old, and need I remind you I can take down two deer to your one on a bad day?"

"Talk is cheap, big sis. Prove it."

"You know, that type of goading stopped working on me seventeen years ago."

"Sounds like someone's afraid of being shown up by her little bro again."

She rocked back in her chair. "I'm not biting."

"That's fine; it's good to know my record will go unchallenged."

Amanda's eyes narrowed to slits. "What record might that be?"

"Don't act like you've forgotten the hunt of ninety-five, when I single-handedly took down two rather large bucks, and me just growing my lion's mane."

"Maybe all this cavorting you're doing has clouded your memory, but I seem to recall it was me who took down the bucks while you spent the better part of the day licking yourself under a shaded tree."

He shrugged. "So you say."

"So we both know."

Amanda contemplated arguing the point more but changed her mind; it had been a while since she enjoyed a good hunt. This time of year their lands would be thriving with all types of wildlife. Besides, it was an excellent opportunity to put her little brother back in line.



"Okay, buddy, you're on, but don't walk around here sulking when you come back with a wee rabbit in your muzzle."

In response, Leo let out a roar that would make any Pride leader envious.

Once her ears stopped ringing, she heard the distinct sound of children cheering outside and immediately realized she'd been royally duped. "Okay, exactly how many cubs have you gathered for this outing?"

She gave him credit for the completely innocent look he managed to plaster on his face.

"All of them?"

"Are you crazy! Why in God's name would you do that?"

"They gotta get trained sometime and who better to teach than you."

"Uh...their mothers."

"Oh please, those lazy felines are too busy vying for spa time."

Amanda didn't doubt it. Her own mother was probably the ringleader of the bunch. Having become accustomed to a life of privilege, Julia Spoils would rather spend her time hobnobbing with the crème de la crème of society than getting her paws dirty by doing something so lowbrow as a hunt. It was obvious to Amanda that her mother's beauty was the driving influence behind their father's decision to take her as first mate, because being a huntress was not in her repertoire of skills.

"It sure would be nice to have Helena back here again." The words slipped out before Amanda had a chance to stop them. Just the thought of her surrogate mother, her father's second mate, a continent away made her heart swell in anguish and only added to her list of reasons to get away.

"As do I. Her exile was unwarranted; even Father knows that."

Amanda shook her head at the injustice. "Yet he let the rest of those jealous females vote her away, so that makes him no better in my opinion."

"She'll be able to come back in another year. Father saw to it."

"Regardless, they shouldn't have been allowed to cast her out simply because she stood up to our mothers. She's entitled to her opinion. I swear, if I'm expected to agree with everything my Pride mates say and do all the time, I might not ever get mated."

"Don't let L and M hear you say that."

Amanda sighed heavily and rose to her feet in a fluid motion, feeling suddenly agitated. A hunt just might be what she needed, even if it meant having several cubs in tow.

She snagged her brother's arm. "Come on so I can show you how a real lioness hunts."

## Chapter Two

It was a memory she'd cherish for years to come, running with her siblings across their private lands. The hunt had become secondary to the freedom of frolicking in lion form, and even Leo abandoned his normal pampering to chase and play with the cubs. Amid all their fun, they managed to snag a few rabbits and one aggressive deer that Amanda took down with the ease of a skilled hunter. They languished over their meals and napped as the sun set before trudging back to civilization. The cubs whined at her heels on the return trip and, once in human form again, begged for another hunt. Having really enjoyed her time with the attention-deprived youngsters, she agreed without hesitation. Tired and feeling a bit nostalgic, Amanda opted for a hot shower before turning in for the evening. She'd have her own cubs in a few years, but she silently vowed to be a very involved parent and put them above all else.

The night before her departure dawned quickly, and Amanda thought she'd dodged a bullet by not having to see her father before she left. Lately, he'd been so busy she'd only managed to catch glimpses of him. Perhaps that was why she couldn't believe her eyes when he showed up unannounced at the guesthouse.

Leo had joined her for a quiet evening indoors, a decision she was certain left a few felines in distress. As the son of a wealthy and prominent Pride leader, her brother's time was very much in demand as felines vied for the coveted position of being his first mate. If only the other lionesses could see him now, challenging her to a rematch of UNO under the absurd claim that she'd cheated. She hadn't. At least not that hand.

"Why don't you put a cork in that whine?"

"I do *not* whine." He growled, a sound that would have been intimidating if it weren't coming from her younger brother. She dipped her head to hide her smile as he dealt them both a new hand.

At that exact moment Lance Spoils strolled into their living room without preamble. The siblings looked up at their father before exchanging glances, as if confirming the sight of an apparition. As an afterthought, they rose in a show of respect. He waved them down, then surprised each by taking an empty seat at the table with them. For several moments no one spoke.

"So are you going to just sit there, or are you going to deal me in?"

Leo opened his mouth to speak but closed it quickly before issuing their parent an equal number of cards.

"This is a bit of a surprise," Amanda began.

"You're telling me -- two attractive, single felines sitting at home on a Friday night playing cards. Times have certainly changed."

It took Amanda a few seconds to realize that this was his attempt at a joke. Lance didn't normally do humor. Barking orders and being obeyed were more his cup of tea.

"There's only so much debauchery one can engage in before it starts to get old," she replied.

Her father made a sound of agreement. "Spoken like a woman ready to choose a mate, but I can also see the appeal of staying in, especially on the eve of your departure."

Amanda tensed. She should have known he'd come for a reason. God forbid he'd actually just want to spend time with either of them.

"Who told you?" She braced herself for the upcoming lecture and shot Leo a disapproving glance.

Her brother gave a barely noticeable shrug, but his eyes revealed much as he looked away guiltily. She couldn't be upset with him. There was no doubt in her mind that their father had found an opportunity to extract the information from him, and she knew all too well how persuasive Lance Spoils could be.

"Does it matter? I'm just sorry that I wasn't around for you to tell me yourself. You've been home for three months, and we've barely had a chance to talk."

Amanda agreed but couldn't say she felt completely sorry their encounters were so brief. It seemed like every time they held a conversation for more than a few minutes he was badgering her about her decision to choose a mate. "We've both been busy, I guess."

He snorted another sound of agreement. "This trip you're taking is military related, I take it?"

She hated having to lie but knew it would avoid a battle she didn't feel like fighting. "Yup, just a couple weeks."

"And when you get back you'll be ready to give me your decision."

She recognized his remark for the statement it was. Her father was done asking, and in two weeks she'd have to let him know which Pride she'd join and align their family with. She'd postponed the issue far longer than most. Typically, females decided

on their Prides early on, then took a year or two to sow their oats before settling down. The issue was usually decided well before a woman's twenty-third birthday. Obviously, Amanda was behind schedule.

"I guess I have a lot to consider while I'm away.

He nodded his agreement. "It's a choice you'll need to live with for the rest of your life. I know that it's not an easy decision, especially for you."

She held her breath for his next words.

"It's obvious you've never approved much of Pride life, Amanda Jo, but it's our way. It's who we are."

She sighed. "I know, but what if I want something else, something different?"

Her question went unanswered, most likely because her father thought the question too inane to dignify with a response. At any rate, the card game commenced without further talk of Amanda's impending departure or the decision that weighed heavily on her shoulders.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following afternoon she replayed the previous evening in her mind as the old-model Land Rover ceased its bumpy ride and transitioned to a semipaved road. They'd driven over the unforgiving path for the better part of an hour to reach the remote destination. Looking out the window, Amanda caught her first glimpse at the small Alaskan town that could have easily doubled as the set for the long-canceled show, *Northern Exposure*. She half expected to see the signature moose loping down the center of its main street. Storefronts lined one side of the street and few people milled about in spite of it being the height of day. Those who did roam about stopped in their tracks to look at the vehicle as it ambled down the road. Amanda was grateful when they finally came to a rumbling stop. She was more than eager to stretch her legs and prayed the feeling would return to her rather numb ass soon.

"You'll want to go into the livery to arrange that boat," her driver instructed as he handed over her sparse belongings from the truck's rear. She'd packed light, one duffel bag and a backpack meant for her hiking excursions while in human form.

She gave the man a generous tip and thanked him for his services before stepping into the store, which seemed to be multifaceted. The interior looked much the same as the exterior -- old and in desperate need of some upkeep -- but she thought she'd keep that bit of information to herself. A few tables lined one wall and were occupied by locals who openly stared at her as she entered. Amanda glanced around the store for someone who might possibly work there. No one stood out at first.

"I'm looking to charter a boat," she said to no one in particular but was happy to see one man rise from a table. He was several inches shorter than her own height of five feet eleven inches. His bright red hair and ruddy complexion made her doubt he originated from the area.

"Say again." The twang was a giveaway -- definitely a displaced southerner.

She thought she'd spoken clearly enough but didn't point it out. "I'm here to charter a boat and pick up supplies. I was told my reservation would be here."

The man seemed rooted to the spot while he stared unblinkingly at her.

"Earl said I'd be able to get a boat and supplies here." She tried a different approach, hoping the cabin owner's name would jar the man into motion. Boy, was she going to be pissed if she'd gotten scammed. Money aside, she'd been diverted to Washington because of plane troubles, spent three hours folded into chairs not meant for comfort, and finally managed to get a flight to Anchorage, where she spent the longest hour-long plane ride beside a man in desperate need of a breath mint. Not to mention the ride into town, which she was certain left some bruising on her tushy she'd be able to physically confirm in spite of her ability to heal rapidly. If the clerk didn't have her information, she'd be stuck in the town until another car could be dispatched, and who knew how long that would take? A return trip definitely didn't rank high on her list of *things to do* in the near future.

"You can't be right. Earl said some military fella would be renting his cabin."

Relief washed over her at the news. Obviously, this man -- and no doubt Earl -- had assumed the A.J. Spoils abbreviation on her credit card and reservation form were the initials of a man. It was a common mistake but not her problem.

"I *am* that military fella, but as you can see, I just so happen to be a woman. So about that boat and incidentals?"

"You're planning to stay at Earl's place all alone? I mean, you don't have a husband or nothin'?"

"Nope, just li'l ol' me. Earl said you take credit cards?" She pressed on, eager to be done with the conversation and on her way. There was still enough daylight left for her to take a quick nap and do a bit of hiking, which was if this man could get over the fact that she was a woman with the initials A.J.

"Yes, ma'am, we do, but I don't think that'll be necessary. You see, Earl wouldn't have rented the place to you if he'd known you were a woman traveling alone."

He had to be kidding. But the look on his face assured her the man was very serious. What sort of backwoods hole had she come to where a woman wasn't expected to travel alone? "No? And exactly why is that?" She was becoming annoyed, which was never a good thing.

"Earl's cabin is very rustic, and the woods around it just aren't a place for a woman all alone, especially at this time of year."

"Well, I think I'll be okay, but I appreciate your concern." She'd endured some rather intense survivalist training during her military career. A rustic cabin would have seemed like a palace during those periods. If that wasn't enough, her being a shifter certainly equipped her for anything the Alaskan wilderness could throw her way. But she couldn't mention the latter thought to the man. Shifters were a very private species and rarely exposed their existence to the "majority" population. However the fact that

she possessed unique abilities was beside the point. Even if she weren't a shifter, making the trip was completely her choice, no matter how foolish it might seem to someone else.

"Ma'am, you don't understand --"

"No, you don't understand. I'm tired and hungry." To top it off, she was fairly certain she was PMSing, but he didn't need to know that either. "All I want is to get to the cabin I paid for, find the generator working, and get settled in. I was told your establishment was the place to come to for the transport and supplies. So, do you want the business or not?"

The man mulled over the question, and Amanda bit back a growl.

"All right, but I think you're making a mistake going up there alone."

"Thank you for your concern." The last thing she felt was gratitude as she followed the man to the obscure register.

"What's this?" Amanda eyeballed the stack of papers he handed to her after ringing up the sale. There was enough legalese in tiny font to make any lawyer proud.

"It's our release form. You're asking us to take you into bear country, ma'am. The bears in that territory are very...aggressive."

If he thought he was scaring her, he had another think coming. She was well aware that the area was home to both black bears and grizzlies. As a precaution, she'd done a little research on the animals and was happy to find that grizzly attacks were rare. Most people became victims because they frightened the creatures or made stupid mistakes like unwittingly leaving food out and attracting them. Black bears, on the other hand, were a completely different breed. In contrast, they were more aggressive in nature. If people found themselves face-to-face with one, it was because the bear had hunted them down intentionally. She could appreciate the predatory mentality but was glad to have the added advantage of being a shifter on her side.

"We can't be responsible for your safety up there and don't want any confusion should anything...happen. Of course, if you want to change your mind, we can reverse the sale and I can arrange a place for you to stay tonight, in town."

Amanda ignored his last comment as she promptly scribbled her name on the last page of the document. The man pulled the signature page free and handed her the remaining pages.

"I can make you a copy of this page for your records," he offered.

"That won't be necessary. Just show me the boat and supplies. I sent Earl a list of things I'll need. I'm assuming everything is here." She tucked the papers under her arm; it would make good kindling for a fire later.

"Yes, ma'am. We'll just need to load the boxes on the boat."

Amanda muttered her thanks under her breath and made her way outside before she said something completely unpleasant.

She was glad to see the navigator of the small motorboat wasn't the illustrious shopkeeper as she'd suspected. When she was finally under way she managed to relax a bit and enjoy the combination of wind and water spray rushing through her hair. Some major products would be needed to tame it after the ride, but Amanda didn't care and doubted nature would either. Unlike most of the females in her family, she didn't mind getting mussed or even downright dirty. She enjoyed everything about nature while in both her forms. Unlike some of her feline peers, she even took pleasure in water and wasn't uncomfortable traveling on it or swimming in its depths. She actually hoped the water wouldn't be too frigid to take a quick dip.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sunset was a spectacular testament to beauty and made the troubles she'd experienced getting to the tiny cabin worthwhile. She stood on the wide wraparound deck sipping a hot mug of coffee she'd brewed as soon as her provisions were packed away. It had taken longer than she expected to get to the secluded location, which nixed her thoughts for a late-afternoon hike and dip. Tonight she'd settle for the view and soak up the peaceful serenity of her surroundings. Amanda plopped into an oversize wood rocker as a breeze wafted across the deck. A distinctive scent had the predator in her stirring. She sniffed the air with her more heightened senses. The smell was unfamiliar, but there was no doubt the pungent fragrance belonged to an animal. By the sheer strength of the odor, she'd say it was either very large or very close. Her skin itched, stretching as the lioness in her pushed forward to linger just below the surface of her human form. It was a precautionary measure in case she needed to shift quickly. She listened but sensed nothing save a few birds and smaller animals settling down before they became evening prey. There was no doubt in her mind that few animals native to the area could generate such a strong fragrance capable of being carried over any large distance. The clerk's warning came instantly to mind. He'd said the bears in the area were aggressive. She wondered just how aggressive. Could it be her presence sparked a bit of curiosity. Bears. Hopefully the critter had satisfied its interest and decided to stay in his part of the forest or she just might be forced to expand her culinary palate.

## Chapter Three

Amanda rose early the next morning and decided on a sparse breakfast of boiled eggs and tuna. She planned to do a little hiking that morning to get a lay of the area. She decided it would be in her best interest to learn a little more about the territory before she ventured out in the evening to satisfy her lion's nocturnal preferences, especially since she wasn't the only predator in the surrounding forest. She made sure her provisions were airtight and wouldn't draw the attention of the resident Yogi or any Boo Boos for that matter. Stepping out onto the front porch, she did a quick sensory check to see if there were any large surprises in her general area. She paused as the same strong odor from the night before hit her like a ton of bricks. Apparently, the bear had done a little night traveling and by the strong scent had left his calling card across a wide area of the front porch.

Great, just what she needed, a bear marking her temporary place of residence as his personal space. The feline in her couldn't have that at all. Amanda deposited her backpack just inside the front door and went to make a quick concoction guaranteed to erase any trace of an animal's presence. It was an easy concoction, made up of a few common household ingredients. After a generous application of the mixture had been spread across the affected area, she washed it and all traces of her visitor away with a pot of boiling water. Satisfied with the results, Amanda was content to leave, albeit she was a bit annoyed by the disruption in her morning. She might have to do a little marking of her own if the bear didn't get the hint.

Much later, as Amanda retraced her path to the cabin, she got the oddest feeling of being watched. She was being absurd of course. According to Earl's description, there wasn't another cabin for miles. She sniffed the air only to be greeted by the now-familiar trace of bear, but there was something else mingled with the animal's smell. Her eyes rounded in recognition. A shifter? A male shifter. She cursed under her breath. There was no mistaking the combined human/animal scent distinct to all shifters when



in partial form. Why would a shifter mark the cabin? It didn't make sense. They were mindful of others' properties, even those belonging to nonshifters. Although Amanda didn't claim to know much about Bear Clans, she couldn't fathom the peculiar behavior. She sniffed the air again, but the scent was gone. Full of questions, she made her way back to the cabin, her mind distracted. Otherwise she would have immediately caught another strange fragrance, distinctly different from the first one, before stepping onto the porch. A bear? Or was it another shifter? She couldn't tell. What she did know for certain was the damn thing had marked the porch in the same spot as the shifter.

*What the hell?*

Annoyed, Amanda flushed away any trace of the second marking. Back inside, she stripped out of her clothes and stepped onto the deck before she secured the door. Her nipples tightened as she stood on the porch for several minutes, enjoying the cool breeze from the lake while it drifted over her nude form. She leaped from the porch with her body stretched taut and straight as an arrow. Her lioness lingered just below the surface of her human self. In the seconds it took her feet to hit the ground she was in lion form and off to prowl the territory anew. It was time that any nearby bears, shifters or otherwise, knew a lioness was on the premises and she didn't take kindly to intrusion.

\* \* \* \* \*

If her mother could see her now, marking trees and brush, she'd shake her head in shame and lament about how a daughter of hers could revert to behaving like a common animal. That thought alone spurred Amanda on in her quest to keep the overzealous bears at bay. She realized a short while later that perhaps her excursion had gone a little too far. She was fairly certain she'd ventured beyond Earl's property line but was still pleased with herself for her handiwork. Smug satisfaction was probably to blame for her failure to notice the large lumbering form advancing on her from the clearing. There was no mistaking the creature. It was a bear. Her body tensed at the continued approach of the animal. Its stride was slow, but there was no doubt the steady, intelligent gaze focused on her. The bear stood on its hind legs about fifty yards away, holding a steady pose as if accustomed to the position.

She recognized the bear's scent as that of the shifter she'd identified earlier. His smell was strong all around her, and she could have smacked herself for being so unobservant.

Man, was he a big ol' boy. She'd never been in the presence of a bear before, shifter or otherwise, but was fairly certain he had to be above average in build.

Amanda issued a warning growl, certain she could be heard in spite of the distance. For good measure, she flashed her sharp fangs at him. The bear didn't bother to move farther, choosing to stare at her with an unwavering gaze that was a bit disconcerting. She took a retreating step backward, rethinking her previous thought of challenging the manimal. This was his turf, and he had a definite home court

advantage. Besides, he was a hulk of a creature. She refused to let panic set in as she assessed the situation; after all, she still had speed on her side.

The bear growled his own warning as she took another step backward. If she were in human form, she'd apologize for trespassing on his territory, but she didn't feel much like shifting at the moment to offer up a verbal defense. Yet she doubted any of her lion sounds would soothe him. Quite frankly, with the exception of purring, her kind didn't make any nonthreatening sounds, and she most definitely didn't feel like purring. She berated herself again for the carelessness that had led her into the bear's area. Shifters were notoriously territorial, more so than animals, and for another shifter to encroach on land without prior approval was an affront that could be dealt with in severe fashions. Amanda evaluated her surroundings again before looking back to the grizzly. He dropped back to all fours and approached her once again.

Did he really think she'd just stand there?

A trained soldier knew the best time to fight and when to take flight. This was definitely a flight moment. Amanda decided to flash a final warning to the bear before making a dash back through the trees from which she'd come. She darted through the forest at a breakneck speed in an effort to retrace her steps to the cabin. Overgrown foliage and low-hanging branches grabbed at her fur as she ran. Her momentum left little room for sure-footedness, and she was certain she'd gathered a few superficial scrapes. It was something she'd worry about after she was safely behind heavy, locked doors and could radio for a return boat. Her heart jumped with elation as she spied the clearing leading to Earl's cabin. It was just a few more yards. She wondered if the shifter still pursued her or if he'd given up the chase already. Not one to test fate, she didn't stop or even slow her pace to find out.

Another odor assailed her nostrils a split second before something hard barreled into her side. The force of the impact sent her soaring several feet off the ground, and she landed with a thud on the thick vegetation that surrounded the cabin. She'd only had the wind knocked from her body once before and could have lived a lifetime without experiencing it again. Her chest heaved as she labored for breath. As much as she willed herself to, she couldn't maintain her lioness form. As her human persona emerged, she rolled to her back, taking short, life-sustaining breaths.

Calm, calm, she chanted mentally.

"Why on earth did you hit her like that?" Amanda heard the question but was still too focused on trying to bring her respiratory functions under control to seek out the speaker.

"Like you had a better way of stopping her. She's fast."

"I could have caught her."

"Yeah, right, Grizzly Adams. Keep dreaming."

Two forms came into view, effectively blocking out the sun. They stood on either side of her for a brief period before kneeling to give her a slow once-over. It took a moment for their facial features to come into focus. Both men stared down at her with a

show of concern. Her gaze flicked from one to the next. They appeared to be close enough in build, so far as she could tell from her position, but the similarities ended there. The man to her right was fair in coloring with brown hair that seemed to have wheat-colored highlights. His thick tresses were caught by a breeze and pushed backward to expose a ruggedly handsome face. She noted the stubble outlining his jaw was a bit beyond being fashionable, but couldn't help but think the look worked for him. Sharp sky blue eyes stared down at her with an intensity that held her gaze hostage. His brows furrowed as he studied her face.

"Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Was he kidding? She felt as if she'd just had a brawl with a Mack truck. Her body ached everywhere, yet surprisingly an internal assessment didn't reveal any broken bones.

She nodded, switching her gaze to the second man. She bit her bottom lip to keep from gasping aloud. His skin was only a fraction darker than his companion's. Hair the color of raven's wings framed his face and hung only inches above her skin as he knelt. Emerald-colored eyes watched her as if on alert for her next movement. His jawline and upper lip were covered by thick fuzz that didn't look the least bit tamed like so many of the men she was used to. In spite of the facial hair, she couldn't help but notice that he had the kind of full lips that made a woman want to feel them all over her body. Scared that her wayward thought might be revealed in her eyes, she shifted her gaze to something less seductive. Pleased to find the distraction just above his sexy mouth, she studied the slight crook of his nose, which let her know it had probably been severely broken a time or two. The imperfection only added to his rugged handsomeness.

"Do you feel pain anywhere?"

The question brought her gaze back to the blond man. His voice was deep, authoritative, compelling her to respond to his question.

She shook her head. It was a lie, but he didn't need to know that. If they thought she was unhurt, maybe they'd think twice about challenging her for encroaching on their territories. Now if only she could muster the strength to pull herself up off the ground.

"Can you walk?" the dark-haired man asked. His voice was deep as well but had a more gritty quality to it.

If she couldn't walk, she'd sure as hell try, especially when the alternative was having one of these Neanderthals carry her off to God only knew where. She was mindful of the fact that she lay completely nude in front of two strange men, but nudity for shifters was as natural as the air they breathed. Like her, both men were completely devoid of clothing, a fact that she couldn't completely ignore, but what made her uneasy was the uncertainty of what would happen next.

"I can walk," she said, pushing up on her elbows for leverage. Her movements were slow as she tried to prevent any further discomfort. The rapid healing inherent in

all shifters would alleviate the bruises and pain in under an hour, but until then a sister hurt something fierce.

"This is ridiculous," the dark-haired one nearly hissed.

Amanda didn't realize his intention until it was too late. With an ease and care she hadn't expected, he lifted her into his arms and rose to his feet without difficulty in spite of her added weight.

"You're hurt, and for that I apologize." Green eyes locked on her, and there was no doubting the sincerity behind his statement.

"Um...okay."

He held her gaze for one long moment before turning to his companion, who watched their interaction closely.

"She'll need time to heal. I'll take her to my place until she's ready."

"My place is closer," the other man countered casually, but there was no denying the spark of challenge in his eyes.

"The cabin I'm staying at is just down the hill, probably closer than either of your places," she suggested hopefully. The last thing she wanted was to be back on either man's turf.

The two males exchanged looks over her head but in the end nodded their agreement. She breathed a sigh of relief, needing to get back to the cabin with her belongings and a way to call for help before the men decided she was well enough to exact their retribution.

"Um...by the way, I'm sorry about the whole trespassing thing. I hadn't realized exactly how far I'd gone."

"That's inconsequential at the moment, although had you heeded my warning, we wouldn't find ourselves in this dilemma." The admonishment came from the blue-eyed shifter.

*His warning? Whatever.* It wasn't like she had wanted to be bulldozed by his hulking friend. In human form, both men were massive, certainly nowhere near the size of their bear alter egos, but big enough to give a person some serious pause. The one holding her had to be at least six feet three inches of pure, packed muscle, while the other man stood a good two inches over him with an equally impressive physical stature.

"Sorry, but my bear is a little rusty, so I couldn't quite translate your grunts and growls out there." The flippant reply escaped before she could stop it. "So what happens now? Like I said, I'm real sorry about the trespassing thing."

Ignoring her question, the dark-haired man holding her directed his comment at his companion. "We both know she was on my land when I caught her."

"She happened on yours after being pursued on mine."

"Pursued by you, but caught by me."

Amanda rolled her eyes. They were worse than two bickering lionesses.

"You call what you did catching? I've seen more finesse watching moose mating."

"I'm surprised you could see anything with all that dust in your face. If it weren't for me, she'd be tightly tucked away in that cabin."

The latter part of the darker man's accusation sounded like a good thing to her. He was bragging, and obviously, he'd forgotten the person they were speaking of was still very much in their company.

"Look, I hate to break up this very interesting chest thumping, but I just need to know how to make amends for my error so that we can put all of this behind us."

She was starting to feel like herself again, which was only magnified as the men made their way onto the deck of her rental.

"Do you really think this is about a land violation?" the shifter carrying her questioned.

Her brows rose in confusion. "It's not?"

"We're invoking the Rite of the Victor," the blond one stated calmly. At her silence, he added, "Before sunset, you'll need to pick one of us to take as a mate."

## Chapter Four

Maybe there was something wrong with her hearing. Perhaps the blow had been hard enough to knock her unconscious and this was really just one big hallucination. "The Rite of the Victor?"

"You're not familiar with it?" Blue eyes studied her as the shifter set her down on slightly unsteady legs inside the cabin.

"Of course I am. It's just no one ever uses victor rites anymore. It's considered retro, like leg warmers, but definitely not making a comeback." Her attempt at humor fell on deaf ears. They couldn't really be serious. Shifters had the laws of their people drilled into them from day one so as to prevent any accidental offenses. Shifter laws were the only things that could supersede a particular species' governing principles. The victor rites law was an oldie, ranking up there with death matches. People understood it, but most shifters preferred to settle things in more a modern fashion nowadays. Sure, even their currently practiced methods for resolving disputes might seem arcane to humans, but those rules were a lot less harsh than some of the lesser-used shifter laws. Victor rites were most popular over a thousand years ago, before shifters embraced mating outside of their orders, which opened the pool of available females. Learning that humans and shifters could successfully mate was just another nail in the coffin for the law.

She took a step back to look up into the dual scowling faces of the robust men.

"Are you saying you reject shifter laws?" Blue Eyes posed the question.

She shook her head in answer. To be a shifter and reject the laws was tantamount to blasphemy and an immediate forfeiture of one's life.

"We all know that the more crude laws have been overridden. Surely as members of the Bear Clan, you've instituted more...modern customs?"

Emerald eyes narrowed even more as the dark-haired male took in her question. "And by modern, you mean *civilized*?"

She didn't miss how he nearly spat out the last word.

The uneasy feeling she'd felt outside was returning. These men were definite throwbacks of a bygone era from a time when shifters embraced less of nonshifter's influences.

"Not at all." Actually, it was exactly what she'd meant, but she doubted either would appreciate her admitting it. "Why don't we get dressed? I'm sure Earl has some things you could wear and then we can sit down and talk this out in a reasonable manner."

"We prefer the more natural form," Blue Eyes said. "Do your *modern* Pride rules mandate the wearing of clothes?"

"In the presence of strangers, it's considered proper etiquette unless engaged in a hunt." It was a truthful answer and one she hoped would be honored.

"So your Pride rules *do* supersede shifter laws?" he questioned further.

"Of course not."

"Hmmm. Shifter law states one should embrace the natural form whenever possible, whether shifted or not."

"Look, why don't we start over? I mean, we don't even know each other's names, yet we're discussing victor rites and shifter laws."

Emerald Eyes was the next to speak. "I'm Regan Nardeau, and Gentle Ben here is Kam Victor."

"I'm going to ignore that crack, Nardeau. You're lucky I've more important things on my mind." The man now identified as Kam Victor issued the warning to his companion, yet his gaze remained on her. "And what is your name, my pretty feline?"

"Uh...my friends call me A.J."

"Not a very feminine name for a woman. Why don't you give us your birth name?" Regan suggested.

Amanda looked between the two men, feeling very small and feminine. It wasn't something she was accustomed to. What made matters worse was her own adolescent fascination with their very prominent erections. The male form was no mystery to her, and she silently cursed herself for her curious glances to what should have been as commonplace as their noses. Just one more peek, she told herself. *Good Lord, were they hung!* Each of their cocks had to be nine inches from base to tip and still growing. She noted that Kam's shaft seemed thicker closer to its base, while Regan's was long and straight and had just enough of a curve guaranteed to find a woman's G-spot.

"There will be time for that later, my dear, after you've selected your victor, but for now we're waiting for your name."

Kam's voice brought a blush to her cheeks at being caught staring, and she coughed to dispel the nervous heat coursing through her body.

"Amanda Jo of the Spoils Pride of California."

"Well, that's an awful long name, but I think Amanda will do just fine. Now back to more important matters," Kam continued.

She made an effort to keep her focus on their faces as she spoke. "I really don't mean to be contrary, but I can't in good conscience pick either of you as a mate. See, I came up here to consider which *Pride* male to take as a mate back home. When I return, my father is expecting my answer."

"Think of how happy he'll be to find you've already selected someone."

Lance Spoils would be anything but happy to see her waltz onto the property with a three-hundred-pound bear shifter in tow. In fact, she was pretty certain he'd have a coronary right where he stood.

Obviously, the two wouldn't see reason, so she'd just have to try a different approach. "Look, as tempting as you both are, I can't rightfully say either of you was the victor. Kam chased me, and Regan damn near killed me, neither of which spells out an exact winner."

They grudgingly grunted their agreement, and she almost sagged with relief.

"Death match it is," Regan stated, and Kam nodded.

Just the thought made her sick to her stomach. Sure, she'd seen tons of violence in her life, had even killed a few men herself in battle, but to think that another life could be taken because of her was quite another thing. Besides, she fully intended to get her deposit back from Earl and was sure shifter remains would negate that possibility.

"Wait a second. There's got to be another way."

The two men exchanged glances before looking at her and shaking their heads.

"Either there's a clear victor, which we haven't been able to establish, or you make the decision. Since you don't seem to want to do that, the only other option is the death match," Regan offered.

She thought of one other option, which seemed the most logical. "Or we could just forget about it altogether and go on our merry ways. I'm sure there are plenty of shifter females in your Clans for you to fight over."

Kam moved farther into the open living area, setting off her internal alarm bells. In their previous positions, she could keep her sights on both men. "Hon, I don't know if you've heard, but the ratio of men to women here is ten to one, even greater when you factor in the shifter population." His movements were as casual as his words as he went about the cabin inspecting things. "Looks like Earl has picked up a few new items in his travels," he said to no one in particular.

"You know Earl?" Amanda wasn't sure why that came as a bit of a surprise, but it did. Kam stopped in front of the brick fireplace, and she was granted a full view of an amazing ass. His cheeks were muscular and tight like the rest of him, and her mind drifted to a vision of her holding them for dear life as he pounded into her. Her pussy clenched at the thought.



"We're the neighborly sorts; why wouldn't we know him?" Regan answered. "What's more surprising is that he would rent his cabin out to a single female, especially during our mating season."

*Mating season? Of course.* She could have smacked herself for being so stupid. The shopkeeper all but spelled it out in his warning. If only she'd read between the lines of his concern or at least listened.

"He thought I was a guy." Her statement had Kam whipping around to give her a disbelieving look. "I've been in the military for ten years. I usually fill out any paperwork with my military rank and my initials."

Kam nodded his understanding and went back to his exploration.

She chuckled to ease the growing tension in her belly. "So I'm sure you both see what a big misunderstanding this really is."

"Sounds more like fate, wouldn't you say, Kam?" Regan asked.

"Sounds like it." Kam turned to lean his back against the fireplace. "The powers that be, in all their infinite wisdom, dropped a very beautiful, unmated shifter in our midst." He sniffed the air with exaggeration. "And one in heat, no less."

She cursed under her breath. A lion cub could tell she was ovulating, but she'd silently hoped that bears' noses weren't as sensitive. Fat chance.

"Indeed. So here we stand with the same dilemma before us and time slowly ticking away," Regan said, bringing their attention back full circle.

"There is another way," Kam inserted.

Amanda jumped at the possible solution. "What?"

"You could try us both, see which you'd prefer," he continued.

She bit back a laugh.

Not even if hell froze over twice, but she gave him an A for effort. Granted, they were both fine specimens of men, and under different circumstances she would have been open to a mutually satisfactory evening, but these two were playing for keeps.

Regan mulled it over. "No penetration or kissing, of course, not until she decides which of us will be her mate."

"Of course. It would purely be for her pleasure," Kam agreed.

Her heart caught in her throat at what the two were suggesting.

Regan's face softened for the first time, and Amanda was surprised at just how handsome he looked. Well, maybe handsome was an exaggeration, but he certainly looked less fierce.

"Works for me," Regan agreed.

"Uh...hello. I think the lady in question gets a voice here, or don't I matter?"

"Of course you do, but know that either way, your answer will have the same result," Kam informed her.

Just the thought of taking one of the two men as a mate made her ready to hightail it back to California. At least with her Pride, she knew what type of life to expect. Sure, she could share her mate with as many as six other women, but once she was able to forge out her own place in the Pride, she could live a relatively enjoyable life. But taking a bear as a mate, especially one of the two throwbacks in front of her, could only spell disaster. The men obviously scoffed at any of the newly adopted Pack, Clan, Pride, Flock, or School rules. She wouldn't be surprised if she learned the places they called home turned out to be dank, dark caves and that they spent most of their time in bear form rolling around in the mud. She'd take a preening lion to a slovenly bear any day. If only she'd heeded the obvious warning, or if only she'd contented herself with her future among a Pride, she wouldn't be in her current predicament.

*Like a lamb to the slaughter.* "So what now?"

"I believe Earl's bed is in the loft. Judging from his size, I'm assuming it's pretty substantial?" Regan asked.

Amanda shrugged, knowing it could tightly fit three men of Kam or Regan's size. "I guess."

"After you."

She wasn't sure who spoke; her brain was working overtime thinking of ways to get out of the situation. In that short period they had spent debating the issue, her body had done enough healing to lessen her aches and pains. It might be a far stretch, but she was sure she could put one of them out of commission and possibly outwit and outmaneuver the other long enough to radio for help. She'd been outmanned before in hand-to-hand combat. Of course, none of her opponents were shifters, nor did they outweigh her by about a hundred and fifty pounds. Still, there was always a way to take down a bigger man. The budding question in her mind was whether anyone would come to her aid once she subdued the men. Short of murder, she was sure anything she did to them would only temporarily put them out of commission.

Again her mind drifted back to the shopkeeper's attempts to keep her from the cabin. It was obvious to her now that the man had known what awaited her.

"Amanda, as much as I enjoy a challenging tumble, let me warn you that Regan there is Navy SEAL trained and I still whip his ass often enough. So unless you consider combat foreplay, I'd suggest not trying any of your military tactics on us," Kam suggested softly.

Regan's only response was to let loose a low snarl, most likely at the other man's assertion that he managed to best him.

"Am I supposed to just take your word for it?" she couldn't help but ask.

A rakish grin spread across Kam's lips. "I'd love for you not to."

"Primitive animals," she threw over her shoulder as she resigned herself to her fate and made her way to the stairs leading to the loft. The two male shifters followed at her heels.

"By George, I think she's got it." Regan's amused reply rang in her ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda's heart pounded in her chest, but not from fear, as should have been the case. Instead its upbeat tempo was in answer to the anticipation coursing through her body. If not for the outcome of their little encounter, she'd probably be an enthusiastic participant. After all, what self-respecting shifter would walk away from such attractive temptations? Kam was the first to climb onto the bed, positioning his back against the headboard and resting on his knees. He beckoned to Amanda, who hesitated before crawling onto the mattress in front of him.

"Rest your back against my chest," Kam instructed, and wordlessly, she obeyed. His cock pushed against her lower spine. The cat in her couldn't resist teasing him by shifting against his erection under the pretext of getting comfortable. She heard the low growl start in his belly and took pleasure in knowing he was affected. He bent to graze his lips against her ear, and she inhaled his scent. It was much different in full human form, a musky, virile fragrance that was bewitchingly lethal.

"So you like to play, my little kitty?" He pulled her arms behind his neck. "Lock your fingers and keep them that way until you're told otherwise"

"I hate to break it to you, big guy, but I've never been overly obedient."

"I certainly hope not," Kam replied.

Still, she locked her fingers behind his neck as instructed and did her best to look bored with the whole event. Above her head, Kam chuckled.

Maybe the sound distracted her, because she was surprised when he stretched long arms down her belly and raked his fingers gently up her stomach. Such a simple action, yet her body quivered from the thrill.

"Very responsive, good." Kam's tone dropped an octave and his cock thumped against her back. He cupped her breasts, kneading and plumping the firm flesh. She arched into him, hoping he'd get the hint that she wanted him to do more without her having to voice the traitorous words. She bit her bottom lip to keep quiet. Kam brushed her sensitive nipples with the tips of his thumbs, and electricity shot through her. The peaks tingled and swelled to hard points. He pinched her pebbled flesh between his forefingers and thumbs, and she moaned. Just that quick she was on fire.

"Open those pretty, long legs of yours so Regan can see what he'll be missing after today." Kam's voice held the confidence of a man sure of his victory.

Normally, she would have had no problem bursting his pompous bubble, but she chose to ignore the comment and follow his instructions. Feeling completely brazen, she spread her legs wide, having nearly forgotten about Regan's silent presence until Kam's words. Regan made his way between her parted thighs, and the bed gave a little protest at the added weight. She watched him stare at her cunt as if it were the last vestige of hope for a dying man. As his green-eyed gaze slowly traveled up her naked form, it darkened to a near-black color, making his arousal evident. His movements were slow as he eased his way up and over her body. He leveled himself above her mons before

pressing his lips softly on the triangle-shaped thatch of hair. His eyes never left hers while he deliberately kissed his way up her body. He paused at her flat belly, and the tip of his tongue dived into her concave belly button, plunging into the crevice several times until she shuddered with excitement. Having two men committed solely to bringing her pleasure was intoxicating. As her brain turned to complete mush, she wondered why she hadn't tried it before.

Kam cupped her breasts, offering the orbs to Regan, and boy was she ready to feel the heat of his mouth on her. He leveraged himself above her body, but the position didn't prevent her from feeling his thick shaft between her thighs. He was so close. She was tempted to buck beneath him and see if he'd resist the invitation to sink into her flesh.

"Why do I get the distinct impression you're up to something?" Regan's voice was low and sultry, and Amanda was struck again by his rugged appeal.

"Me? Never," she answered coyly.

Regan let loose another low growl before he focused his attention on the offerings in his friend's hands. His head ducked, and he captured a nipple between his full lips. She was right in her earlier assumption. Regan's mouth was skillfully wicked, suckling her until she moaned and writhed beneath him. She lost her hold on Kam's neck, only to have him guide her hands back into place. Regan was relentless as he pursued the puckered nipple of her neglected breast. He suckled the sensitive flesh into his mouth until her body hummed and vibrated.

He retraced his path down her body. "Dear God," she crooned. She really shouldn't be enjoying this so much. How had she honestly thought she could remain unaffected by either man? Now she was no better than a cat in heat wanting to be screwed by anything with a big-enough cock. Scratch that, she wanted to be fucked by two cocks in particular.

Kam's fingers took over where his companion left off. He pinched her nipples harder, and the combination of pleasure and pain sent a flood of cream to her pussy. She stretched her legs wider, certain that Regan would have no problem seeing the wetness coating her. He stared up at her from between her legs and wrapped his arms around her thighs to hold her in place. He trailed kisses along the inner flesh before blowing his warm breath on her exposed cunt. His fingers traced her labia, spreading her slick feminine lips. Her breath hitched expectantly, and heat rose in her groin. The first flick of his tongue was like heaven. The second swipe sent currents through her pussy that traveled throughout the rest of her body. He laved her with one long, firm stroke that stretched from her slit to her nub. His next tongue lashing was slow and leisurely, pushing her to the brink so quickly her legs quaked. Her fingers itched to dive into his thick hair and hold him steady. Kam's play with her nipples became more aggressive, adding just the right amount of pressure to give her pleasure and painful enjoyment.

Amanda whimpered and rotated her hips, straining for more. It was all too much. Just when she thought it couldn't get any better, Regan massaged her slit with a finger, then sank it into her moist channel. He added a second finger after only a few plunges.

"Your pussy is so tight," he mumbled against her clit.

She spasmed around his deep-thrusting fingers, and his tongue picked up speed, massaging her nub until she arched off the bed. Kam's hands left her breasts to hold her arms in place behind his neck.

"Oh God, I'm going to come," she cried. Regan was unyielding, his thick tongue exquisite. Her legs quivered. Stroke after stroke, he continued his relentless strumming of her clit until her taut nub pulsated. Her stomach tensed and tightened as the first wave of her orgasm took hold. The blood rushed to her ears, blocking out all sound. She jerked, then shivered and jerked again. She panted through the remainder of her climax as her clit throbbed and her vision blurred. Her body twitched while Regan took his time lapping up every bit of her feminine juices.

"You taste wonderful," he said before giving her one last swipe of his tongue.

She was still seeing stars when Kam allowed her arms to drop to her sides and smoothed the unruly curls from her face. She was certain she must look a mess, between her ordeal outside and the head-thrashing bliss she'd just experienced at the hand -- and mouth -- of Regan. Maybe it was sexual deprivation that made her experience so enjoyable. After all, a starving man would think a cracker a delicious delicacy. Her last sexual encounter had been nearly two years ago and was a travesty, to put it mildly. She'd broken with protocol and given into curiosity with another ranking officer who'd flirted with her for several months. It was their one and only time together.

Regan lingered between her thighs, looking less intimidating than her first impression and more like a rakish lover. "What say you we ditch the overgrown teddy bear and get down to some serious mating?"

Feeling completely satisfied and surprisingly comfortable in her current position, Amanda couldn't stop her smile as she stared down at him. "I don't think that would be too fair."

He gave her a wickedly sexy look. "All's fair during mating season."

"I think little bear here is just afraid that you'll like me better," Kam said, continuing to smooth her hair.

"So have you two known each other long? 'Cause you sure bicker like an old married couple."

"Too long. Our entire lives, in fact," Kam answered.

"The big guy has been a thorn in my side since I first learned to forage. It's no surprise he's encroaching on my territory now." Regan's words didn't fool her. It was obvious there was a definite friendship between the two. She wondered what would have happened had she let the death match stand.

"Fine way to talk about the man who saved your overzealous hide from going over the side of a cliff," Kam countered.

As unorthodox as the scene was, she found herself at ease. Their easy bantering added relaxation to what could have been an uncomfortable aftermath. It disturbed her to think just how natural things felt.

"I'm starved, so why don't you two rehash your youth while I rustle up something to eat?" Amanda half expected to be restrained and was surprised at how effortlessly she was able to slip from the bed.

Regan stood, his cock at full attention, and gave her a look hot enough to heat all outdoors as she walked by him. She grabbed her thin white silk robe as she made her way from the loft.

Downstairs, her mind slowly reprocessed what was happening to her as she went through the motions of preparing the steak she'd originally planned to make for dinner. She heard the men's movements as they came down, and spared them both curious glances before popping the generous slab of meat in the oven. She contemplated making two more but changed her mind quickly. If they wanted to eat, there was an entire forest at their disposal. She certainly felt under no obligation to see to their nourishment.

"Hmm, looks good, but hardly enough for the three of us," Regan commented.

"You don't actually expect me to feed you, do you?" The silence behind her had Amanda turning around to fix them both with a glare.

"Isn't that what a lioness does, take care of her man?"

She rolled her eyes at Regan's comment and turned back to the stove to busy herself with setting the appropriate temperature. "That's only for our Pride, and since neither of you are members, looks like you're on your own."

"Ah, but you forget that's exactly what we're trying to determine here. Which of us shall win the fair paw of one beautiful feline." Kam's voice was like silk in spite of its deep baritone.

Amanda was surprised when she felt the gentle brush of a hand on her shoulder. She hadn't heard him come up behind her and was taken unawares. It was amazing how someone as large as he could move with such stealth.

"So is cooking your meat part of your Pride's way of fitting in with nonshifters?" Kam asked close to her ear. Her body went on high alert, and her legs felt suddenly unstable. An arm around her waist steadied her, and she found herself leaning into him for support. She shouldn't be this comfortable, not with him, not with anyone under these circumstances.

"I like it cooked ever so slightly; brings out the flavor of the meat."

Regan grunted from somewhere in the living room.

"Hmm, maybe I'll have to try this *cooked* meat."

A shiver ran down her spine as his velvety voice all but seduced her right there.

Get a grip, she told herself. Apparently, celibacy had taken its toll. Kam's fingers slipped around her waist and undid the knot of her robe, and it gaped open with little prodding from him. His touch didn't come immediately like she expected and hoped for. In fact, he pulled back slightly and tugged the robe to the edge of her shoulders. Gravity did the rest. The silken material slid down her arms to gather at the bends of her elbows.

"You have beautiful skin, Amanda, like a rich espresso."

Normally, she hated cheesy compliments, but coming from him, the words sounded brilliantly alluring.

His voice dropped. "I look forward to tasting you all over, to having you quivering for me alone."

The excitement of the moment was getting the better of her. Thankfully Regan's forced cough from the living room interrupted her before she could act on the thrill rushing through her body. Kam stayed in close proximity but threw a clipped comment over his shoulder at his friend. A hand stretched out to click off the oven.

To her, he whispered, "Let's get this over with so we can be alone." Kam's larger hand swallowed hers, and she silently allowed him to lead her into the adjoining living room. Forgotten were her hunger and the steak left in the oven. Gone were the reservations she felt when the options were first presented to her. If the evening didn't result in her picking a mate, it was certain to expose her as a closet nymphomaniac.

As Regan threw an assortment of pillows on the thick, furlike carpeting in front of the fireplace, her gaze drifted to the blatant arousal he sported. Her pussy clenched at the thought of it sinking into her slit. As hard as they both were, she could probably milk both men dry before seeking her second orgasm.

Damn them and their rules.

Kam escorted her to the pallet, and she felt like the belle of the ball. They stopped in front of Regan, and Kam took the opportunity to remove her robe completely and toss it carelessly out of sight, which she didn't mind at all. Regan traced the back of his hand across her jawline and down the length of her neck and chest. The feel of his rough fingers was erotic simplicity, and she wanted to feel it again. Regan placed his hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around to face Kam. Behind her, Regan left no part of her back unexplored. His hands traveled her contours in slow movements that made her shudder. He moved in close, pressing his hard body into her, and she leaned into him for support. Kam stood silently watching, his gaze holding hers, and she wondered what he was waiting for. Having him withhold his touch was worse than having him tease her body into a frenzy as he'd done so quickly before. Her breath hitched when Regan dipped behind her, and his arms swooped beneath her, allowing her to fall against him completely.

"Relax," Kam urged.

If she were in her right mind, she might have protested what Regan was attempting, but not now. Instead she did as he bade. The position draped her legs over

his forearms so that his hands cradled her thighs. When he stood again to his full height, she found herself held in a very alluring position, which enabled Regan to spread her dangling legs wide. She was at their mercy. In front of her, Kam knelt slowly and added the additional support of his hands beneath her knees. She felt like a queen preparing to be intimately lavished by her manservant.

For long moments, Kam remained still between her splayed legs, breathing in her scent. Having him posed so intimately was a thrill all its own. Not one touch, and yet her breathing was becoming labored as excitement built up within her.

The needy groan that escaped her parted lips surprised her but seemed to serve as the catalyst for Kam to dive in. Her head fell limply against Regan's chest while his partner feasted on her cunt. His tongue darted out hot and heavy to press into her clit, lapping and slurping at the juices her pussy produced. He sucked her swollen nub and rolled his tongue around the flesh.

She moaned again, unable to stop the rocking motion of her hips. He sucked harder, his lips and tongue working her body into a fevered pitch. He pressed into her more and sucked her clit harder. *Harder*. She writhed against his mouth, forgetting her delicate position. Her need to come was overwhelming, and each delightful caress of his tongue aided her in her goal. Her climax hit her with a violent jolt that had her arching into Kam's tormenting tongue. Heat infused her face from the sudden rush of blood.

"Oh yes!" She shouted her orgasm to the ceiling. He lapped at her juices again but wasn't done with her yet, because his tongue went right back to work, probing and sucking her clit. Her body twisted and convulsed, not given a chance to calm before he was licking her toward her third orgasm of the day. She was completely limp when Kam and Regan gently laid her on the thick carpeting and tucked several pillows beneath her head.



## Chapter Five

Amanda needed to catch her breath. Hell, that was priority number two; first she needed to find her mind, because she was fairly certain she'd lost it somewhere between her tumble in the forest and the orgasm that still shook her body. She looked at the man responsible for her body's shuddering response from beneath hooded eyelids. His expression was unreadable, but her heart raced at the way his steady blue-eyed gaze focused on her.

"The little lady has an important decision to make. Why don't we give her a chance to mull it over a bit?" Regan suggested, standing to his full height. "Besides, I think I need some major cooling off."

For the briefest moment, Amanda felt a twinge of guilt. The two men sported erections hard enough to be classified as lethal weapons, yet they continued to respect the rules of engagement with her.

Kam was slower to agree and hesitated before he stood to his towering height. He extended a hand in her direction, pulling her easily to wobbly legs. She stumbled into his arms and didn't resist when he pulled her firmly into their circle. His cock nestled between their heated flesh. It was so large and so fucking tempting pressing against her soft belly. She craned her neck to look up into his face. His eyes studied her, and she got the distinct impression that he could see into her very soul. Could he tell how much she wanted him inside her at that moment? Instinctively, she stood on tiptoe. Her lips ached to feel his pressed against hers, to share intimacy instead of just taking it.

"If you kiss me, I'll take it as your decision. Are you ready for that?" The anticipation in Kam's voice was subtle.

Amanda was ready to forget the consequences, ready to give everything just for the taste of his mouth. His question slowly sank into her brain, and she retreated from his embrace with little resistance. Again she wondered what she was doing.

"Are you two coming?" Regan called from the deck, his voice retreating with his movements.

Amanda didn't answer. Instead she turned on her heels and practically ran after the other shifter before she did something she'd later regret. She fell easily in step with Regan's long strides, making sure to keep a wide-enough distance from him.

"Where exactly are we going?" she asked, trying to ignore the man she knew followed closely behind them. She wondered if he watched the way her hips and ass swayed, but dared not look back.

"There." Regan pointed to the vast lakeshore.

She looked at the open water as if seeing it for the first time. It was just what the doctor ordered to refresh her body and mind. Maybe after a vigorous swim she'd be thinking clearly again.

"Perfect." The word was out just as she sprinted toward the open lake. She barely had time to register the raised male voices as she went full speed into the water. The dive she'd planned to execute into the shallow end was cut short as the impact of the icy wetness shocked her system. Her eyes rounded while she alternated hopping from one leg to the next to ease the frigid chill. She turned to make her escape but found herself falling unceremoniously on her backside. Icy-hot pain shot through her, forcing her into motion, and she leaped from the water with a speed she hadn't known she could muster while in human form.

On the shore, both Regan and Kam stared at her as if she'd just jumped from an alien spacecraft. The bafflement on their faces was short-lived, because the two were immediately overcome with laughter that had them practically doubling over.

"Gee, thanks for the warning, guys." She let loose with several expletives, not caring how unladylike she sounded to them.

Regan was the first to speak. "We didn't think you'd jump in without shifting first. It makes the cold more tolerable."

"Oh, and how was I supposed to know that little detail?" She glared at both men.

The two exchanged looks as if she'd spoken in another language.

"You're not in California anymore, Amanda. It takes a bit longer for the water to warm up in these parts, so until it does, we make do. You'll get used to it," Kam explained, coming to her and pulling her into the warmth of his arms despite her protest.

As much as she hated to admit, having his strength wrapped around her felt good on so many levels. His body transferred delicious heat to hers, but that alone wasn't the reason she finally sank into his arms. No, Kam's embrace provided her with something she couldn't quite describe, and she was reluctant to let it or him go. But she did. After a long moment of being comforted in his hold, she stepped away. Their eyes met, and she was greeted by a look he'd fixed on her so many times that day. Only this time there was no questioning the obvious longing there. The force of desire hit her stronger than the freezing water she'd rushed from, only there was nothing cold about his stare. All

heat, his look promised hot sex, sin, and forever. Lord have mercy, but she wanted it too. When he would have reached for her again, she did the only thing she could and shifted into lion form before loping off into the cold water.

They were right; in her shifted form, she could better manage the chill of the water. In fact, it didn't take her long to get accustomed to the coldness and cat-paddle out into deeper depths. The men joined her in their much larger bear personas, diving and surfacing around her as if they were part fish. The sight was surely a spectacle to behold. A lion, a grizzly, and a black bear. Oh my! But even in their animal forms the men pursued her, albeit in a more playful manner, yet Amanda recognized the competition. Having had her fill of fun, and feeling thoroughly exhausted and completely famished, she paddled her way to the shore. Water sprayed from her damp fur as she shook herself. She'd rid herself of most of the moisture before she shifted back into human form. Sparing one glance over her shoulder, she saw Kam, as a grizzly, dive under the water again while Regan gave her a curious look before following suit with his fellow bear.

Inside, Amanda swiped up her discarded robe again and belted it loosely around her waist as she headed for the kitchen. She pulled the slab of meat from the oven, and her mouth instantly watered at the barely heated morsel. She felt a little guilty at the thought of eating the entire steak, but hunger won over. She trimmed herself a large helping and popped the morsel into her mouth just as the two men bounded into the cabin, each carrying four large fish. Amanda's nose twitched at the delicious scent.

"Don't you go getting any ideas, little kitty. Remember, you didn't want to share," Regan reminded her.

Amanda attempted an exasperated sigh that sounded completely forced to her own ears. "And you believed me? I was just about to carve this up three ways." She choked on the lie.

"I think the proof is fairly evident." He nodded toward the cut piece of steak.

"I had to taste it first."

He gave her a skeptical look. "And if I believe that, then I'm a monkey's uncle."

"I've always had my suspicions about your lineage," Kam commented. He took his catch to the fireplace, retrieved a large bowl-shaped container sitting in front of the hearth, then deposited the large pieces of salmon in the dish. He knelt in front of the fireplace to start a blaze, and Amanda's eyes were immediately drawn to the powerful bulge of his visible thigh. The muscle bunched beneath his fair skin, and she knew it would be hard to the touch.

"Why don't you bring your offering to the fireplace, and we'll see if it's worth trading for some fish?"

Regan's suggestion fell on nearly deaf ears. It took her several seconds to respond.

"Uh...sure, let me just get some plates and forks." She twirled away from the sight of Kam and busied herself with gathering eating utensils, which gave her something to do with her hands as well as an opportunity to reprimand herself for staring.

"You're kidding, right?" Regan's question came from the general proximity of Kam, she guesstimated without bothering to turn around.

"Of course not, there's no reason we can't sit and have a proper meal. There's nothing in shifter laws against it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda stared in disgust at the unused plates that were melting in the fireplace where Regan and Kam had tossed them. She'd barely managed to save the silverware from a similar fate. She eyed the males, who sat back sucking the remains of their meal from thick fingers, looking completely satisfied with themselves. She knew the looks were only partly due to their satiated bellies, and the other part had to do with her foiled attempt to bring them into modernity. Well, if they thought the expense was coming off her charge card, the lug heads had another think coming.

"You two are so paying for any destruction of property," she felt compelled to inform them.

Kam shrugged. "It's not the first time we've destroyed something of Earl's; it won't be the last. I'll make sure he adds it to our running tab."

"Just barbaric for no good reason," she muttered under her breath.

"You're repeating yourself, sweet kitty. I thought we'd already established that." Regan flashed her a rakish grin that had her smiling in return in spite of herself. She turned her gaze to the fire, needing something else to focus on other than the two of them. If she weren't careful, she might find herself liking both men and giving in to their arcane ways. The warmth from the fire chased away the afternoon chill, and Amanda found herself drawn in by the mesmerizing flames as they crackled, expanded, and danced within the confines of the hearth. Her eyes felt suddenly heavy, and she knew it wouldn't be too much longer before she succumbed to the weariness threatening to consume her.

"Come here, Amanda." The gentle command came from Kam. She could have ignored him but didn't see the point. Plus she doubted he would let the matter drop so simply. There was a gentleness in his face that made him seem endearing to her. He patted the empty space on the carpet between himself and Regan. Without comment, she slipped between them and sank into the softness of the material. She lay on her back, and it wasn't long before her eyes began to drift closed. Fingers traced the flat contours of her belly, and she managed to peek through one eye to see that they belonged to Kam. Of its own accord, a gentle purring started in the back of her throat. A new set of fingers trailed her outer thigh, and from the side chosen she knew it had to be Regan. What a beautiful end to an unordinary morning, she couldn't help but think as her mind drifted into heavy sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda awoke just as the sun dipped into the horizon. She knew that the sunset must be spectacular but dared not move from her spot to confirm the theory. Especially not when Regan was so contentedly suckling at her breasts.

Her moan of pleasure was a dead giveaway to her awakened state.

Regan raised his head, pinning her with another of his rakish smiles. "I was wondering when you'd wake up."

"Well, that's one surefire way to get me to," she answered sleepily.

"Why don't we see how much more of your attention I can get before big boy over there interrupts us?"

"Why do you tease him so much?"

Regan shrugged before propping himself on an elbow to look down at her. "It gets his goat and can make for an interesting way to pass the time during long winters."

"Because he's an asshole," Kam mumbled into the top of her hair, letting them both know he was fully aware of their conversation. His hand at her waist tugged her closer. It was a simple move, but one full of possession.

"It's not my fault that grizzlies are so easily domesticated and therefore are the source of jokes among bearkind," Regan added.

"Remember that the next time I'm kicking your ass, Nardeau."

Regan snorted, reached for her leg, and anchored it over his hip. Kam growled a low warning.

Neither tried to disguise their very prominent erections. In their position, it would be so easy for them both to take her. She'd only need to lift her hips a bit, and with a little manipulation she could be filled with two very thick cocks. She grew wet at the thought.

"Smell that, Victor. I think our little lady here is ready for another round of bear loving."

"I think you're right, but first her decision."

"Why can't we just forget this mating nonsense? I don't see why I can't just have both of you."

"And who do you suggest gets to sink into that hot, tight pussy of yours? Who will get to fill your womb with his seed?" Regan asked.

God help her, but the visual image his words conjured up made her even hotter.

Kam's hand stroked up her stomach until he cupped a firm breast. He pinched her nipple between two fingers, and she moaned, arching as much as possible into his touch.

"It's not so simple, kitten," Kam said. "Only your mate will have the privilege of fucking you. The privilege of having his seed take root in your belly."

"Time's up, my little lioness. You gotta choose," Regan said.

Amanda made to rise but was held in place by her thoroughly captured body.

"I can't. I don't know either of you well enough." It seemed funny to voice after the afternoon they'd spent, but it was the truth. Her choices from other Prides were men she'd grown up with, but these two men were strangers. Other than firsthand knowledge of how wickedly skillful their hands and mouths were, she didn't have enough information to make a decision that would impact the rest of her life.

"It can't be helped, kitten." Kam nuzzled her ear. "Bears are terribly possessive sorts, and I'm sure it's bothering Regan just as much as it is me to have another man's hands on his potential mate. So, if for no other reason, you have to put one of us out of our misery."

"Well, whose fault is that, exactly? If memory serves, the two of you suggested this little test. I was perfectly happy forgetting our paths had ever crossed." She didn't try to hide the smile in her voice. "At any rate, it's not fair of you to suggest I make a permanent decision without really knowing either of you from Adam."

It was Regan's turn to growl now, a frustrated sound with just a hint of playfulness added. "What more do you want to know?"

"How about I learn something about you both? You could start by telling me what your favorite foods are."

"Fish," came the echoed response.

"All right, maybe that was too obvious. Okay, what do you like to do for fun? And if you both say forage, I'm going to scream."

"Hunt." There was no hesitation in their stereo response.

Amanda sighed heavily. "Are you two linked telepathically or something, because this isn't helping."

"Think less like a human and more like a shifter, Amanda," Kam suggested. "What do your instincts tell you? Which of us makes your heart race? Whose touch do you crave most?" As he spoke, his fingers traced circular patterns around her navel, igniting butterflies in the pit of her stomach. He had to know the effect he had on her. Her choice was obvious; she just hated to admit it aloud. Her pussy moistened, and she bit her bottom lip to stave off the moan that threatened to escape.

"This is highly unorthodox," Amanda felt the need to say, but she was only prolonging the inevitable.

"Quit stalling, Amanda. We're both big boys here," Regan said, sliding his large callused hand up and down her thigh.

She closed her eyes and tried to block out the feel of them pressed so close to her. She wondered when her life had gone from complicated to impossible.

"Kam." The name came out just above a whisper, but there was no doubting the men had heard her clearly. Regan's hand stilled on her thigh, but other than that, there was no outward show of how he felt about her decision.

"Are you certain?" Regan asked.

Amanda opened her eyes slowly. Her gaze clashed with his green-eyed stare, although his expression still revealed nothing.

She nodded.

"There you have it, Nardeau. Now if you'd kindly untangle yourself from my future mate, I'll spare you a severe beating."

Regan grunted and removed himself, giving her thigh one last gentle squeeze. Kam's hand rested on her stomach as Regan rose and silently left the cabin.

"Alone at last," Kam said and propped himself on one arm while easing her onto her back.

Amanda couldn't miss the pleased expression on his face. Her heart jumped, causing her already restless belly to flip. In that instant, the other man was all but forgotten. It wouldn't be long now before the entire world evaporated from her thoughts.

"Okay, before we go any further, I have a few ground rules," she said, feeling the need to talk quickly.

Kam arched his brow at her.

"First, while I understand you like to live a more rustic lifestyle, I have to tell you that I can't live in a cave or anything close to one."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she silenced him with a finger to his lips. "Let me finish. I have to insist on returning home to bring my family up to speed on...us. And I have to insist that I visit some semblance of a city from time to time. As much as I admire our current surroundings, I'm still a city girl who enjoys a sporadic shopping spree and sinfully large helpings of mall cookies. Oh, and I simply must get out to see any movie starring Jackie Chan or Jet Li...or anything where martial arts is the primary theme of the film."

"Are you finished?" he asked as her finger fell away.

Amanda pretended to think. "For now, but I reserve the right to amend or add to the list of demands."

"Hon, this isn't a hostage negotiation. You'll be my mate, and as such, I *will* do everything in my power to see to your comfort, okay?"

It wasn't exactly the "yes, dear" response she was looking for, but Amanda doubted she'd ever get it.

"Anything else you'd like to address?" He stroked her hair, tickling her scalp with each brush of his fingers.

"Since you've asked. About the whole cub thing...you do know there are methods we can use to hold off on that sort of thing."

"That really was a rhetorical question, Amanda, but since you've broached the subject, why would we want to prevent our children?"

"Well, there is the little matter of getting to know each other more, which would probably best be done with just the two of us."

A low, rumbling sound edged its way from the back of his throat. "There you go, thinking like a human again. We're shifters. We mate, we have offspring, and we have the rest of our lives to thoroughly learn each other. There is no divorce, no separation; we're in this for keeps."

She knew that, and it was probably why her stomach wouldn't settle and was also why her hands had gone clammy with nervous tension.

"You are mine as I am yours." He recited the words she'd heard exchanged in many mating ceremonies done in the presence of family and friends. Funny how she'd once thought of that simple sentence as mundane tradition. Having him say the words to her and knowing that her life would forever be changed by them made her reflect on her life and ponder their future.

"Amanda." His tone urged her to respond.

She knew what he wanted. "I...I am yours as you are mine."

She half expected the earth to stop rotating on its axis, for the sun to reverse in the sky. When none of that happened, she expelled the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She blinked up at him, mentally scolding herself for being so dramatic. They were but two people about to engage in an act as old as time itself. Nothing extraordinary. Or so she thought until his head descended toward hers.

The first touch of Kam's lips on hers was like an electric shock to her system, but a trillion times more pleasurable. He didn't ease her into his brand of kissing. Instead he took her from zero to a hundred in one second flat. His tongue probed its way into her mouth, refusing to be denied any access, yet he gave as good as he got. He wound his fingers into the tight curls of her hair while he laid siege to her. She did more than surrender. She reached out and pulled him closer, latching onto his shoulders for leverage. He came to her without resistance, nudging her legs wide to settle between her thighs. His cock nestled against her cunt, its length stretching and pressing against her clit. He rotated his hips, sending bolts of excitement through her little nub that spiraled throughout her body. She groaned into his mouth, digging her nails into the hard flesh of his shoulders.

"Mine," he rasped against her lips and trailed heavy kisses down the side of her face and neck. Amanda felt the distinct prick of sharp incisors graze her, an enticement, a prelude for what was to come when he demanded her total submission. He lingered a little longer at the hollow of her neck, his thick, coarse tongue stroking her flesh until she writhed beneath him. In answer, Kam pressed his hips forward, and his cock bore down even harder against her sensitive clit. She bucked beneath him, matching his rhythm. Her pussy quivered and clenched. She wished he were buried deep inside her. How she wanted to flex around his thick shaft. His lips stopped their journey at the swell of one breast, and he homed in on her nipple, flicking the already elongated flesh with the tip of his tongue. She arched and bucked at the same time. She waited for the full force of his mouth on her, but Kam had other plans. As he toyed with the pebbled flesh, a rush of hot air from his mouth circled the sensitive nub. A flick of his tongue



made her arch her back for more, and the firm nip of his teeth followed by a tug stretched the tender flesh until she moaned.

Her body went up in flames as if she hadn't already experienced three sweet orgasms that day. "Please," she begged.

"Tell me what you want." The low command sounded rough, barely discernible.

Her breath came in shallow gasps. "You. I want you to fuck me, please. I'm so...so..." She ground her teeth in frustration when he pulled away from her.

His heated gaze held her mesmerized, and no more words were spoken. They both understood the other's need, what had to be done. His predatory look ignited a primal longing in her. Her movements were slow as she raised herself to her elbows and shifted her position carefully, turning her back to him and dropping to her hands and knees. His large hand pressed into her back, and she capitulated, making sure to leave her exposed rear in the air as her upper body bent toward the floor. He grabbed the curves of her ass, kneading the firm flesh. She jerked when his hand suddenly cupped her sopping cunt, and Kam's response was immediate, a warning growl that had her settling back and spreading her legs wider to give him better access to her puckered ass and creaming pussy. He pushed a finger into her heated channel, and she bucked against it with excitement, eager to feel him buried inside her. Disappointment racked her when just as quickly the finger retreated.

"No more," she pleaded. "I need you to fuck me now."

"Show your need for your mate."

She did so gladly, turning her head to one side to give him full view of her neck. It was the ultimate act of submission. Amanda's heart soared as the tip of his cock pushed between her nether lips, stretching her slit. She felt the rounded tip work its way up and down her cunt, gathering her juices for lubrication. Her mind reeled when he pushed forward in one long, deep thrust that impaled her completely, and her pussy pulsed in protest at the thick invasion. He held his position as her channel stretched to accustom itself to his girth. He retreated only to plunge forward again, withdrawing and returning with deep, penetrating lunges, over and over, until he settled in a rhythm that left her clawing her fingers into the thick carpeting. Exquisite pleasure the likes of which she'd never before experienced rolled through her with each thrust.

"Oh yes," she crooned. Her hips jerked in uncontrolled eagerness.

Kam wrapped an arm around her waist, slamming into her body with pleasurable force. She felt the steady build of an orgasm as it wound her body tight, and her vessels expanded with the rush of blood coursing through her body. Her heart hammered in her ears. Her legs quaked under her weight and the rough ride she was receiving. The throbbing in her was intense.

"My pussy," he ground out. Kam pumped in and out of her faster and faster.

The sound of flesh on flesh mingled with their panting gasps, and pleasure knotted in her belly. His teeth sank into her soft flesh as he swelled unbelievably larger inside her. She cried out from the sharp pain of his bite and the earth-shattering orgasm

that rocked her completely, filling her head with a piercing white light that sent her falling into an endless abyss of delight.

“Fuck yes!” she howled. Her pussy milked his cock in the aftermath of her climax, spurring him on to his own orgasmic voyage that had him spilling his seed deep in her womb as he branded her permanently as his.

## Chapter Six

In his forty years of living, Kam Victor had never felt so thoroughly complete, and it was all due to the sleeping woman at his side. His woman. His mate. Earl and Amanda's miscommunication had turned out to be his greatest gift. Kam owed his distant neighbor big-time for the blunder and was determined to make sure he was significantly rewarded. From the first moment he had caught her scent, Kam had known he would have her. He'd kept his distance as he considered his options, but then that pain in the ass Nardeau had started sniffing around and he'd known he needed to act quickly. It was mating season in bear country, and the natives were restless. Unfortunately for him, his friend of many years rivaled him in persistence and, unlike most, wasn't at all intimidated by Kam's larger stature. He couldn't blame Regan for wanting Amanda. Women were scarce in the area, and female shifters were a definite prize indeed. Add to that Amanda's natural beauty, and it was cause enough for a pretty competitive environment. In the end, he was triumphant and very pleased.

It was amazing how quickly he'd taken to her. Already her scent was ingrained in the very fiber of his being as he was certain his was within hers. He'd made sure of that when he marked her. In sleep, she lay on her stomach, her neck and the evidence of his claim clear. Even with their accelerated healing, he knew it would be a while before the mark was completely gone. Still, when the visible indication diminished, his claim would remain and be recognized by all shifters. Her head turned in his direction as if she were aware of his watchful gaze. He felt a modicum of guilt when she let out a soft, painful gasp. Perhaps in his zealousness to claim her he'd been a bit too rough, but he'd wanted her with an unfamiliar intensity, and when he'd finally buried himself in her tight, hot sheath, his only thought was of dominating her in every sense of the word. It didn't help that she'd bucked so wildly beneath him or that she'd throbbed around his cock so deliciously. His body sprang to life at the memory, and his eyes roved her naked form. She was magnificent. Her deep brown skin was like silk to the touch. She

was sleek perfection all over, and her ass. His cock throbbed. He was an ass man and had hit the mother lode with Amanda. He couldn't resist stroking her firm ass, which rose so high before dipping into the small of her back. She was toned yet soft and feminine beneath his fingers. Call him crazy, but he even loved the wild mass of curls that now obscured her face. It was a completely irrational thought, but he was jealous of the slumber that now claimed her. She was a vision, and if he sat there much longer, he'd wake her from her much-needed sleep. Reluctantly, he heaved himself from the floor with a need to do something productive with his time or run the risk of having her awoken with him thrusting deep inside her.

Kam left the cabin quietly and shifted into bear form with a single-minded focus

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Even with her eyes closed, Amanda recognized Kam's presence in front of the fireplace. She opened them slowly to see him adding wood to the dying embers. From her vantage point, she had a perfect view of his backside as he balanced himself on his haunches. She was amazed by his steady position, but that quickly gave way to a different type of appreciation. He was a brilliant specimen of a man. Large, but she'd be hard-pressed to find an ounce of fat on him. Hell, the man's back rippled with muscular definition that would impress a bodybuilder.

"You keep staring at me like that and I'm going to forget my noble intention to feed you breakfast in bed," he said, turning his head to give her a long look over his shoulder.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call this bed," she returned, feeling no shame at being caught staring. She propped herself on her elbows, stretching and crossing her legs in front of her, just short of touching him with her toes.

"I didn't hear you complaining last night."

"That's because I was too busy fighting you off."

"Hmm, I guess that would explain my scratch marks."

Amanda made a face at him, then kicked out playfully with her foot. Kam swiveled quickly, catching her heel before it could make contact. She let out a surprised laugh as she tried jerking out of his firm grasp.

"Not so fast." Kam shifted his hold to her ankle as he lifted her foot higher for his scrutiny. "You know, it doesn't bode well to begin a relationship with such violence."

Amanda giggled when his other hand began caressing her instep.

"Perhaps all you need is a gentle hand to curb your violent tendencies."

"And you think you're the right man for the job?" The question was asked coyly.

"I'm the only man for it."

She quirked a brow, prepared to respond with a witty rebuttal, but lost her train of thought when Kam's lips descended toward her toes. He watched her as he placed

tender kisses on their tips. Her heart leaped, a reaction that apparently was something she'd have to learn to get used to around him. His tongue snaked out to taste her flesh, and then he nipped her first toe, sucking it between his lips with a sensuality that left her squirming. He didn't stop there. Rather, he took his time lavishing each of the five digits with his wicked tongue until she moaned.

"Is this your way of trying to get out of feeding me?" she groaned.

"On the contrary, I plan to feed one hunger first, then concentrate on the other."

"And who says I want to forgo food for what you have in mind?" She tried to keep her voice steady as his tongue continued its carnal enticement. He sucked all five toes into his mouth slowly. He observed her in the way that made her feel he had insight into her soul. His movements were slow when he finally placed her foot on the floor. Just like that she was on fire, eager for him to slide deep inside her without the preamble of foreplay. Normally she enjoyed the stimulation of the sensual activity, but with Kam she only seemed to enjoy him, preferably hot and heavy inside her.

"If you'd rather, we can start with our meal," he suggested.

*To hell with that.* In answer, she pulled free from his hold and moved with seamless fluidity, tucking her legs beneath her, then coming to rest on her knees directly in front of him. He mimicked her position but made no move to touch her. His cock was like steel between them. She smiled up at him, noticing how he managed to dwarf her while resting on his knees. Her arms snaked up his chest and crossed behind his neck, and she pulled him toward her, impatient to feel the touch of his mouth on hers.

The caress of his lips was as she remembered except he tasted oddly of a sweetness she couldn't place. She initiated the action, but there was no question who was in control. She felt the vibration before a rumbling sound emitted from within his chest. His kiss deepened and his tongue prodded its way into her mouth.

Kam reached between their bodies, and she gasped when he cupped her sex. His deft fingers spread her folds and zeroed in on her clit. Amanda moaned into his mouth as her arms tightened around his neck to steady her and provide leverage for her to rock against his strumming fingers. Her pussy spasmed from the excitement and deprivation.

She was reluctant to break their contact but wanted him inside her even more.

Amanda leaned backward and demonstrated her incredible flexibility. She unfolded herself and placed her feet flat on the ground. Bending her knees slightly, she spread her legs wide, showing him her aroused sex. The gleam in his eyes made her smile, and she crooked her finger at him in invitation. Kam growled before following her. The look he gave her smoldered. He nudged her legs wider to accommodate his girth. If she thought he would give her what she wanted so easily, she was mistaken. He braced himself over her, keeping his full weight off her smaller frame. It was a simple gesture, yet her heart expanded.

He bent, dropping his body back just enough to target her breasts. His tongue snaked out to twirl around one areola, causing the already puckered flesh to tighten

even more. He teased her until she tingled with excitement. Heat ricocheted throughout her body. She cried out, arching for more. He gave it to her. No longer content with just lapping at the pebbled nub, he sucked it into his mouth as if it were the sweetest treat. When he plucked the elongated nipple, her body jerked in reaction. Her moist pussy gushed. He teased her mercilessly, switching the sweet torture to her other breast until she was bucking beneath him. She reached for his back and did her best to pull him into her. His superior strength wouldn't be budged, and his thrilling harassment wouldn't be thwarted.

She was shocked at the first sign of pressure building up in her core. "I don't want to come yet."

He reared up and quirked a sexy brow at her coyly. "No?"

"I want you inside me," she whimpered, not caring that she sounded like the needy female she was in this space of time.

"How do you want me?"

She didn't care, so long as he eased the tension.

"Shall I give you a rough ride? I think you liked that. Or would you like it slow?"

His words only aided in enticing her more, and she squirmed beneath him. "Fuck me, make love to me. I don't care which."

"I aim to please, my dear mate." He sank slowly into her damp heat then. Blue eyes watched her face, as if studying her every reaction. Her pussy stretched and creamed around his long shaft as he pushed forward until he was buried deep inside her. He gyrated his pelvis in slow circular motions, stimulating her clit.

"Ohhh." She groaned her pleasure, hips rolling in time with his. He was skilled beyond belief, and he was all hers. He alternated between long, deep thrusts and pelvic rotations that had her nails digging into his back. She was coming apart, but this time she didn't try to stop it. Her orgasm built like a wave, crested, then broke around her, sending delicious ripples through her. She throbbed around Kam's thrusting dick, keeping pace with him even as his moves became more hurried. His cock swelled unbelievably.

He threw back his head, and a low howl emanated from him as he emptied himself into her. His body quivered and he retreated, only to drive into her a final time. He rolled onto his side, pulling her with him.

"That was great," she mumbled into his chest.

"Just great?"

She chuckled. "Hey, you gotta start somewhere."

"We'll see who's laughing in a few minutes."

"That's all you got in you --"

She squealed when Kam flipped her to her back and sank into her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda gave the last remaining berry in the oversize bowl a disinterested look, but Kam wasn't fooled. She wanted it, the same way she'd wanted him only a half hour before. He held back his smile as he shook the container, which sent the fruit on another circuit around the interior. Her eyes followed the circular movement until he was certain she'd get dizzy from the repetitive motion. She tensed when his fingers unexpectedly snaked the plump morsel from its mission. They'd just finished up the rather substantial breakfast of fish and berries he'd gathered, and sat opposite one another in their natural splendor. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight than Amanda sitting cross-legged with a small throw pillow plopped on her lap. Such untamed, natural beauty should never be clothed. Her hair had taken on a life of its own, sprouting to a curly afro that she'd swiped at unsuccessfully a few times. He wanted her to remain that way for as long as possible without all the notions of perfection city women adopted.

He twirled the juicy berry in his hand, pretending to examine it closely.

"These sure were good." It was becoming increasingly difficult to hide his amusement. "I'm stuffed, but I could never resist the temptation of them. Even as a kid, I'd sit by a blueberry bush for hours and pluck it clean, at least until my mother grew tired of calling me and pulled me away kicking and screaming."

"For God's sake, eat the damned thing already and stop trying to regale me with the saga of a cub and his berry fetish."

The smile that threatened broke across his face. "And here I thought to feed this last one to you, especially seeing as how you enjoyed three-quarters of the bowl, but if you can't even muster up enough politeness to listen as I share a fond childhood memory..."

Amanda rolled her eyes, letting loose an exasperated sigh. "Well, hurry up with it, why don't ya, because at this rate I can go pick my own."

Without warning, Kam flicked the berry high into the air and watched with pleasure as Amanda leaned forward, craned her long, slender neck, and caught the delicacy. She flashed him a quick view of it from between the front of her porcelain teeth before letting it fall into her mouth.

"Now that was truly *perrrrfect*, and to show you my appreciation, I'll even take care of clean up." She snatched the bowl from his hands and was up heading for the adjoining kitchen before he could get a word in, not that he had much to say as he thoroughly languished in the view of her walking away. He knew he had it bad as he rose to follow. His fingers itched for the feel of her.

He leaned against the open counter opposite the kitchen sink while she made quick work of cleaning the bowl and her meager dishes from earlier.

"So what's going to happen to Regan now?"

He stiffened, partially because he hadn't anticipated the question and because he didn't like the fact that she inquired about the other man. She'd made her decision when she chose him, and he wanted to be the only male to consume her thoughts. He'd

hoped to erase any lingering thoughts of the shared intimacy between herself and his friend. His hand clenched in reflex at the idea that she possibly doubted her choice.

"He'll live to mate another season."

"But you both said that women up here are scarce."

Kam nodded, wanting to change the topic of conversation.

"So what does he do?"

"He waits for his own mate, and if he's smart, he'll stay as far away from mine as possible."

Amanda crooked a brow at him. "Sounds a bit possessive, don't you think?"

He shrugged. "Call it what you like, but you belong to me now. There will be no going back from that."

"*Belong* is a mighty strong word."

"Yup."

The stern look she shot in his direction and her arms crossed over her bare chest didn't faze him.

"You know, most people have done away with such archaic notions of a woman belonging to a man."

"I'm not most people. Need I remind you that we're both shifters and as such don't live by nonshifter expectations or their so-called evolved social norms?"

"Well, let me enlighten you to something too, buddy. I'm a freethinking individual, who is very much the product of a modern environment, and if you think for one second that I'm just going to capitulate to a subservient lifestyle, you have another think coming."

He could almost see the cogs in her brain at work. She was drawing her line in the sand as if in doing so he would back down. The bear in him took notice of the challenge. It welcomed the dare, but it was the man in him who spoke.

"I don't need your subservience. I'll always cherish your free spirit and appreciate who you are as my mate and as a person. But let me make this abundantly clear: you are mine, and as such, I am entrusted with certain responsibilities and obligations that I *will* fulfill. I expect there will be times that we disagree and times when you will fight me on certain issues, but in the end, my will must be obeyed."

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it just as quickly. He remained quiet as she contemplated his words. He could tell from her posturing she didn't agree with his assertion, but there would be no backing down on his part. It was essential that a clear understanding of their relationship be established. He expected it would take some getting used to. Amanda was a woman accustomed to a certain amount of freedom and independence, and although she was shifter, she'd obviously lived like a nonshifter for far too long.

"How in the world am I going to break this to my dad?"



The unexpected comment was said more to herself, but he couldn't let it go unaddressed. She needed to know that he would be there for her no matter the situation.

"We'll do it together."

Her eyes rounded, and he couldn't help but notice the anxious look in their depths. "No, you don't understand. My father won't take this news well. It's probably best if I do it alone to give him a chance to accept things."

"But you're not in this alone and I will not hide behind my mate. No, when you tell your family, I plan to be right there at your side."

"It'll be your funeral," she muttered.

He chuckled. "You only wish you could get rid of me so easily."

"I'm serious. My dad won't approve of our mating one bit."

It wasn't what Kam wanted to hear. The last thing he needed was to create strife between Amanda and her family. He only hoped her Pride would show some semblance of tolerance around he and his mate because he wouldn't stand for anyone hurting her, not even family. "So tell me what your father has against bears."

She gave a nervous laugh, but he was happy to see her arms relax their position. "He doesn't have anything against bears or any other shifters, per se. He just really has this thing about keeping our bloodline 'intact.' He expected me to pick a mate from one of the other larger Prides."

"How did you manage to put it off for this long?"

"Luck and a supportive surrogate mother. She convinced my dad to let me join the services."

"Remind me to thank her for that."

Amanda attempted a smile that didn't quite succeed. It was obvious the matter was of serious concern to her, and he'd do everything in his power to make things easier.

At her continued silence, he probed further. "Pride life must not have held much appeal for you to put it off for so long."

She shrugged before rounding the counter. "I'm a lioness; it's the life I'm expected to lead."

"Were expected," he corrected. An unfamiliar sadness nagged at his heart as he watched her move into the living area where she began reorganizing the spacious interior back to its original state. Kam shook off the irrational thought that she was trying to erase any evidence of their frenzied lovemaking. The urge to stop her hurried efforts was strong, yet a part of him knew she needed to keep a bit of distance. He'd allow her the space for the time being. "And you didn't answer my question. Does Pride life appeal to you?"

"Some aspects of it do, but I...I never..."

"Never what, Amanda?"

She turned to him, her gaze heavy with unshed tears. "As horrible as it sounds, I never wanted it for myself. It just isn't in me. I think my surrogate mother understood that about me."

The pain in her voice gripped his heart, and he closed the distance between them in a few long strides. She resisted as he pulled her into his embrace, but it was a fruitless effort. A long-held breath escaped her as her efforts quieted.

"I understand what it's like to feel out of place with the mainstream way of thinking. But who you are is on the inside. Listen to your instinct, to your nature."

She sniffed. "But that's supposed to be my nature. I'm lion."

"Lion yes, but that doesn't mean you have to follow a script. You're an individual."

She nuzzled his chest, coating the area with her tears. "So I guess that means I can forget all that stuff you said about me obeying your will, since I'm an individual and all?"

He chuckled at her quick wit. "No."

"Typical male, says one thing but does another."

"I'd like to think that I'm a step above being typical."

"Hmm, should I comment on just how typical that response was?"

"Only if you want to feel the sting of my hand on your backside."

Amanda pulled back just enough for him to see her interested look. "Are you trying to threaten me with a good time?"

He paused, not expecting the retort. Could it be his kitten enjoyed a firm hand on occasion? He hoped so. Although far from a sadist, he did enjoy administering a lusty spanking from time to time. The key was finding a woman who could appreciate such physical attention. It was yet another reason to count himself lucky. He wondered exactly how she liked her swats administered. Would she prefer the creative use of an instrument or the primal contact of flesh against flesh? Kam knew which method he'd prefer. He suppressed a groan at the thought of her turned over his knee, his hand cupped and poised to deliver a delicious sting. His cock stirred with hope, and it took every effort to prevent the budding erection from erupting into an undeniable hard-on. He decided he'd have to be patient a little longer; right now she needed an ear more than another lusty romp. As much as he wanted to toss her over his shoulder and carry her up the stairs leading to the loft, instead he suggested, "Let's go for a walk."

It may not have been exactly what she'd expected him to say, especially seeing as how his cock was blooming against the warm flesh of her stomach. She didn't protest as he broke their embrace and took a firm hold of her hand before leading them from the cabin where they'd shared so many impassioned hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

Would being mated to him always be this way? Nights and days of orgasmic pleasure and thoughtfulness that made her heart want to weep? God, she hoped so. Who knew, she might come to like her life in Alaska with her barbarian. They'd lived like Adam and Eve in the cabin hideaway for the last couple of days. Amanda didn't think that anything could possibly intrude on their cohabitation, at least not for the next week. A large part of her dreaded the end of her rental period, when she'd have to relocate to the far-more-primitive abode of her mate. Even more than that, she hated the idea of returning to her family's compound to break the news of her mating to her parents.

Amanda pushed the thought aside, preferring to bask in the present. She listened as Kam moved about the kitchen, putting coffee on to boil in the old-fashioned percolator. She wished he'd rejoin her soon. Her gaze skimmed the lake, and she smiled to herself, remembering the way they'd romped in shifted form there in the wee hours of the morning. She directed her gaze to a not-so-distant mountain range. It was still a place left unexplored, and she was determined to have Kam indulge her in exploring the area. Thus far their outings amounted to brief nature walks and romps in the lake before they became inspired to pursue more erotic adventures. Her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of something in the distance. Dark clouds puffed above the tree line in symmetrical formations.

"Is that smoke?" she asked as Kam sidled up behind her, wrapping his strong arms around her bare waist. Behind her, he stiffened, and she knew the answer to her question before he spoke. "Earl has a transistor radio. Should I call in for help?" From the distance, the smoke seemed nonthreatening, but there was no telling how quickly things could change.

"No, it's not a fire."

"Maybe not anything significant, but where there's smoke there's bound to be fire."

Kam kissed the back of her head in a habit she'd grown quite fond of. "It's a message."

"What?" She stared as two new puffs emerged one after the other before dissipating in the sky. There was a long break before three more clouds rose.

It couldn't be. "You mean to tell me someone is sending smoke signals?"

"Not just anyone. Regan."

"And you know this because?" Understanding dawned as the last word rolled off her tongue. "Tell me you can't read smoke signals?"

"It's our preferred method of communication," he said matter-of-factly.

He couldn't have floored her more if he'd said he could fly. "Okay, you did hear me when I said Earl has a transistor radio?"

"Yes, and those things are a pain and not too convenient to tote in shifted form."

Heaven help her, but she'd permanently hitched herself to a man so far removed from the twenty-first century it would take the better part of her lifetime to catch him up on the basics of the modern world. With any effort she might just be able to convince him to build them a right palatial home like Earl's.

"What does he say?"

"There's trouble in his territory."

Amanda found herself squinting at the clouds as if in doing so they would form into readable words. She'd obviously have to enroll in a beginner's course of Smoke Signals 101. "What kind of trouble?"

"I'm not sure, but I should go take a look."

"Okay. It would probably be faster if we traveled in shifted form. That looks like a nice distance."

"Almost a day's journey, but I can't take you with me."

She turned in his arms to stare up into his startling blue eyes. "You're joking, right?"

"No. Whatever has happened must be pretty important for Regan to disturb us. I can't risk taking you."

She stood on tiptoe but still only managed to place a kiss on his chin. "It's sweet of you to worry, but you forget I'm a trained soldier. Highly trained, in fact. Special Ops."

"A career choice I'm happy to see come to an end, but I can't risk your safety."

"You won't be. I choose to go. Besides, three heads are better than two."

"Others will probably answer the call too."

"See, it's sounding safer already. We should probably get going." Her attempt to pull free of his hold was easily thwarted.

"You're not going, kitten." His tone was quiet, and his words were slow and deliberate. "I don't have time to argue with you over this."

"So don't and we can go." She braced her hands against his rock-hard chest and pushed without success.

"Don't make this any more difficult than it already is. I'll be back as soon as I can, but I want you to stay put. Is that understood?"

*Yeah, right.* "And you expect me to sit on my hands like the dutiful woman waiting for your return?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation or apology in his tone. "The longer I stand here, the worse things could be getting for Regan."

If someone else's life weren't in question, she'd have stood and argued her point, but it was and she couldn't allow herself to be so selfish.

"Fine, go," she said, trying to keep her anger in check as she looked away from him. For good measure, she focused her stare on a distant tree, biding her time until he

had to release her. A finger under her chin forced her head forward, but she chose not to make eye contact.

"You *will* stay here." It wasn't a request.

"Should I roll over or perform any other tricks while I'm at it?"

"Perhaps we'll explore that when I get back. I've always wanted to challenge the assumption that cats can't be trained."

"In your dreams."

"We'll just have to see. Now why don't you give your mate a send-off that will make me rush back to your arms?"

"Trust me, dear mate, the send-off I'd like to give you would render you incapable of rushing anywhere."

It infuriated her when she heard his easy chuckle. Regan or not, she was prepared to give him more than just a piece of her mind when his head swooped down and his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that conquered her mind and body. She was like putty in his arms. A big, soft pushover. By the time the kiss ended, she was clinging to him like some simpleton. It was pathetic, really, and only made worse by her sulking heart as he shifted into bear form and bounded down the stairs with a brief backward glance.

## Chapter Seven

Women in romance novels, not soldiers, pined away for their loves, but Amanda wasn't sure what else to call her vigil since Kam's abrupt departure. She found herself taking every meal on the deck and staring off in the direction he'd disappeared. She tried occupying her day with as many activities as possible but found her mind wandering to Kam and what might have happened to him. If she cleaned one more spot in Earl's cabin, she was liable to leave him a bill for her services. Even her exploratory walks turned into quick jaunts because of her eagerness to return to the cabin in case Kam returned.

By day two, she'd had enough and decided to track him down. To her disappointment, she lost his scent about a mile from the cabin. At first Amanda thought her emotions were affecting her tracking abilities. She'd mastered the art of ferreting out people and prey that were cunning and adept at camouflage many times in her career. Yet all her years of training and practice failed her now. His scent seemed to be all around her, confusing her senses, and his physical trail was a puzzle she couldn't seem to solve, leading her to dead ends time and time again. It didn't take her long to realize he'd done it all deliberately. By the time she returned to the cabin, her concern over Kam's safety was rapidly giving way to anger. She was certain he'd rationalize his deception by quoting a concern for her safety and had probably never considered the possibility that he might become a victim. The big barbarian lout may have walked right into harm's way with his macho, arrogant attitude.

"Hmm, just maybe the answer to my prayers," she huffed and immediately regretted the words. The last thing she wished was for something to happen to him.

Amanda's worried musings were interrupted by the sound of static coming from the living room. She immediately recognized the noise as coming from the antiquated two-way radio and bounded off the porch's rocker.

"Hello." She tried to keep the concern from her voice. Immediately, she suspected the worst, and images of an injured Kam plagued her mind.

"This is the land livery trying to reach the renter in Earl's cabin, over."

"This is she. I'm Amanda Spoils."

"Glad to reach you on the first try, ma'am."

Amanda recognized the southern twang of the store attendant, and her heart leaped into her throat as to what would have him making contact with her.

"Sorry to give you such bad news this way, ma'am, but we've received word that a loved one was injured."

Amanda couldn't speak. Her legs shook before finally giving out altogether. Luckily for her, there was a chair close enough to prevent her from landing on the ground, and she hit the wooden seat with a *thud*.

"Wha...what happened?" she asked after several silent swallows.

"I don't rightly know, ma'am, but I've already dispatched a boat to your location to bring you back to the mainland. One of the locals has a small Cessna he's willing to use to take you to the airport once you arrive."

"Dear God," she breathed. It was worse than she'd imagined.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm here... A boat's coming to take me to a plane," she repeated for her benefit as well as his. Had Kam been taken to a city hospital? Were his injuries that severe?

"Your brother said he'd have your family's plane waiting for you at the Anchorage airport."

The man's words were slow to penetrate her distraught mind. Did he say her brother? What did Leo have to do with Kam?

"My brother?" That was impossible; Leo didn't even know where she was, let alone how to get in contact with her.

"Yes, ma'am, he said your mother was in the hospital."

Her heart lurched. Her mother. "But what happened?"

"That he didn't say, ma'am. Just asked if there was a way we could contact you and get you to the Anchorage airport as quick as possible."

"Mom," she said weakly.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

Of course she wasn't all right. She was all alone in a secluded cabin while her mother lay in a hospital thousands of miles away. How the hell did he think she was doing? "You said the boat's on its way?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd say he should be there in about another twenty minutes or so. Uh...will you be coming back alone? George's airplane is a three-seater, but not large enough for...um...extra cargo."

She knew what the man was asking; the extra cargo he referred to was a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound bear shifter. Under different circumstances, she might have taken a few moments to rail at him. "It's just me."

"How'd you manage...? I mean, I'll let the pilot know."

"Thank you."

No sooner had Amanda ended the transmission than she was gathering her personal items and tossing them in her bag. By the time she finished packing and dressing for her trip, the sound of a boat's engine could be heard in the distance. Once she'd locked up the cabin and made her way to shore, the boat was already pulling up to the makeshift dock. They were speeding back toward the little town before she realized she hadn't left a note for Kam. For a brief moment, she considered what his reaction would be when he found her gone but pushed it to the back of her mind. Her family needed her right now. Her mother needed her now; she'd have to deal with whatever Kam felt later.

As long as the journey to get to the remote location had taken, the return trip seemed ten times longer. Her brain worked overtime, trying to play out possible scenarios in her mind. No sooner had the small plane set down at the Anchorage airport than she was pulling out her cell phone and dialing Leo.

He answered on the second ring. "Thank God someone was able to reach you. It took me a while to track you down."

*A while?* Her stomach flopped. "How's my mom? What happened?"

"Don't worry; everything's better now. So just breathe."

Easy for him to say. "Leo, what's going on?"

"First off, it wasn't your mom -- it's Helena. She's in the hospital in New York."

Was that supposed to reassure her? Helena was closer to her -- to them -- than their own biological mothers. "How is she?"

"Better, stable now. It was pretty sketchy for a minute."

Amanda waved her thanks to the pilot as she ran with her duffel bag into the airport's private entrance. "Sketchy? What the hell is she doing in New York? She's supposed to be in Egypt, for cripes sake. Wait, hold that thought."

Amanda stopped at the information counter just inside the door and asked for directions to the boarding area for private jets. She repeated the simple instruction that would take her down two different corridors before rushing off. "Okay, go," she said to her brother.

"Obviously she didn't go to Egypt as we all thought. From what I've gathered, she's been working on something big, but she won't tell me anything about it until you're here."

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief but wondered what the hell Helena had gotten herself mixed up in now. "How did you find me, Leo?"

"A little investigative work on my part." His voice brimmed with pride.



"Meaning?"

"I did a little hacking on your laptop after trying the normal channels for civilians. I thought the military was just giving me the runaround. I'm surprised I didn't have a couple of Feds show up at the house. When I realized I wasn't going to get anywhere with them, I took matters into my own hands. Imagine my disappointment when I didn't find myself privy to some top secret governmental assignment."

Any other time Amanda would have been furious with her brother's snooping, but she was glad his computer savvy had managed to come in handy. "You said she's stable now. What kind of injuries could she have sustained that her body couldn't mend from on its own?"

There was a brief pause. "Two gunshot wounds. One just missed a lung, and the other lodged itself in her spleen."

"What?" Her surprised shout had several people staring in her direction. She was happy to see the check-in point for private plane passengers a few yards away. Helena would have a lot of explaining to do. "Did you say shot, like with a gun?"

"Yup. She asked the doctor if he could give the bullets to her as mementos."

"She didn't."

That was definitely something Helena would say. Her own mother swore Helena was certifiable, and this latest misadventure was starting to convince Amanda that her parent just might be on to something.

Leo chuckled. "Sure did. The detective said they'd need them for their investigation."

Amanda groaned. Of course the police would be involved, at least until their father intervened. "Where's Dad? It doesn't sound like him to stand by and not get answers from Helena or to even let the police interfere in what he'd probably deem as a Pride issue."

"You guys should be here within hours of each other. Seems as if Dad was making a surprise visit to Helena in Egypt. It took me a day to track him down too. I swear, the two of you are the most secretive individuals."

Amanda didn't try to dispute his statement. Just wait till they found out about her latest secret. "Leo, I'm almost to the check-in so I gotta let you go, but I'll see you in a few hours. I'll get a car at the airport. Until we figure out what Helena's mixed up in, I want you to stay with her at the hospital."

"Gotcha."

Amanda disconnected the call and slipped her cell into the front pocket of her jeans before tossing her bags in for the security check. Her mind couldn't help but run through possible scenarios that could have led to Helena's shooting. Who would want to shoot someone so sweet? Sure, the other Pride mates had threatened to strangle her on more than one occasion, but they'd opted instead for mostly ignoring her. Others, including Amanda and Leo, thought she was the cat's meow, and as much as her father

grumbled over her outrageous behavior, even he couldn't get upset with her "inappropriate" antics.

To say he'd take issue with her current predicament was an understatement. Lance Spoils would definitely be putting his hefty paw down to get to the bottom of things. Mentally, she cringed and hoped she beat her father to the hospital to get the full story before Helena pled the Fifth as she was most certain to do in her mate's presence. Amanda could see it now; her surrogate mother would demand Lance calm down and listen rationally, which would only get his ire up more. It wouldn't be a pretty picture. Selfishly, she hoped that it would distract from the second thing to surely give her father an ulcer. Amanda's thoughts shifted to her own mate. This reunion would definitely not be the time to go into particulars like Kam's lineage; it would be hard enough to explain how and why she'd taken a mate without informing her family first. The thought of her mate raised more questions. Was he okay? Had he returned to the cabin? Would he be upset to find her gone? She was sure her answer to the latter would be yes, and could only hope he'd calm down enough by the time she returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda was glad that she had prepared herself for the worst, because seeing Helena hooked up to ventilators and other unidentifiable machinery wrenched at her heart. The woman who'd always seemed larger than life to her looked frail and completely helpless in the hospital bed.

"Are you just going to stand there, *habibti*?" The lightly accented voice that greeted her was so small and weak that it was barely recognizable. As Amanda was the only one standing in the doorway, she knew the question was directed at her. She hesitated for a moment. The room was already crammed to capacity with Pride members. Closest to her was Leo, who stood like a sentry at Helena's bedside.

"*Tant* Helena." Amanda's voice crowded with tears. Her legs acted of their own volition, moving her toward the bed, and the other shifters parted to allow her access.

"*Salam*, *habibti*. I've missed you. *Ahlan*?"

Amanda shook her head at the absurdity of the question. Only Helena would ask how she was doing while lying on what could have very well been her deathbed. It was so like her to think of others first. The brave face Amanda planned to present crumbled, and she let loose a floodgate of tears.

"*La*, A.J. No crying. I'll be fine."

Amanda wanted to hug her, to kiss her face, but feared doing so would only cause further injury. "What happened to you, *tant*?"

"This is nothing. You should see the other guy," she joked, but Amanda found nothing amusing. She glanced at her brother, who nodded in silent understanding before ushering the other Pride members out. There were a few protests, but he didn't

relent until everyone was out and the door to the room was securely closed behind the last person.

"Now will you be honest?" Amanda quizzed.

Helena's expression changed quickly, and gone was the false joviality of seconds before. Instead she wore a mask of seriousness that let Amanda know she wasn't going to like what she was about to hear.

Helena's eyes darted to Leo, who'd come to take position next to his sister. "How long before your father arrives?"

Leo checked his watch. "His plane should land in about thirty minutes."

"So we don't have much time. I'll be brief." She spoke in low tones. "I obeyed the Pride's edict for me to go into isolation in Egypt, but I couldn't just sit around. I heard about the current excavations happening in Ethiopia to unearth the Queen of Sheba's Palace at Axum. It was like a dream come true." Her hazel eyes sparkled with a light even as she labored on a long drag of air.

"Take it easy, tant."

"No time for easy. I had to be a part of the dig, so I called in a few favors, falsified some documents, and got myself a position on the team."

Amanda wasn't surprised by what she was hearing. When she had married Amanda's father, Helena had given up an impressive archeological career. Her early retirement had been a condition of her joining the Pride, since the other females refused to have a member who had a career that required her to do something as lowly as dig around in the dirt. Although she'd acquiesced on the condition, she'd never given up her love for the field. Secretly, she'd gotten a few of the cubs, like Amanda, interested in archaeology. They would spend hours after a hunt unearthing small treasures like animal bones and fossilized rocks.

"I was skeptical at first. Many archeologists have speculated over the various mysteries buried in Axum, but this was the first find of this magnitude. I befriended an American researcher there from Kansas. Her name is Cheryl Boden -- remember it."

Amanda didn't bother to interrupt her to ask why, knowing eventually Helena would get to it.

"The dig was being funded by an anonymous man, which raised a red flag for me. Even Cheryl didn't know who the investor was. We'd recovered some very valuable, well-preserved beauties that deserved to be shared with the world, most importantly with the Ethiopian people, but the philanthropist had no desire to share his findings with anyone. It became evident no one cared about any of the items retrieved. They were searching for something specific, and it was as if they knew exactly where to look."

Amanda shot a concerned look at the monitor tracking Helena's heart rate. It was obvious that in retelling the story she was getting herself completely worked up. Amanda reached for her surrogate's hand to urge her to slow down.

"There's no time for me to be leisurely. Day after day, I watched as priceless relics were tossed about like yesterday's trash, but then one day there was a major commotion. It was obvious they'd located something of extreme importance. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't gain access to the artifact, but Cheryl did. She was disappointed that I wouldn't be shown the item, said that I'd contributed too much time and sweat to be kept in the dark. So she sketched it and showed it to me one evening."

Helena succumbed to a fit of coughs that left her cringing in pain, and the color drained from her face, leaving her light brown skin looking ashen. She tried to refuse the water Leo offered but, at his insistence, finally took a few sips.

"I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me or at the very least she'd drawn the image incorrectly. But the object was shifter in origin."

"What do you mean?" Amanda couldn't help but ask. Few ancient artifacts of the shifter world existed. Most believed that their ancestors were so keen on keeping their existence hidden from the predominant population that they were careful not leave proof of their existence. There were those who believed one or two texts may have been crafted chronicling the origins of shifters and including the original shifter laws.

"The artifact was a small bejeweled chest of sorts." Helena paused long enough to indicate the dimensions with her hands. "Cheryl made me privy to some additional information that suggests this chest was given to Sheba from a close friend and military strategist who may have also been her lover before King Solomon."

"A shifter?" Leo's words echoed Amanda's thoughts.

"Either that or someone with knowledge of our existence. Reason suggests a lover, maybe even a confidant. I hesitate to think of the type of devastation our ancestors would have suffered at the hands of enemies who possessed that knowledge. Nothing suggests Sheba shared the information given, and the fact that she almost immediately had it buried deep beneath a religious altar in her palace leads me to believe she wanted to protect the knowledge contained within."

"And you're sure the chest held shifter documents."

Helena attempted a shrug. "The symbol of our kind was carved into the top, and Cheryl said the team guessed the parchment inside dated back further than Sheba's reign. I tried everything in my power to see the items for myself, but the things were guarded like Fort Knox, and I know I'd already brought extra attention to myself. The items were sealed and shipped to New York."

Amanda was amazed by what she was hearing. "And you followed?"

"What choice did I have? I'm certain the dig was about uncovering the chest and the information inside. I needed to know who would want it and why."

"You should have called us to help," Leo stated.

"I wasn't sure I'd need it. Obviously I was wrong. Whoever is behind this is serious about guarding not only their anonymity but also the artifact. I suspect that's the reason they chose to ship instead of fly it in, since it's a lot easier to secret an object in crates through customs."

It wasn't that Amanda found the covert tale to be fantastical; it was the fact that Helena had stumbled into the situation which made it hard for her to stomach. "And you're certain that's how it arrived?"

"Positive. I thought I was being discreet in my investigation, but obviously not or I wouldn't have been caught."

"Who caught you? I need descriptions." She was determined to bring the perp to justice for this crime.

Helena shook her head slightly. "Didn't exactly see who it was. In fact, I didn't even know I was found out. The shooting caught me completely unaware."

"Where were you?" Leo asked.

"A warehouse, the address is in the pocket of my jeans. I'd talked Cheryl into giving it to me before I left."

Leo went to retrieve the slip of paper.

"And this Cheryl woman? Where was she during all this?" Amanda wondered how involved the woman was in her surrogate's shooting. Had she in fact set her up to be executed?

"The last I knew, she was still in Ethiopia. She was supposed to oversee the rest of the dig. I know what you're thinking, but if you met Cheryl, suspecting her would be the furthest thing from your mind."

"At this point, I wouldn't rule anyone out. I'm assuming she was the only one who knew about your trip to New York."

"Yes, but --"

"No buts, tant. She's as much of a suspect as everyone else involved in that dig. I need to know everything you do about the excavation."

Amanda listened quietly, her mind processing every detail relayed. She'd need to call in a few favors on this, but in the end, she would get to the bottom of things. By the time Helena finished giving her accounting of everything about the dig, the poor dear looked completely drained. Amanda was eager to get started on finding her surrogate's shooter and hunting down the artifact. She'd let her family know to allow the injured woman to rest but make sure a member of the Pride was with her at all times.

"Amanda, I really think this chest contains the rumored Parchment of Origin, the very document that talks about how we came to be and the basis for our laws."

"But that was destroyed."

"Maybe not."

The implications of such a find were extraordinary. Shifters worldwide would rejoice at the discovery, but in the wrong hands it could mean exposure that their species had worked so hard to prevent. Few knew of their existence, and shifters liked to keep it that way. Humans might not remember, but shifter history told of great battles between their species the likes of which had nearly decimated the smaller group.

Time and patience had proven to be kind for shifters because with the passing of generations humans began to regard the tales as nothing more than myth and fantasy.

Amanda's next question was interrupted by the sound of a commotion from the hallway.

"Looks like your father's finally arrived. If you're lucky, *habibti*, he'll be too upset with me to notice that you have the mark of a mate on you." Helena fixed her with a conspiratorial look.

"What?" Leo looked between the two before sniffing the air. "That's what you were doing out there in no man's land."

Helena laughed. "*Habibi*, you've never been overly observant, but I blame that on the coddling we gave you." She shook her head at Leo.

"Hey, guys, let's not talk about this right now. There're more important things at stake."

"Dad's not going to like this."

*Leave it to Leo to state the obvious.*

Lance burst through the door and shoved it closed behind him to block out the other Pride members. "What the hell were you doing that got you shot *twice*, Helena?" Not that there would be any secrecy in the room, since he'd probably bellow for the next hour. Lance Spoils rippled with anger as he made his way toward the bed, and both Amanda and Leo stepped aside to allow their father access. The cursory glance he cast their way was full of two emotions Amanda had never seen in him: fear and anguish.

"Good to see you too, Lance."

Amanda bit back a groan at Helena's flippant greeting.

"You were supposed to be in Egypt." His tone was accusatory.

"And I was for a while, but exile is so boring without you, my love." She practically purred, but Amanda still noted the strained look on her face and her pale complexion.

Helena's syrupy tone was one had Amanda heard only when Helena addressed her mate, probably because she was always doing something to get him so riled up. This time it didn't have the same effect as it had in the past.

"What were you doing in New York, Helena, and who the hell shot you?"

"Why don't we talk after the children have left, dear?"

Lance looked over his shoulder at his silent offspring. Amanda was aware of the way his eyes lingered on her, narrowing slightly as he studied her. She squared her shoulders, prepared for the inquisition that his look threatened.

"If you all plan to stand there all day, perhaps I can get a nap." Helena's words brought his attention back to her.

"Not before you answer my questions, woman."

Amanda and Leo took the diversion as their opportunity to make themselves scarce. Which they did posthaste.

She was impressed. Her brother managed to hold his tongue as they pushed their way through their inquisitive Pride, and they were safely confined in the sterile elevator before he started in with his own badgering.

"At least tell me who he is."

Amanda stared at digital counter above the door as it counted down to their destination. "Nope."

"Do I know his Pride?"

"Nope." *Jeez, what kind of hospital is this? Shouldn't we be picking up at least one passenger?*

"You're seriously not going to tell me anything?"

"Nope."

"Do you think L and M will approve of him?"

"Not likely." After several seconds, she thought she'd throw him a bone. "He's a bear." *Finally*. She pushed forward as the doors slid open.

Behind her, Leo sputtered his next question as she made her way into the busy lobby. "You're kidding right?"

"Nope."

"But...but --"

Amanda stopped in her tracks, abruptly turning on her brother, who pulled up short to avoid knocking her over. "Leo, what's done is done. Dad may not like the fact that my mate is not Pride, but it won't change it. I'll have to deal with that issue at another time. Right now we need to figure out what the hell this artifact really is and make the people responsible for Helena's shooting pay."

She completed a perfectly executed about-face and dragged her cell phone out of her pocket as she walked. Time was ticking, and she had several calls to make to get the ball rolling. There was no doubt in her mind Kam would be sour over her absence, and the sooner she could set things straight with Helena and the artifact, the sooner she could return to Alaska and the life that awaited her there.

## Chapter Eight

The moment the darkened cabin came into view, Kam knew something was amiss. Call it a sixth sense or his heightened shifter abilities, but all wasn't as it should be in Kansas -- or Alaska. Of course, he wasn't expecting a warm reception. Although he had coveted a fantasy of Amanda meeting him in the meadow surrounding the cabin and having her hot little way with him. Wishful thinking on his part. What he didn't expect was to find her completely MIA. He sniffed the outside air for her alluring scent but came up with only faint traces of her. Remnants. Even as he stepped over the threshold of the still cabin, his mind worked on rational scenarios; perhaps she'd gone hunting, or maybe she was sleeping. He was wrong on both counts. She and her belongings were, in fact, missing. The cabin's pristine condition erased any evidence of the time they had shared there. He felt like an idiot standing in the middle of the floor, looking for any clue that she hadn't simply abandoned him. The truth smacked him right in the face. She hadn't even left him a note. The memories that had sustained him during his time in the mountains now ripped through him with a jagged ferocity.

Her scent lingered on everything she'd come in contact with, including him. Even the way she tasted was still fresh in his mind, on his tongue. He recalled their first night alone together when she'd given herself to him, submitted to him as his mate completely. Or so he had thought. His incisors lengthened. She *was* his. In every sense of the word, she belonged with him. Could very well be carrying his babe deep in her womb. Heat bloomed inside him and spread like wildfire. There was no controlling the rage that coursed through his body, causing his entire being to shake. How could she? He paced the length of the living area several times, but instead of calming him, each step he took only added fuel to his anger.

"I guess it would be silly of me to ask where your mate has gone?" Regan asked smartly from the doorway.



Kam knew his friend had lagged behind him as a show of respect to the newly mated couple. It had turned out to be an unnecessary gesture. There would be no sweet reunion requiring privacy.

"Maybe she just stepped out for a little prowling. I hear cats like to do that sort of thing all the time."

If only that were the case he wouldn't feel so torn up inside. No, Amanda was gone. He wouldn't be surprised if she'd left the moment he'd disappeared into the woods. His jaw clinched as he imagined her stealing off. He needed an outlet for his fury and was very tempted to turn on his friend for taking him away from Amanda and providing her with the opportunity to leave him. A small part of him recognized the absurdity of doing so, but it didn't change his desire to pummel something. His body swelled in a primitive response that pushed him close to an involuntary shift. Without thought, he drew back his arm and let loose a mighty roar as his knuckles made contact with the log of an outer wall. The force of the blow caused a rippling effect the likes of which could only be compared to a measurable earthquake.

"Better now?" Regan asked after a few moments.

It had helped, but not much. "No." His voice was rough, sounding more bear than human.

"I'm sure Earl won't mind if we use his radio. I think he'd like it a whole heck of a lot better than finding rubble where his cabin should be."

Kam only grunted. His bear was still close, too close for him to form sentences. Regan didn't bother with more questions. Instead he radioed the livery for a boat to pick them up and asked that the plane be made ready to carry two adult male shifters. Kam was still cooling his heels as Regan moved about the cabin only to return with a pile of clothes and a pair of boots.

"These will probably be a tight fit on you, but they're better than the alternative," he said, indicating their nude forms. Kam's lodgings were the closest, but making the trek there would take far too long and waste necessary time. He didn't have a moment to spare, didn't know how much of a head start she had. He'd find suitable clothing later, but his attire was the least of his concerns. Regan was right, however; the way the plain T-shirt stretched across his chest was certain to test the strength of the material. The sweats meant for comfort felt anything but, straining against his muscular thighs. The elastic band just below his calves was tight. He should have taken a small amount of solace in finding out Earl shared his same size 14 shoe, but his mind found it hard to take comfort in anything at the moment. If Amanda thought she could just walk away from him, she'd need to think twice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda had only needed to place two calls to get the ball rolling on learning more about this Cheryl chick and to see what information could be uncovered about the

financier of the excavation. As much as she hated to sit back idly and do nothing, it was the only thing left until she could get more information.

She implicitly trusted both men she contacted, and knew they'd be discreet and quick. One was a former team member turned mercenary who belonged to a prominent wolf Pack out of Michigan. The other was the only human she'd ever divulged her secret to. He'd been the commander in charge of her unit during both tours in the Gulf.

Amanda was happy she could count Joe Howard, who was now a colonel, among her short list of friends.

Leo's large frame dropped onto one of the elegant high-backed chairs at the dining table of their hotel suite. "We might as well get it out in the open, and don't try to throw up any more barriers. We can't do anything until we hear back from your guys."

She had known the topic would resurface but thought the roller-coaster pace they had been moving at during the last couple of hours would postpone the questions a while longer. She should have known Leo's single-mindedness wouldn't take a vacation, even under their current circumstances. He was right. They were playing a waiting game now.

"How about using the silence for internal reflection or meditation?" she suggested as her brother sat waiting across the wooden table. For now their upscale hotel suite was command central, and she wished Leo would find something in it to occupy his time while they waited. Amanda was managing to busy herself with some investigation of her own. Thanks to Leo, she had her trusty laptop on hand and was able to do an online search of the dig. Unfortunately, not much was learned via the World Wide Web, but she had managed to find info on one Cheryl Boden, born in Kansas City, Kansas, to James and Sandy Boden. Nothing exciting there, but in a few minutes she'd be privy to a nationwide background search on Ms. Boden.

"Nice try, sis, but I'm not gonna drop it that easily." He reclined in the chair and propped his large, loafer-clad feet on the table.

Amanda pretended not to hear him and instead kept her gaze on the Web site's countdown.

"I thought you had more regard for me than to make me wait for some Pride announcement to learn about your mate." The sincere note in Leo's voice touched her.

"There won't be an announcement. This thing is complicated enough without me subjecting myself to a million and one questions from the family."

Leo scoffed. "Do you honestly think you can avoid it? Dad's not just going to accept it."

"Right now Dad has more important things on his mind, as should the rest of the Pride. My taking a mate was bound to happen soon enough anyway. No point in making a big deal over it."

"It is a big deal, or at least it should be. You're bound to this man for the rest of your life, yet you want to ignore the topic as if he doesn't exist."

"Trust me, I know he exists and I'm not trying to pretend otherwise."

Still, she wanted nothing better than to pretend that she'd never gone to Alaska or met Kam Victor, at least for now. She couldn't help but wonder if whatever problem he'd gone off to help Regan with was resolved. Was it dangerous in nature? Was he back yet? How had he taken finding the cabin empty when he returned? She reminded herself that it had been his choice to go running off into the forest without giving her any means to contact him. Hell, what if something had happened to her all alone? None of the shifters she knew would leave their new mate alone for so long. No, she wouldn't feel guilty over having to leave or over the length of time it would take her to return. Kam would just have to understand, the same way he'd expected her to understand when he'd run off to his friend's aid.

"So tell me about him."

The Web site she'd concentrated so hard on finally flashed before giving a very brief, very boring background on Cheryl Boden. The woman led a spotless life. Downright dull, if you asked her. Until Cheryl's jaunt to Ethiopia, it didn't seem as if she'd ever left her hometown, so how the hell had she earned her spot on the archeological team? Amanda hoped Joe was able to scramble up more information than what was publicly available. She closed the lid on her laptop and gave her brother a long look from across the table.

"His name is Kam, and he's the most overbearing, insufferable, chauvinistic male I've ever met," she began.

"Sounds like he'll fit in nicely with our family. So how did you meet this charming specimen?"

"He chased me down."

Leo's brows rose curiously. "You mean he hunted you?"

"In a way, yes. There were two of them."

"Two?"

"Kam and Regan. I saw Kam first because I'd stumbled into his territory."

"And you ran?"

Amanda didn't like the amused tone of her brother's voice. "Hey, you would have run too, if you'd seen the size of his big ass. Do you want to sit there and laugh at me, or do you want to hear the rest of this story?"

"Can't I do both?"

When she made to rise from her chair, Leo gestured for her to remain seated and made a dismal attempt at not looking too amused.

"Anyway, as I'm running from big bear, I get completely blindsided by another one."

Her brother dropped his legs from the table and sat forward, resting his elbows on the wooden surface. "I thought the Bear Clans had all migrated to the cities."

"So did I. Apparently, there are some who've decided not to conform. These two were definitely throwbacks from a bygone era."

Leo tensed. "They didn't force you to...?"

"I wouldn't call anything we did force, really."

"What is that supposed to mean? And who's included in that we?"

"I'm getting there. They invoked Victor Rites."

"What? No one does that anymore."

"Looks like we're both wrong. Long story short, I had to pick one of them or take the survivor of a death match."

His mouth dropped open, and after several moments, Amanda began to wonder if he'd freeze that way. "Did they just thaw from an Arctic glacier? Next you'll be telling me they run around nude or live in caves."

The look on her face must have spoken volumes, because Leo burst out in a fit of laughter. "That's just great. Not only do you find a nonlion mate, but you've managed to rustle up a bona fide heathen. Your mother's going to be so proud."

"Mother I can handle." They both knew where her difficulty would lie.

"So what did you have to knock your caveman over the head with to come here?"

"Nothing so dramatic. I just left."

"That simple? And he was fine with all this?"

Amanda shrugged. She'd done enough reliving of her time in Alaska. Just thinking about Kam renewed a longing in her. She hated to admit how much she missed him, how she would have loved to be held in his arms just one more time. "What matters is I'm here now."

"Why do I get the distinct feeling your new mate won't sit back on the sidelines for long?"

It was Amanda's turn for amusement. "You think Kam would come here? Trust me, the city is the last place he'd want to be. Besides, he has no clue where I was headed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Not much had changed about the place since he was here last. Blaring horns intruded on the silence of the car's lush interior, and all around them buildings reached toward the heavens, blocking out the noonday sun. Outside, a sea of people bounced off each other on the crowded streets as they pushed and shoved their way across the pavement in a rush to get nowhere fast. No, nothing had changed, not even him.

"Home sweet home," Regan mumbled dryly, more to himself than to his quiet companion sitting across from him in the luxury stretch SUV.

"You didn't have to come," Kam reminded him, sparing his friend a brief glance. He was anxious for the car ride to be over, and Regan looked completely uncomfortable

in the leather seats. Whereas Kam preferred not to be in the city, Regan downright detested it.

"I couldn't let my friend go off half-cocked. Your little lady wouldn't stand a chance against that infamous Victor temper."

"You needn't worry about Amanda; she's my mate." The bite in his voice made his irritable state clear in spite of his outwardly calm demeanor.

Regan only nodded before staring back out the window at the slow-moving traffic. Needing something to do, Kam flipped open his cell phone and pushed the Redial button in an attempt to place another call to the cell number Marty had hastily given him at the livery. Again he got voice mail as he'd done every time he'd tried the damned thing. The phone belonged to a guy named Leo, but that's all he knew and it only irritated him further. Who the hell was this man who knew his woman so intimately? Were they together now? He snapped the phone closed, willing the car to move faster.

He'd calmed considerably after learning the reasoning behind Amanda's departure. Yet he felt he deserved at least a brief note explaining why she'd gone or where she'd be. He replayed their conversations over in his mind, trying to recall any bit of information she'd shared. To his dismay, nothing came to mind. They'd spent more time enjoying the moment and less talking about their past. The only information Kam garnered centered around her father and his fixation on her picking a mate from a good Pride. Was this Leo person someone her father would approve of? His jaw clenched as he tried not to let that be the focal point of his thoughts. Amanda would need him to be there for her, and he would be. He dared anyone to stand in his way.

After their reunion and an assurance that her mother was on a road to recovery, he would promise to make sure they filled in all the blanks about their lives. Thus far, everything he'd learned about her current location came from retracing her steps. Thankfully, the trail hadn't gone cold with the one-day head start she had on him. Marty was extremely apologetic for providing the means for Amanda's flight and eagerly gave an accounting of everything he knew. Kam couldn't hold the man at fault. He'd done what anyone in his position would have. How was Marty to know that Amanda was mated when she'd deliberately answered to the contrary after being asked?

Midtown came into view, and a familiar tension started in the pit of his stomach. It had been too long since he'd seen her last. The vehicle was still rolling when Kam pushed open the door and bounded out with Regan at his heels. He made a direct beeline for the hospital admissions desk, and the woman behind began her standard greeting on automatic pilot while she stared intently at her computer monitor.

"You had a patient by the last names Spoils admitted here a couple days ago."

"Are you a family...?" The woman's words trailed off as she finally looked up from her terminal. Her initial expression was one of boredom and irritation, but that soon changed as she did a quick sweep of him. Kam was used to seeing the spark of

interest in a woman's eyes, and a few men's for that matter. In the past, he'd always been polite, even done a bit of flirting if he was so inclined, but there was no time for it today.

"Um...are you a family member?"

"I'm her son-in-law, the ma -- husband of Amanda Spoils."

Disappointment showed on her face. "I see. Well, I'll just need to verify that. I'm sure you understand."

He hadn't wanted to be announced but figured the extra precaution was for a reason and didn't object as the woman dialed a number.

"Yes, there's a visitor here a Mr...."

"Victor," he supplied.

"Mr. Victor. He says he's your son-in-law."

The woman cringed as the barked reply rang through the phone. Even if Kam hadn't had sensitive hearing, he would have been able to make out the outraged question. "My what?"

The woman hesitated, shooting Kam a curious look.

"Amanda Spoils's husband," she answered, but this time had the foresight to pull the phone away from her ear a few inches as she waited for his response.

"I'll be right down," came the curt reply before the line was disconnected. Kam wasn't a man used to being made to wait, but he saw little choice in the matter. He still didn't know what floor Amanda's mother was on and doubted the now nervous-looking attendant would be forthcoming with any information. He was fairly certain she'd dispatch security if he didn't remain in plain sight. So Kam had no choice but to wait with a silent Regan, who stared with feigned interest at an automated bulletin board that scrolled hospital-related announcements.

"Hmm, don't look now, but I think that stone-faced gentleman heading toward us might just be your father-in-law," Regan began quietly after more than ten minutes had passed.

It was ten minutes of pure frustration. Amanda had to know he was waiting. He was pretty sure the entire ward where her mother was recuperating had heard the lion's angry responses. Kam turned to face the approaching figure, and disappointment spread through him when he realized the man had come alone. Although he'd never met Lance Spoils before, Kam would have recognized the man as a shifter. If not for his sheer size, then for the absolute arrogant air about him that seemed born to all shifterkind and expounded upon by lions. By looks alone, he would have pegged the man to be in his early fifties but knew that based on Amanda's brief conversations he was just over sixty. Assessing eyes shifted between the two bears. Certain he was trying to determine which man was mate to his daughter, Kam stepped forward. The bronze-skinned man closed in on them, his eyes narrowing slightly to show his displeasure.

"Mr. Spoils, I presume." He wasn't in the mood for pleasantries, and it was obvious the man was less than happy to meet him. But he felt it necessary to put forth some effort.

"You presume correctly but have me at a disadvantage. This is the first time I'm hearing about my daughter taking a mate." The man's voice was tight, his tone businesslike.

Kam ignored everything else as he homed in on the man's words. Amanda had been back with her family for two days, and shifters could easily recognize mated individuals. The fact that she'd taken a mate would have been as evident as the nose on his face. "Then you must not have seen her, because she most assuredly bears the mark of a mate."

"Oh, I have seen my daughter. Unfortunately, it was too brief an encounter for us to have a proper meeting. As you know, one of my mates is in recovery. I have yet to spend any length of time with Amanda."

Kam could barely contain his irritation. "So you're telling me she isn't at the hospital?"

"No. She's busy seeing to matters relating to her surrogate mother's accident."

"And your mate, how is she?"

"Healing nicely now. I expect to bring her with me tomorrow evening to finish her convalescence at home."

"Good. And where might I find *my* mate?"

Kam didn't miss the tightening in the older man's jaw.

"As I said, she is looking into matters concerning Helena's accident and is with family."

"And her location?" he insisted with a patience he didn't feel.

"Perhaps it's better if I speak with my daughter concerning your arrival first. If you give me the name of the hotel you'll be staying at, I'll make sure to pass on the information."

*Like hell he would.* No doubt the man would toss it in the nearest trash receptacle and hope Kam would return to where he'd come from. "I'm afraid I must press the issue. I'm sure you understand my desire to see Amanda."

"Funny you should mention that. I would think that as new mates you'd have been reluctant to let her out of your sight, but you did. As I said before, I'd like to discuss this matter further with her. We'll be in touch once I've been apprised of all the facts."

Kam resisted the urge to grab the slightly smaller male by his collar and shake the information out of him. The only thing stopping him was the fact that the evasive lion was his mate's sire and therefore deserving of some respect. Besides, he didn't think she'd take kindly to knowing he was responsible for doing the man harm.

"I assure you that there's nothing else to be apprised of. Your daughter has taken me as her mate. Do you think to stand in my way?" Kam didn't keep the challenge out of his voice.

Spoils's voice dropped. He leaned forward and fixed Kam with a firm stare. "Until I know for certain this mating is what Amanda wants, you better believe it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well that went better than I thought." Kam wasn't certain when Regan had moved into position behind him, but there was no mistaking his friend's misplaced attempt at humor.

Kam watched as his mate's father disappeared down the hall from whence he'd come. He didn't trust himself to move or utter a single word for several seconds. "I don't think there's much left here for us to do," he finally said.

"No chance of me interesting you in finding a couple of kinky city women?"

"No."

"It was worth a shot. So where to next?"

"Amanda."



## Chapter Nine

Apparently, neither wishful thinking nor prayer worked in having her Pride back off or in getting the phone to ring. She received only one call from Joe Howard, confirming what she'd already learned about Cheryl Boden from the Net, although he did find an additional caveat in the woman's history not accessible to the public. Apparently, she'd spent one year before college in a classified military hospital. Unfortunately, the records from the hospital had been lost in a fire, so any details regarding her stay would have to come directly from the source. Amanda was still waiting to hear back from Rex Taolore, her wolf friend from the service, and hoped it would be soon or World War III might break out in the plush hotel suite.

"Don't these people have their own rooms to go to?" she mumbled, retreating to the only place absent of Pride members.

"Yeah, but you know no one is leaving until you clue them all in on your --"

Amanda held up her hand to halt her brother's next words. "I know, I know." She was well aware they all wanted the lowdown on her "man." If she thought it would make them leave her alone, she'd gladly tell them about him, but learning she'd hitched herself to a bear would keep their tongues wagging for half a year. "What do you say we get out of here for a while? My cell phone is fully charged if anyone needs us," Amanda suggested.

"Sounds good to me. I'll just grab mine as a backup," Leo replied before making his way through the living room and to the hall that branched off into a series of sleeping quarters.

The thought of getting breathing room was enough to have her feeling some relief, but her sense of contentment fled when she heard the door opening, followed by a round of rousing greetings directed to the head puss of the Spoils Pride.

"Amanda, be a dear and come greet your mother properly instead of hiding out in the kitchen," the well-known female voice called.

She bit back her groan, pasted a phony smile on her lips, and pushed herself from the kitchen counter. "Hello, Mom. I didn't think you'd make it," Amanda said as she rounded the corner to the living room.

As usual, Julia Spoils was the picture of flawless perfection. Her slender, modelesque form was draped in a formfitting minidress that displayed her shapely legs. Perfectly coifed black hair was swept up into a tight bun and showed off her stunning bone structure. She didn't hesitate to admit that her mother was a stunning woman and that they looked more like sisters than mother and daughter, as everyone seemed to point out. Others tried to emulate the style and grace that was as natural as breathing for her mother.

She gave her mother her customary kiss on the cheek, fully aware of her Pride's watchful eyes.

"Of course I came. You make me sound heartless."

The jury was still out on that one. "So you've been to the hospital?"

"Not just yet. I've been flying all day and wanted to freshen up first. Besides, I heard a vicious rumor that my daughter had taken a mate, and I just had to come and see for myself. I see they weren't mistaken."

"No, they weren't." Amanda was happy to see Leo emerge from the hall leading from the bedrooms. "But I'll have to fill you in on all the details later. Leo and I have some leads to chase down."

"So where is this mate of yours, anyway?" Julia continued, ignoring her daughter's last comment.

"Home."

"Really, and exactly where might that be? I hardly think it wise to start off your relationship apart. I remember when your father and I were newly mated the poor thing couldn't stand to let me out of his sight."

*Unbelievable.* Amanda stared unblinkingly at her mother.

"Well, none of what's happened recently is exactly normal. I happen to be fortunate enough to have found a very understanding shifter."

"Hmm, well, maybe we can turn this negative into a positive. I'll be sure to make arrangements at the spa for you. By the time I'm done, your young lion won't know what hit him."

"Mother, I came here for Helena, not to be turned into one your pet glamour projects."

Julia rolled her big brown eyes heavenward. "Your father left word with me last night that Helena is well on her way to recovery and he should be bringing her back to the compound to convalesce in a day or so."

Were they all crazy? Shifter or not, Helena needed to rest in a quiet, tame environment that only a hospital could provide. Amanda had made certain that at least one Pride member stayed at the hospital to protect her surrogate, even though her father was at Helena's bedside. If need be, she'd make sure round-the-clock detail was continued for the next week to ensure her surrogate got the proper care and rest.

"Well, I'll just have to talk to dear old Dad about that, but for now, I have other things to tend to. Are you coming, Leo?" Amanda was certain she couldn't hide the disapproval on her face. She definitely needed to leave before she said something she really meant.

Hot on her heels, her brother's heavier frame slammed into her back as she stopped short in front of the door she'd just swung open.

"Hello, Amanda." The greeting was casual enough, but it was the owner of the voice that held her transfixed.

She couldn't speak, couldn't believe her eyes. Just beyond the threshold was the subject of so much of her familial interest. It couldn't be. Yet her eyes told her the larger-than-life figure standing before her was, in fact, Kam Victor. Her mate. He looked different. The stubble he'd sported had thickened but was neatly trimmed, and his thick hair was pulled away from his face, giving her an unobscured view of his rugged features. She was so caught up in taking in his more tamed appearance that she nearly neglected to register a key point. He was actually wearing clothes. She'd never seen him in any before, but oh man, did he wear them well. He was dressed casually in a black tee that molded the broad, sculpted muscles of his chest. The top was tucked neatly into a pair of stonewashed jeans that hugged his legs just right, not too tight but certainly nothing like the loose, overly baggy fashion worn by so many. She drank in the handsome sight. Her mouth went instantly dry, and her heart lurched before thumping rapidly in her chest.

All around her everything had gone completely quiet, too quiet, until Amanda was certain she could make out the distinct sound of everyone's breathing patterns. Didn't this just beat all? Here she was, waiting for the right time to inform her Pride about her mate and his...differences, when who should pop in but...

"A bear." Amanda wasn't sure which family member whispered the utterance, but having the observation verbalized seemed to break the spell of silence that held them all enthralled.

"Amanda dear, do you know this person?" There was no mistaking Julia Spoils's polite yet haughty question.

She didn't miss the expectant look in Kam's blue-eyed stare. This wasn't at all how she had planned to introduce him. She'd wanted to talk to her parents as soon as her father was available. It would take some getting used to, of course, but by the time she was ready to return to Alaska for Kam, she'd hoped they'd at least be over their shock. Him showing up at their doorstep definitely threw a monkey wrench in her plans.

"Sort of." The words slipped out, and she instantly regretted them. Kam's body became visibly taut, and she heard a slight groan from behind him. For the first time she noticed Regan's partially concealed form behind Kam's larger frame.

"Sort of?" Kam's voice was a low warning.

"Either you do or you don't. Is he one of your army friends?"

"Uh...no, Mother... He's..." The words were hard to form. Accepting Kam as her mate while they shared their wilderness retreat away from the rest of the world was one thing, but bringing all the outside complications of her family into the mix was a whole other matter.

His eyes darkened.

This was all turning out so horribly wrong.

"Her mate," he provided, and like that, the room fell into another eerie silence.

Kam took a step forward, leaving her no choice but to crane her neck to look up at him. He was so close she could feel the heat radiate from his body. Behind her, Leo held his ground, leaving her uncomfortably sandwiched between the two. She felt the tension in her brother's body and wished he'd back up a bit to give her some breathing space. Having Kam's strained energy to contend with was enough for her without having to deal with Leo's too.

Kam's gaze moved reluctantly from her to focus on the male just beyond her. She didn't like the way his eyes narrowed or the way his muscles bunched beneath his shirt. She placed a hand on his chest but nearly recoiled at the look he fixed her. Instantly, strong fingers wrapped around her wrists and kept her in place.

Leo's reaction was just as immediate as his hands dropped to her shoulders. Her brother's response had a growl rumbling in the back of Kam's throat, and Amanda hoped she wasn't about to become a wishbone.

"Leo, don't," she whispered.

"Leo?" She didn't like the guttural way Kam said her brother's name or the way his fingers gripped her even tighter.

"Everyone, this is Kam, my mate. Kam, this is my family, or most of them." With the exception of the slight squeak in her voice, she thought she'd spoken loud and clear enough for everyone to hear.

"And Leo?" Kam's eyes stayed focused on hers as he waited for a response.

Her brows furrowed. "He's my brother."

Thankfully, some tension drained from his face at the revelation. He spared the younger man another look.

"Her very protective brother," Leo added for good measure, but Amanda could already see that Kam had dismissed him.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but are you, in fact, a bear?" Julia's question had Amanda sending a warning glare over her shoulder to her mother.

"Yes, ma'am, and very proud of it."

"Well, of course, as well you should be. It's just that... Well, we never imagined our Amanda would... We just expected she'd marry one of her *own* kind."

"Mother." *Damn, she just didn't know when to put a cork in it.*

"What? I'm just saying what we're all thinking. You know if your father were here, he'd be a lot more vocal on the subject."

Thank God for small favors.

"He didn't seem to have much to say to me when we met about an hour ago."

Amanda's head snapped around to send a questioning look at Kam. "You've met my father?"

"Briefly, at the hospital. Funny, he seemed just as surprised as everyone here to learn who your mate is." He pinned her with an accusatory look.

*Great.* This was the last thing she needed. "I hadn't gotten around to talking to them yet."

"Really."

"I knew," Leo threw out behind her as he moved into the sitting area, giving the couple more room.

"Are we going to be allowed to come through the front door, because I can't imagine how to get to a rear entrance at this level?" came Regan's dry question.

"Of course, come in." Only, as Amanda made to unblock the doorway, Kam's strong hold didn't show any signs of loosening. Instead he followed her into the sitting area filled with the seven other lion shifters. Several gasps went up around the room as Regan came into view, outfitted in black from head to toe and looking every bit the rough-and-tumble drifter. Unlike Kam, he wore his near-waist-length hair loose. The silky strands shone in the light of the suite but looked as if he'd used his fingers in lieu of a brush to comb the wealth of hair. It was obvious that Regan had done little to conform to his city surroundings besides add clothing to his body. He still looked as rough and untamed as he had out in the wild.

"Everyone, this is Kam's friend Regan."

"Another bear. Outside of your Clan meetings, I thought you guys were loners," her mother huffed, and Amanda felt immediately embarrassed.

"Yes, ma'am, we usually are, but when a family member or friend is in need, we ban together tighter than any Pride."

"Of course you do," Julia stated politely, but thankfully decided to keep her mouth closed.

"We need to talk," Kam directed at her.

"Um...yeah, sure. We can use a bedroom for privacy."

"No need, I took the liberty of booking us a suite for the remainder of our stay."

Their own suite? Even Amanda considered the hotel ridiculously expensive, but her family had their favorite places to stay in the cities they frequented most. Was he trying to impress her with such a lavish expense? "You really didn't need to do that."

"Yes, we keep a number of suites on this floor on reserve in case we happen to be in the city. I'm sure you two could borrow one for a few moments," Julia added.

"Nevertheless, Amanda and I will be staying in the room I've obtained for us." His words held such a finality that she thought better than to argue the point in front of her family. Maybe he felt the need to prove something to them.

"Regan?" she questioned.

"Can handle himself, I'm sure," Kam answered.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about me; I've always had an affinity for pussy."

Amanda's mother made an audible gasping sound, and several males in the room grunted their disapproval.

She sent an imploring look to Leo, who nodded his silent understanding and stepped forward to introduce himself to Regan. She breathed a sigh of relief. It would take a lot to ruffle her brother's fur. She doubted even Regan's antagonistic teasing could do it.

"I'm expecting a pretty important call," she felt the need to inform Kam on their way to the elevator.

"From whom?"

"A friend. He has some information I'm waiting on." The elevator came swiftly, and Kam followed her inside the posh interior.

"I'm assuming this has to do with your surrogate's injuries?"

"Yes."

Inside the elevator, he swiped a key card into the panel. Instead of descending as she expected, the elevator rose. Impossible, there was only one floor above theirs and it was usually reserved for heads of state or other diplomats. Amanda watched with amazement as the doors opened to a palatial foyer where a set of ivory doors waited. This time Kam entered a code on a keypad before pushing one of the double doors inward.

"Kam?" She turned on him after taking in the breathtaking interior of the luxury suite. In the past, Amanda had thought her family's rooms were sickeningly extravagant, but they didn't hold a candle to the intricately designed sitting room.

"You don't like it?"

"What's not to like? But this place is... Well, I can't imagine how much this cost. Maybe it's not too late to get some of your money back. My family knows the management well, and I'm pretty sure that if we explain things to them, they'll be more than happy to issue a refund."

Large arms folded across the expanse of his chest, and Kam cocked his head to one side as he studied her. "And what, exactly, would we be explaining to them?"

"Well, your financial situation for starters. Actually, it was pretty irresponsible for them to issue this room to you without performing the necessary background checks. Did they give you any indication that they needed to do that?"

"No, as a matter of fact, it didn't come up. It's always been my understanding that repeat visitors are considered less risky."

Amanda paused as she processed his answer. "Repeat?"

He nodded.

"In this suite?"

"Usually when I'm hosting VIP clients, but there are rare occasions when I want the solitude."

She swallowed. "Which is how often?"

"A few times a month."

*A few times.* The sheer potential cost of it boggled her mind. Her family was wealthy; there was no need to pretend otherwise, but as far as she knew, not even her father had the finances or clearance to secure these accommodations. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"Afraid not."

Amanda stared at Kam as if she were seeing him for the first time. It hit her then that she really didn't know the man she'd taken as a mate. "But you were running around in the Alaskan wilderness."

"As were you."

"I was on vacation."

"As was I."

"But you pushed the whole Victor Rites thing and said you didn't believe in Clans."

"I never said I didn't believe in Clans, Amanda. I don't agree with the so-called *civilization* of shifter culture to conform to nonshifter. I find it to be a very colonizing thought that suggests our way of life is wrong."

Her jaw dropped, but she recovered quickly. Still, the only thing she could manage to do was stare at him as if he'd sprouted antennae.

"So you and Regan are Clanmates?"

"The Victor Clan has an alliance with the Nardeau Clan as well as many others."

"And staying here doesn't faze you one bit?"

"I prefer wide-open spaces, but I'm used to city living."

"I can't believe this. Here I thought getting you to agree to trips to the city would be hard, and now you tell me that you have a diplomatic suite in the city at your disposal."

"I never said I hated cities."

"You were running around in the backwoods like it was home."

"It is home for me, just not year-round."

Incredible, she thought, turning to stare out one of the large floor-to-ceiling windows that served as walls. "Were you going to tell me the truth, or had you planned to see just how far your charade would take us?"

"You mean like the truth you told your family about me?"

She swung around to glare at him. "That's different. Need I remind you that my surrogate is recuperating? It would have been just a tad bit insensitive to focus on me right now, don't you think?"

"Who said anything about focusing? A brief overview would have sufficed. Had I not marked you, I'm pretty certain you wouldn't have mentioned me at all."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? You run off without even the slightest hint of where you'd gone or if you'd be back, and when I track you down, your family has absolutely no clue who I am."

"Because I wanted to wait for the right time."

"Sounds like an excuse to me."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but my life doesn't revolve around you. Hell, it's obvious that I don't even know you. I didn't go to Alaska looking for a mate, and if you and your twisted friend hadn't tricked me into the whole Victor Rites thing, I'd still be happily single."

His eyes flashed and darkened, but she didn't care. "Boy, you and Regan must have had a huge laugh at my expense. Is that what you were doing with him for two days, or had you found another victim to harass?"

"This isn't a game, Amanda. You are my mate; there's no changing that fact."

"You wanna bet? I'm certain it would be better for everyone if we just ended this thing here and now." In a flash she made for the door, needing desperately to be away from him, but this time she hoped to make the separation permanent.

She heard the predatory snarl and saw the blur of him moving only seconds before she was swept up and cradled in his muscular arms.

"Put me down, Kam, or so help me, I won't be responsible for what I do."

"So on top of everything else, you want to threaten me too?"

"What I want is to be as far away from you as possible."

"Well, I guess it's unfortunate for you that you'll be stuck with me for the rest of our lives."

"Don't count on it." She found a weakness in his hold and took full advantage of it. Her nails lengthened to claws, which she promptly sank into his shoulder while simultaneously butting him in the mouth with her forehead.



He grunted from the shock of the impact, and his hold grew lax.

Amanda twisted in his arms in time to land on her haunches. Seeing her advantage, she didn't hesitate to scramble once again for the doors. She'd just stumbled forward when an arm hooked around her waist and yanked her off balance. Her palms slapped against the marble floor, taking the brunt of the fall. Seconds later, she was pinned facedown on the hard floor. Her cheek flattened against its smooth surface and her mind raced for her next move.

"I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, Amanda, and concede that neither of us has been very forthcoming with information, something I hope we can correct."

She resisted the urge to tell him exactly what he could do with his damned "benefit of the doubt." "Fine, let me up."

"That doesn't sound like the tone of a woman ready to give us a fresh start. I need some assurances here."

"You have my word that I won't castrate you if you let me go now."

"Amanda, you know how risky it is to taunt a shifter. It's even worse to do so to a bear."

"Whatever, Kam. I'm done playing nice with you."

"Dammit, woman. Stop being silly."

Amanda was beyond caring about his warnings. Yes, it was a dangerous path she was venturing down, but once she was free from Kam it would all be worth it, even if she left with a few battle scars.

He wasn't the only one who could initiate antiquated laws. "I want the Rite of Reversal."

Above her, Kam stiffened.

"Should I tell you what that means?" From the change in his body, she was certain he knew its significance. It was another of the abandoned shifter laws, but if she was successful, Amanda could regain her freedom through it.

"I'm well aware of its meaning, but I'm asking that you not do this. Give us both a chance to calm down."

"I don't need to calm down to recognize that we made a mistake. The Rite of Reversal is the only way out; we both know it."

"You won't win."

"Says you."

"You're being unnecessarily stubborn and may get more than you bargained for in the process."

"All I want is my freedom back."

"Forget it. I keep what's mine, and I fully expect you to honor the challenge oath once this is over."

He had to win the challenge first before he could invoke any bizarre requests on her under the oath. She couldn't believe her life had come to this. Pinned to the floor of an upscale hotel suite about to act on yet another arcane shifter law. For a brief moment, she considered changing her mind. No matter how things had begun between them, Amanda had developed some rather strong emotions for Kam in a very short time. She mentally shook off the thought. He and his friend had done nothing but toy with her from the beginning. Everything she had thought about him was a complete lie. There was no way she could spend the rest of her life with a man whom she couldn't trust. And to think she had been willing to deal with the wrath of Lance Spoils for him.

She didn't wait for Kam's next move, choosing instead to seek every opportunity, exploit any weakness or underestimation on his part. He was larger, stronger, but she was more agile, trained, and wasn't above fighting dirty. She went into action and was pleased to see the head butt work just as effectively the second time around as she slammed the back of her head into his face.

He rolled off her with a groan, but his reaction was much quicker this time around. She managed to scoot just out of his reach but didn't quite get the chance to clamber to her hands and knees before he was reaching for her again. As Amanda struggled against him, determination kept her from being pushed down on her belly again. She doubted he'd be susceptible to a third head butt, and quite frankly, she wasn't sure if she could endure another one either. She rolled onto her back and, wrapping her legs around his waist, mustered enough energy to throw him off balance. She rolled their bodies, instantly claiming the top position. The shocked look on Kam's face turned quickly to one of admiration.

She didn't fool herself into thinking she could hold him down for long, but she only needed to hold him long enough for one thing. Her incisors lengthened, and she struck with deadly accuracy for his jugular. Her teeth sank into flesh, and she tasted his blood in her mouth but would not release her hold.

Kam roared. Hands on her waist jerked at her smaller form, but she only sank her teeth deeper. Amanda stiffened at the sound of her blouse and bra being shredded and yanked from her torso. Her ruined garments were tossed aside like yesterday's rags, but still she maintained her hold on his neck. The metallic taste of his blood mingled with the saliva in her mouth. How he managed to wedge a hand between their bodies would forever remain a mystery. However, she knew the moment he had instantly. His fingers zeroed in on her nipple with precision accuracy, clamping down and twisting none too gently. Pain and, dare she admit it, pleasure stormed her system and fused with her adrenaline rush. She wasn't prepared for her body's traitorous response. When Kam increased the pressure, she unhitched herself and jumped off him with the finesse of drunken cat. Amanda stared at him as if seeing him for the first time as she stumbled out of his reach. Kam rose to his feet, and Amanda couldn't help but be stricken by the feral look in his eyes.

"Now it's my turn." Although not as lethal looking, his fangs lengthened to menacing points.

He wrenched the tee over his head. His chest heaved slowly, but she tried not to be distracted by his muscular physique. Her focus had to be 100 percent on winning this battle. This was no mere human she tangled with, and the stakes were far too high.

"Screw you, Kam."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Not in this lifetime." Amanda definitely sounded much braver than she felt. She assessed the distance between herself and the entrance. Relief flooded her as she spotted the key card still on the entry table where he'd tossed it.

Her breath hitched as he unsnapped the buckle of his jeans, drawing her attention to the very evident arousal trapped in his pants. In spite of herself, heat licked at her core before quickly fanning throughout her body.

"Give up, Amanda."

"Go to hell." Throwing all caution to the wind, she lunged for the doors. It was a futile effort. Even the little fake-out move she had planned to distract him with didn't work. Instead she found herself easily hauled into his arms and tossed over one shoulder as if she weighed no more than a few pounds. She struggled against his firm hold, and her efforts were rewarded by several hard slaps to her backside. The blows stung through the thick fabric of her jeans. Amanda winced but didn't cease her thrashing until Kam's hand dived between her legs to cup her sex. She cursed him, mindful that his long strides took them down a long hall to an open door. At another time Amanda would've commented on just how spacious the room was, but at the moment she was trying her best to keep her wits about her.

She waited for him to drop her on the wide expanse of the bed. He didn't. Instead he held her in place while he walked toward the ceiling-high windows. Amanda wondered what he was about after hearing the quiet swish of fabric. When he turned back toward the bed, she noticed how the curtains fell closed on one window. Her eyes rounded as she noted the corded tassels that held the heavy fabric in place on the other windows, and her struggles renewed. She fought harder this time and thought she'd succeeded in her efforts as she fell backward, but the feel of the soft mattress beneath her told her she'd only aided him. Her cat reflexes had her leaping for the bed's edge, but Kam's response was just as speedy. He grasped one ankle and tugged her to the center of the bed while she twisted and kicked for freedom. Amanda felt like a rag doll the way he easily manipulated her thrashing body. He bound her wrists together above her head with one cord and then strung the remaining tassel through the first and used it to pull her arms taut above her head while he attached the end to a decorative rung on the headboard. The rung was built for longevity as well as beauty, because several pulls later the attachment remained secure.

"Asshole," she spat, breathing heavily from her efforts while Kam moved leisurely from the bed. She watched his movements through narrowed eyes.

He stood at the foot of the bed and kicked off his shoes before wrenching his pants down his long legs.

Amanda took small comfort in the trickle of drying blood on his neck, but there was little else she could take solace in. He didn't look fazed in the least, and that only angered her more. "You can keep me tied here all night and I won't submit to you."

"Why don't we test that theory?" he asked, standing before her in naked splendor.

His knee pressed into the mattress, and although she did her best to avoid his grasp, she succeeded only in exerting more of her precious energy. Kam settled over her, trapping her legs between his thighs. Her breath hitched at the fierce look in his eyes. Primordial. Dangerous. As a diversionary tactic, it worked. So distracted was she that she didn't notice what was happening until he tugged her jeans over her hips. He stepped off the bed, hauling the material down her legs until it gathered at her shoes. Her footwear and jeans were easily dispatched, and in seconds she lay on the bed like a nude offering.

Kam's eyes raked over her body. "Concede defeat."

"No."

A growl started deep in his chest, and the next time he spoke his voice sounded less human. "As you like."

He stalked her like the predator he was, climbing onto the bed and forcing her legs apart. There was no tender touch. No whispered words of seduction. As he bared his fangs, his eyes never wavered from hers.

She jerked against her restraints, and the cords chafed her skin as a hand slid between her thighs. A finger dipped into her slit and was soon joined by another. She ground against him, inadvertently giving his digits deeper penetration. A third finger was added, and she hated herself for the pleasurable heat building in her core. Hot desire stretched out, igniting a deeper longing within her that reminded her of their time apart.

"No." She tried to contradict her body's response to him.

He pulled his fingers from her wetness and held them up for her to see. There was no denying the evidence of her juices coating his digits or the ache left from the absence of his touch. He sucked one long finger in his mouth, licking the taste of her clean.

"Your pussy will always be mine." The words came out gruff and forced as if their utterance required great concentration.

"I'll hate you."

"No...you...won't." His nostrils flared as he mounted her and thrust deep into her enveloping cunt in one long stroke.

*Oh God, but he was right.* It took everything within her to suppress a moan of pleasure. She'd missed the feel of him gliding in and out of her. The battle she fought with her body to keep from responding was useless. She was already slick with enough juices for his slow thrusts, and her hips bucked beneath him in a wanton gesture of need.

His hips keeping a steady rhythm, Kam lowered his face to her neck. "Concede." His hot breath fanned her throat.

Really, there was only one option. She was in no position to see her challenge through and had honestly stopped wanting to the moment his fingers had ignited her. Ashamed with herself for her weakness, she yielded to him in the way of their kind, stretching her neck to give him full access.

She hissed at the scrape of his incisors on her flesh. She was at his mercy, vulnerable to anything he wanted to dish out. Fear should be uppermost in her mind, but it wasn't. He wouldn't hurt her. His mate had challenged him in a match that could have ultimately caused serious injury to one or both of them, and now he needed to reestablish his dominance over her. Growling low in his throat, he sank his fangs into her tender flesh and a combination of pain and pleasure took hold. He plunged in and out of her cunt, over and over, again and again. His stride changed and he rode her hard, impaling her. His hold on her neck was brief, just enough to end the issue between them. His hips pistoned even faster, and she groaned at the unbelievable pleasure.

"Look at me," he ground out.

She complied, enjoying the way the muscles in his neck bulged as he buried his thick cock deep inside her sheath. Her gaze traveled up to his face. Blue eyes bore down into her, only heightening the effect of his hard ride. Her breasts jiggled with the force of their fucking. His hand took hold of one, kneading the flesh and plucking her nipple until it pushed her over the edge. She came violently, coating his cock even more with her orgasm. Her body convulsed beneath him, and he drove into her even harder, now on the precipice of his own climax.

"Mine," he howled, pumping his seed into her womb.

Instead of gathering her in his arms as was his habit after they'd made love, Kam rolled onto his back, tossing one muscular arm over his eyes. She felt the loss of his affection immediately. She wished she could turn on her side for a proper sulking instead of being tied and vulnerable. Amanda closed her eyes, hoping to muster some of the hate she promised. It didn't come. Instead she became even more aware of the aftereffects of their coupling, from the clenching of her core to the ache in her neck where his incisors had punctured her flesh.

She belonged to him wholly. There would be no more Rites of Reversal, no choice but to accept Kam as her mate. A melodious tone intruded on her thoughts, and she was grateful for the distraction. Quickly, she realized the sound was coming from her cell phone and her body went on high alert. "Kam, I need that. It could be important."

His lack of reaction left her thinking that he'd slipped off to sleep. She cursed under her breath; he'd never gone to sleep immediately after sex before. Was this yet another new thing she was discovering about her mate? Her musing was interrupted as he stood in one fluid motion. He moved to sweep up her jeans. However, instead of bringing the phone to her, he flipped the compact rectangle open.

Amanda craned her neck in disbelief.

"Yes?"

The response on the other end was hesitant, and she strained to make out the caller. Taolore.

"This is Kam Victor, her...husband."

He paused to listen, and Amanda heard Rex's muffled insistence to speak with her.

"You'll have to make do with me, as my wife is tied up at the moment."

Amanda sent him a look that felt hot enough to heat the room, but he ignored it by turning his back to her. She gnashed her teeth at the snub.

It was possible now that she could dredge up some serious ill will for him.

"How long till the meeting?" he asked, pacing his way out the room and down the hall, effectively blocking out her ability to hear Rex's side of the conversation.

A pause followed, and then Kam said, "I will convey the message."

"Wait!" she sputtered as he flipped the phone closed while reentering the room. Kam tossed the closed item back on her discarded jeans. "I can't believe you just did that."

He didn't return to her as she thought. Instead he made his way into the adjoining bathroom. She heard the sound of running water before he returned with a cloth in hand.

He sat on the edge of the bed and nudged her legs apart. When she would have kept them closed, he shot her a look that dared her to deny him access. Grudgingly, she spread her legs for him, averting her eyes to an oil painting on the wall behind him.

"Your friend wants us to meet in an hour."

Her breath hitched at the warm feel of the damp cloth pressing intimately into her body. "Did he say where?"

"Chinatown. He gave me the address." Kam took his time wiping her clean.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the cloth was removed. "That's across town. It doesn't give us much time in afternoon traffic."

He made a sound of agreement while making his way casually back to the bathroom.

"Any chance you plan on untying me today?"

"There is still the matter of the challenge oath." He came to stand at the foot of the bed with his legs slightly apart and massive arms crossed over his chest.

"And you want to bring it up now?"

"Can you think of a better time?"

She wanted to shout but remained calm. "Yes. Like after I've resolved my family matter."

"It was your idea to initiate the Rite of Reversal now."

"Like I had much choice."

"You could have talked to me instead of opting for such an extreme measure. But as you noted, time is wasting."

"So get on with it."

"It's quite simple. From this moment on, I expect you to keep me involved in every aspect of your life, no matter how small."

"You think I'm going to report my every move to you?" She couldn't keep the note of derision from her voice.

"I expect you to make me aware of the important and inconsequential matters of your life, yes."

Agreement was her only course of action. It was his right to impose any oath and her obligation to acquiesce. There was no point in her drawing out the issue when it was obvious he wouldn't be budging, and especially not when so much else was at stake. "Fine, you have my oath."

"And you."

## Chapter Ten

The lobby, like the rest of the hotel, was a tribute to all things affluent. The tastefully done interior held every modern convenience, which made never leaving the pricey hotel a feasible option. Amanda had laughed when she saw it advertised as a selling point in a marketing brochure. Rumor had it that construction would begin soon to add a fifth boutique to go along with the four spas and the recent addition of an Internet café for the “mainstream” elite. The amenities were only partial reasons for the wealthy and ofttime high-profile members of the world to sojourn there. Patrons were also guaranteed privacy from prying eyes and paparazzi eager for any photo op. Because of the diplomatic status of some of its clients, the owners of the hotel even managed to obtain a special permit, which kept the hounding media several yards from the entrance. Those interested in complete anonymity could copter to the roof’s private landing pad and be whisked to their rooms.

With the type of clientele usually frequenting the posh hotel, it was no wonder several of the guests were casting curious glances at the two giant shifters, especially the rougher-looking Regan, who sent searing looks to a few of the more shapely females passing by.

Their waiting party spotted them immediately. If Leo had thought her request for a fresh shirt odd, he said nothing, only quirked a brow at her in the hotel lobby when she and Kam appeared with her attired in one of her mate’s overly large tees. She plucked the cotton shirt from her brother’s hands and proceeded into the public restroom for a quick change. It gave her no small pleasure to toss Kam’s shirt in the trash on her way to rejoin them. She was self-conscious over her missing undergarment as she made her way back to her party, but a bra was just one of those items she didn’t think her brother would want to scrounge up for her. If not for Leo standing in there, Amanda would have passed the group of men without a second thought. Even so she



was mindful of Kam's watchful stare, especially the way his gaze drifted knowingly to her chest.

"I think we should get out of here before Regan pounces on some unsuspecting woman," Leo said at her approach.

Regan didn't bother to answer. At present, he hungrily ogled a statuesque brunette, who stood next to a man possibly old enough to be her father. The woman's return looks were just as bold in spite of the possessive arm around her waist that suggested she and her companion shared a different type of relationship than that of parent and child.

Regan quirked a questioning brow at the woman. "She wouldn't have any regrets."

"Wanna bet?" Amanda mumbled but was very certain that the keen hearing of the shifters made out her words.

"My car is out front," Kam said.

She preceded the men through the lobby, aware of all eyes on them. They reached the entrance in time to see Lance Spoils alighting from a chauffeur-driven Bentley. She saw the flash of anger pass over her father's face only to be replaced by an unreadable expression.

"Dad." She tried mustering a cheery tone.

Her father gave her a cursory look of acknowledgment before his eyes settled on the men behind her. "You're going somewhere?" His gaze shifted once again to her.

"I have a lead I need to follow up on. How is Helena?"

"She's much better. Good thing there are a few shifter doctors on staff." He'd originally looked as if he'd tasted something bitter, but the mention of her surrogate mother removed some of the sourness. "Does this lead require *all* of you to go?"

"Yes." She didn't like it any more than he did, but wouldn't add to his displeasure by confessing her feelings on the matter.

"I didn't quite expect you to be here." He looked past her again, and it was obvious to whom his comment was directed.

Kam's reply left no doubt about his intentions. "Get used to it, because I'm here to stay."

\* \* \* \* \*

After today, she'd be qualified to teach a course in avoiding shifter brawls, having narrowly averted one between her father and mate. Kam's comment earned him a low snarl from her sire that Amanda recognized as that of a hunter ready to protect his cub. The air filled with electricity, which only dissipated when Amanda reminded him of their meeting. She'd taken a risk by moving away from the men to a large custom SUV she assumed belonged to Kam. The driver moved around to open the door for her. As

she'd hoped, the three men followed, and she breathed a sigh of relief when they were safely ensconced within the vehicle without incident.

Kam reached for the intercom switch and supplied the address along with directions to the driver. He'd relayed the route in true New Yorker fashion, which reminded her just how often he must visit the city to be so well acquainted. There was still so much she didn't know about him.

The oversize vehicle must look out of place converging down the narrow side streets of Chinatown, she imagined. With Kam's directions, they'd left the main tourist haunts fairly quickly after hitting the bustling area.

"Stop," Kam said as the car continued to jerk from playing a never-ending game of chicken with pedestrians. "We can walk from here."

"Are we close?" Leo cast a glance at the darkening sky above, obscured only by the aging buildings, as they poured onto the street.

"What's wrong, pussycat, afraid of the dark?" Regan goaded.

True to form, Leo didn't bother to spare the other shifter the slightest glance.

Regan gave him a queer look, and she hid her smirk. Amanda should probably tell Regan he was wasting his time where her brother was concerned because Leo possessed a hide several inches thick. Even she had a hard time getting him to rise to her baiting.

"Only a couple more blocks," Kam answered, herding her closer to the group of men. She rolled her eyes heavenward but held her tongue. He gave quick instructions for the driver to leave before the group embarked on their destination.

Darkness settled quickly and the narrow road flowed into an even more constricting alley. The crowd they'd encountered earlier hastily thinned farther away from the main thoroughfare until they had traveled until they were the only ones visible. At her side, Kam moved in closer. Finally, they stopped in front of a nondescript gray metal door, and Kam knocked twice. Amanda eyeballed him questioningly. There were no markings anywhere. She wasn't even sure what street they were officially on, yet Kam moved to the door without the slightest hesitation. The door was pulled open with a popping sound that echoed in the interior, but she couldn't see anything more than Kam's broad back. They were granted entry, but Kam maintained his lead position. Regan insinuated his body in front of hers, leaving Leo to fall in behind her.

The lighting was low in the wide-open interior save for the glow radiating from within its cavernous depth. As shifters, the absence of illumination didn't hamper their vision, and in actuality, her feline self preferred the subdued glow. The door closed behind them and was latched firmly in place. Amanda recognized the man who let them in as a tiger shifter.

"Follow me," he said unnecessarily. She surveyed what looked like an abandoned factory. All equipment had been cleared, making it unclear as to what it had once been used for, but a faint synthetic smell lingered in the air. To the factory's rear, she made out two more males, neither of whom she recognized as Rex. A makeshift partition obscured her view of any other people and partially shielded the light. Her ears perked

at the soft whimpering sounds coming from behind the barrier. They were female sounds. She scented the air. A scared female. No longer content with being placed behind the men, she took a flanking position to Kam as they moved around the barrier and silently dared him to disapprove. Her pace quickened at the prospect of learning what Rex had uncovered.

The sight in front of them brought the group to a sudden halt. What amounted to a spotlight blared directly onto an ashen-faced woman, but that was only the first thing that caught their attention. The bruises marring what had the potential of being a beautiful visage left her speechless. The woman's arms and legs were secured by rope. Combined with the state of her clothing, she looked as if she'd barely pulled through a brutal beating.

"Amanda --" was all Rex managed to get out before Regan flew into action, reaching the other shifter with a speed not normally associated with bears. His large fist caught Rex square in the jaw, sending the other man down. Not ones to let such an offense go unpunished, the other men in Rex's group converged on Regan, which only served to send Kam into action. To his credit, he looked as if he actually intended to pull Regan away from the men, but his good intentions quickly went awry, turning the event into a melee of wolves and bears.

The bound woman did her best to hop out of harm's way, and her swollen eyes widened pitifully in fear. She didn't make a sound at the snarling bundle of men who were landing blows.

"I thought you all were friends," the tiger shifter said at her side in a bored, catlike tone.

"We are." Amanda shook her head in disgust.

"Should I stop them?" Leo asked casually at her side, not taking his eyes off the brawl.

She shook her head. "That won't be necessary. Can I have your handgun?" She extended her hand to the tiger.

The man didn't hesitate to hand the piece over to her.

She spotted a wooden beam beyond the group, took aim, and fired into the solid but forgiving surface. That got their attention. Several pairs of feral eyes turned on her as if she'd lost her mind. "That was just a warning shot, fellas. If you each don't want to get a cap in your ass, I suggest you break up the kiddie fight so that we can find out what's going on here."

Kam's eyes were the first to return to normal, glinting with amusement, which she promptly ignored. The other men exchanged questioning glances from their haphazard positions.

"She'll do it." Rex spoke with authority from the bottom of the pile.

Slowly, bodies untangled as the men righted themselves and dusted their clothing as if the scrimmage were already forgotten.

"Fucking dogs need to be kept in a kennel," Regan exclaimed after inspecting a large gash in his shirt.

"I got your dog right here, you clumsy bear."

When the other man looked as if he'd charge Regan, she cocked the gun and gave him a menacing look. The wolf gave her a threatening look that had Kam issuing a cautioning growl.

Amanda handed the weapon back to the tiger. "Enough already. Rex, tell me what's happening here. Was this really necessary?" She pointed to the female, trying to reserve judgment until she had the full story.

Rex shot a glare at Regan. "We aren't responsible for the way she looks now. Had we not shown up when we did, Ms. Boden wouldn't be here to tell her story at all."

Amanda wasn't sure why she was so relieved to hear that, especially when the woman could be to blame for Helena's injuries. She stared at the frightened female whose gaze lighted on each of them. "Where are the other people?"

"At the bottom of the river, they should surface in a few days," the tiger at her side answered with familiar nonchalance.

"There were only three of them, but they drew weapons first," Rex offered by way of explanation.

"Were they ours?"

Rex shook his head. She swore silently at the loss of valuable information that perished with the men.

Regan's expression was full of disbelief. He moved to shift the harsh lighting away from Cheryl. "And I take it you found her tied like this too?"

"No. She kept trying to run, no matter how many times we told her there was nowhere to go," the tiger answered.

She had spunk. Amanda admired that about her but wasn't quite ready to form a cheering section for the woman. "So what have you learned?"

Rex's jaw tensed. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other but maintained steady eye contact. "Nothing."

"Figures." Regan snorted.

Rex's temper flared. "And you think you could do better!"

"Stop!" Amanda interjected before Regan could respond. With a determined stride, she grabbed the only other chair in the room, no doubt previously occupied by Rex as he questioned Cheryl. She dropped it only a few inches from the woman and straddled the seat.

Cheryl Kathleen Boden wasn't exactly what she'd expected. Amanda could tell a fairly attractive woman lay beneath the bruises and puffiness. If she were to hazard a guess at the woman's age, she'd peg her somewhere around twenty-six, give or take a year. Her silky, straight hair, almond-shaped eyes, and porcelain complexion left no doubt to the woman's ethnicity. It only struck her as slightly interesting that an

obviously Asian woman could have such a purely American name. Brown eyes scrutinized Amanda.

"I'm Amanda Spoils, Cheryl. I'm sure you're feeling pretty frightened at the moment, but I promise you that no more harm will come to you. I asked my men to bring you here, and from the sound of things, it looks like I did it in the nick of time. Why were the other men trying to hurt you?"

"You're Helena's daughter." It wasn't a question. Amanda was struck silent by both the woman's comment and the sound of her femininely husky tone. In spite of the entire trauma she'd endured. Her voice was clear and steady. "She told me about you."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage."

Cheryl's eyes clouded with tears. "They got to her, didn't they? My God, she's dead."

Not prepared to confirm or deny any information, Amanda only watched and waited for what the younger woman would do or say next. Tears streamed down Cheryl's face at a steady rate, and Amanda didn't doubt their sincerity.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know."

That was a start.

Amanda pulled a switchblade from her pocket, extending her arm to the woman, who only hesitated slightly before holding out her bound wrists. She didn't get a chance to cut the binding at her legs loose because in that instance Regan was there freeing her of the remaining restraint. Cheryl cringed noticeably as she eyed the shifter warily.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he said softly before moving away from her.

Amanda quirked her brow at the display and gave Regan a look over her shoulder as he walked off into the shadows. She returned her observation to Cheryl only to find the woman staring after his retreating form.

"Who were the men who did this to you?"

"Boyle's goons. He brought them on the dig as security."

"And who is this Boyle person?"

"He was the representative sent by the cash cow responsible for the excavation."

"Do you know the name of the backer?" Amanda asked gently, glad to see Cheryl so forthcoming with information.

"We never really knew. The head archeologist refused to speak of him, although I'm certain he knew. Both he and Boyle spent a lot of time with their heads together."

"Is this Boyle person still in Ethiopia with the archeologist?"

"No. Both he and Dr. Anderson escorted the artifact back to the US."

"I'll need both their full names."

The woman shook her head. "Boyle didn't provide a last name and the doctor's name was Neal Anderson."

"Was?"

She nodded slowly. "Boyle's men said that I'd be joining him soon in the afterlife."

Amanda didn't disguise her curse this time. If Cheryl was to be believed, her lead list was steadily dwindling.

"Did you hear anything else from these men, anything at all?"

Cheryl's eyes closed and she became extremely silent. Even her breathing slowed. For a moment Amanda thought she might be in pain. She heard footsteps behind her and knew it was Regan coming to the woman's aid again. Her hand shot in the air to halt him, and surprisingly he stopped. She didn't pretend to think that he would remain that way for too long if Cheryl showed any signs of distress.

"I can show you everything I know, Amanda." Cheryl's eyes remained closed as she spoke. "But I'll need physical contact."

"No!" Kam barked, coming to stand behind his mate.

"Not now, Kam. I need to do this."

"You have no idea what this woman is about, Amanda. You can't trust her."

"It's all right, bear. I have no intention of harming your mate. I doubt if I could even if I wanted to, but thank you for giving me so much credit."

The silence in the room was deafening. There was no doubt all eyes were on the human female who easily identified the mated couple.

Cheryl's eyes remained closed as she spoke. "I know what all of you are, although I find it intriguing that a bear and lion shifter would form a permanent bond. Must be a great topic of conversation when the two of you are out of earshot."

"How do you know this?" Amanda was the first to find her voice. There was no point in denying the woman's words.

"I can read energy, or rather there is something within me that can read energy from anything. It requires a level of concentration I haven't been able to attain since being taken from the site."

"So you can read our minds?"

"No, nothing as extravagant as that. I see energy signatures and auras. Within you I see two, the human and lion half...and...well, the bond linking you to the bear behind you. All of you have two signatures, so I can only assume that you're shifters, the same as Helena."

"A doppelgänger," Kam provided.

"Correct...um... Should I just keep calling you bear? Although I'm sure that will become very confusing soon, since there are two bears, two lions, two wolves, and one tiger in the room."

"His name is Kam," Regan provided, maintaining his position. "I'm Regan."

Cheryl's eyes snapped open and she cast a tentative glance in Regan's shadowed direction. Her voice pattern wobbled a bit. "Thank you...Regan."

Amanda knew very little about what was assumed to be an extinct species. The only bit of information she'd retained was that they had a duality like shifters, only their second side was thought to be psychic in nature.

"Unfortunately, Kam, my abilities don't amount to much beyond energy and aura readings."

"Your kind is said to be wiped out," Kam continued.

"Yet here I am."

"Is that why you were hired for the dig?" Amanda wanted to know.

"I didn't think so until recently. No one knows what I am...and those who knew about my abilities are long gone." A haunted look came over her face but was gone quickly. "I'm not sure how they could have found out."

"And you never used your ability to help them?"

"Not purposefully. I love archeology, and every unearthed treasure is a joyous discovery. I had the sole and distinct pleasure of cataloging the artifacts and would oftentimes work long after the rest of the crew was asleep. The trailer we used for the smaller items had security cameras inside. I thought it was just a necessary measure, but now as I think back, it was the only way they could have known how important the artifact was."

"How do you mean?" Amanda asked.

"Let me show you." Cheryl extended her hand again.

"I don't like it, Amanda," Kam said.

"So noted, but it's what I have to do." Amanda didn't hesitate in reaching for the woman's hand.

"You'll need to close your eyes and relax; it's the only way a connection can be established. I should warn you that our sense of recall is like living in the moment, so you will see and feel everything I experienced."

Amanda nodded and closed her eyes.

*"See what I've seen, Amanda."*

## Chapter Eleven

She opened her eyes to find herself transported to a dusty trailer filled with recently unearthed items. Her fingers touched each piece like a kid looking for a starting point in a toy store. In her enthusiasm, she hummed the Grateful Dead tune "Touch of Grey." Her eyes fell on a small chestlike box brought in earlier. She'd been busy doing the careful washing of a small artifact when the item had come in and hadn't had the pleasure of devoting time to it yet. She pulled on a new pair of rubber gloves and picked the box up for a closer examination. Even encrusted in layers of dried dirt and clay, she knew the item was special. Cheryl brought the piece to her cleaning station and began the arduous task of carefully removing the packed dirt. She worked tirelessly, ignoring the grumbling in her belly and the ache in her back and neck until she'd removed what she considered a safe amount of earth. More work would need to be done in a proper facility, but with more specialized tools than had been provided to her for the excavation. It was a mockery, what she had to work with and the negligent way the artifacts were treated once they left her care.

"Don't worry, little guy. I'll make sure you get the VIP treatment," she said after a final brushing. She scrutinized the box closer, looking for any obvious mechanism that would trigger the latch on it. Nothing popped out at her. She smiled secretly before placing the box on the flat table. Allowing her eyes to droop closed, she summoned energy from her second self, the psychic part of her that lived like a ghost within. An enormous energy surged from the tiny chest, causing her to stumble backward.

The connection broken, she stared at the relic as if it were alive. "Whoa, you certainly pack a wallop." She closed her eyes again, only this time called up a mental safeguard that would protect her from the force of the power within.

Her mind reached again for the connection, and even with her safeguard in place, she still felt the shove from the artifact. The blow wasn't enough to break her link. Electricity flowed from the interior, streaming out in vibrant spindles of light. She felt



the very real energy of a consciousness. Groggily, it reached for her, wanting to touch her mind.

"No!" The scream was wrenched from her, breaking her connection. Her heart raced as she stood staring at the bejeweled chest.

A knock sounded at the door. "Everything all right in there, Dr. Boden?"

Her first instinct was to call the security guard in to take away the vestige, but after one deep breath she mustered a strong "yes." Although she fought the inclination to flee the trailer, she knew she couldn't stay in the relic's presence until she could better understand what she'd just seen. It was silly to think the box would leap off the table and attack her, but just to be on the safe side, she edged her way out the only door.

She wasn't sure where she was heading until she walked into the tent where Helena was doing the grunt work of cleaning and sterilizing tools. It was busy work, which is all they seemed to assign to the woman who'd signed up on the dig under the name of Tina Ahmed. She carried the lioness duality within her, something Cheryl picked up on quickly but kept to herself. She'd doubted early on that the woman was who she pretended to be. It wasn't until after she befriended the eccentric female that the truth leaked out while the women imbibed a little too much wine in a private celebration over the latest find. Cheryl had never divulged the woman's true identity and had never questioned her further after the tell-all night.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost." Tina -- Helena -- dropped the tool she'd been polishing and wiped her hands on dusty linen pants.

"I may as well have." She proceeded to tell her what she'd experienced in the trailer, for the first time in her life not holding back any information. At Helena's baffled expression, Cheryl formed a mental connection to share her experience with the woman. Unfortunately, Helena didn't get a chance to see the item firsthand because it was shipped back to the States that night. The brief insight hadn't squelched the woman's curiosity, and Helena left soon after with as much information as Cheryl was privileged to.

After Helena's departure, things on the site came to a grinding halt, and she got her walking papers only four days later. Feeling disgruntled and worried over the future treatment of the site and uncovered artifacts, Cheryl was prepared to publish a scathing letter over the treatment of the precious relics at the site. She hadn't counted on being kidnapped from a busy JFK International while she waited for her connecting flight back to Kansas City. She immediately recognized her captors as she came to a disoriented wakefulness in the backseat of the car with one man. He was one of three men hired as security for the excavation site. She'd never cared for him or his comrades and rarely had cause to interact with them. Ricky's hand crept dangerously up her leg until she struck out with all her might to smack him across the mouth.

"What the fuck!" The exclamation came from the front of the car while the guy next to her was too busy nursing the busted lip she'd given him. The car swerved, and Cheryl didn't waste time trying to open the rear door.

"Get that bitch!"

To her dismay, the door didn't budge and she was jerked backward by the collar of her shirt by the front passenger. Buttons snapped and flew about. She didn't have time to react before a heavy fist connected with her jaw. Fireworks went off in her head, coinciding with the pain that burst through her cheek that sent heat through the rest of her face. She tasted blood as her teeth sank into the side of her tongue. The blow stunned her, giving the guy next to her enough time to regain his composure and drag her squirming body across his lap. His beefy hand encircled her neck and she struggled for air.

"I'll squeeze the life out of you right now if you don't chill out. Got it?"

She nodded her understanding but knew either way her life would be over if she didn't get away from the men. She was just buying herself time. He pushed her back across the seat and she cowered as much into the corner as humanly possible.

"How much of that shit did you give her?"

"It knocked the doctor out for the count," Ricky complained while settling back into his seat.

"I gave her the same damned thing, I swear," the guy next to her whined. She'd never bothered to learn his name, preferring instead to steer a wide berth around the man because he'd made her skin crawl.

"Obviously not enough. I hate shooting conscious targets. All that damned begging and screaming gets on my fucking nerves," Ricky said distastefully.

Creepy guy looked at her like she was a choice piece of meat. "I'll do it so long as I get do stick it to her first. I like fucking uppity bitches."

"Forget it; your DNA will be all over her. It's bad enough we'll have to clean her up before we dump her body with old Doc Anderson."

Creepy mumbled and looked out his window like a sulking child just denied his favorite toy.

"You got any more of that stuff on you?" Ricky asked.

"Nah, I tossed it in the trunk," Creepy answered.

"You're a smart one, aren't ya?" the driver threw over his shoulder.

"Just shut up and drive, Mikey," Creepy sneered.

Cheryl stared out the window, trying to get an idea of where she was. Granted, New York was all Greek to her, but she was certain from the numerous films she'd seen in the past that the desolate road they drove down wouldn't be on any tourist maps. It made sense, of course; they couldn't risk taking her anywhere public. The car crawled to a halt near a bank of old warehouses. Ricky got out of the car to the push the heavy garagelike door open before coming around to her side of the car. She heard the locks disengage, and her heart hammered in her chest.

Think, think! her mind shouted.

There was no mistaking the gun or the silencing cap Ricky was securing on its tip before he exited the vehicle. "End of the road, hon. Say hello to the doc and that nosy Middle Eastern chick when you get to the other side."

*Helena.* Her heart wrenched with anguish, but it was an emotion she couldn't indulge in now because once she was out of the car her life would be forfeit. The driver slid from the car to watch just as Ricky pulled her door open.

"Come on, don't be shy. Everyone has to go sometime. Why not do it with dignity?"

Did he really think he was selling her on death?

"Hand me the gun, and I'll trade places with you." Her comment wiped the smug look off Ricky's face but also earned her an openhanded slap across her uninjured cheek from Señor Creepy. The hit was sure to leave a mark, but what would it matter with her body rotting at the bottom of the ocean? She lashed out then, using her foot to kick Ricky, where he stood waiting, as hard as possible in the groin. A high-pitched noise was followed by the distinct sound of air rushing from the rear tire beside her door as the man moaned and doubled over in pain.

"Dammit, she made him shoot the tire out." Mikey stared in disbelief at the irreparable damage.

"I've had it with this cunt. Screw Boyle and that white-haired bastard's procedures. We took care of that Arab bitch just fine using our own methods," Ricky said through gritted teeth as he took aim with the gun from his bent position. On the opposite side of her, Creepy scrambled through the door to get out of the line of fire. It was the end for her, and chances were her parents would never have a body to bury. Her disappearance would go unsolved.

"Rot in hell," she said, staring the gunman square in the eye. One minute Rick stood poised to end her life, and the next something large hurtled at his body, knocking him out of her line of vision.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was an out-of-body experience. At least that's how it felt to Amanda as she opened her eyes and found herself back in the factory and in her own skin.

"Whoa!" She exhaled.

Kam was there at her side, pulling her to her feet while he searched her face. "Are you okay?"

Amanda wasn't certain but thought it better to reassure him. "I'm fine, really."

She took a few deep breaths to try to reorient herself to the here and now. It helped, but not much.

"You can let me go now, Kam." She didn't think he would at first, and then reluctantly, he let his arms drop from her waist. Amanda gave him a reassuring smile before reclaiming her seat.

"Thank you," Amanda said to the bruised woman. "I'm sorry if these men scared you even more, but I had to know how involved you were in Helena's shooting."

"I understand. I only wish I could have done something to stop them from..." Pain crowded her throat, cutting off the last part of her statement as tears welled in her eyes.

The sympathy Amanda had reserved for the woman earlier flowed through her. Extending her hand to cover Cheryl's, she let go of the secret. "Helena isn't dead."

Her eyes searched Amanda's for the truth. "But...they said --"

"They shot her, but Helena is a tougher bird than that. Thankfully, they didn't take the time to dispose of her body as they'd done with the doctor."

"So she's alive." Relief washed over Cheryl's face and she rose on unsteady legs. "When can I see her?"

"She's in the hospital recouping, but if my parents are to be believed, she'll be out soon. First things first, we need to get you seen by a physician."

"I think that's a good idea...because I'm not feeling too hot." No sooner were the words out than Cheryl's legs buckled and she fell right into Regan's arms.

## Chapter Twelve

"Was that Vulcan mind meld thing she did helpful?" Leo asked over the blaring sirens. It was amazing all the little privileges Rex got in his line of work. Leo looked completely undisturbed in the passenger seat of Rex's truck as they followed the truck carrying an unconscious Cheryl and a doting Regan at top speed.

Amanda ignored the number of traffic violations they were committing in an effort to get to the same hospital where Helena convalesced. She had taken the liberty of contacting the shifter doctor on his private cell to let him know to expect another special case stat.

"Yes and no. I'm still not sure what the hell the artifact is, but it was powerful, old, and familiar. There was an address associated with it, so that's where we'll start."

"And the artifact, was it something you'd seen before?" Kam questioned.

She shook her head. "It was more like a feeling."

"Sounds very *X-Files* to me," Leo commented.

"You need to lay off the boob tube, li'l bro, seriously. There was something else I found interesting too. One of Boyle's men referred to another man with white hair. I think he's the benefactor of the excavation."

"Not exactly a bio," Kam said. Amanda noticed how tightly he held on to her hand. As much as she didn't want it to, his concern touched her.

"Helena is convinced that the financial guy is a shifter too. Once we find this Boyle fellow, we'll be able to get ahold of Mr. White Hair," Amanda said.

"If Boyle is still alive," Kam added.

"We'll start with the addresses Cheryl used to ship the packages to. A person has to be attached to them," said Amanda.

"Not to burst your bubble, sis, but she looked out for the count. I doubt you'll be getting any more useful information from her tonight," Leo said.

"That's okay; she's already given it to me, remember?" Amanda tapped her temple with her index finger.

Rex glanced at her through the rearview. "And what if this is a trap?"

"I don't think so, but just to be sure, we'll have to keep on our toes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rex's statement mirrored Kam's thoughts. He saw Regan's instant attachment to the doppelgänger and wanted to trust the woman, but he'd reserve judgment until he had more information. Foremost on his mind was keeping Amanda safe. She was more than his mate; he felt an affinity for her far beyond anything he'd ever thought possible.

He had dated both humans and shifters before meeting Amanda but had generally found that their interest in him seemed far less genuine than their interest in his wallet. Happily, he filled most of his time with work. However, the passing of his fortieth birthday brought with it a longing for something more. His grandfather was the first to comment on Kam's restlessness and didn't hold his tongue or his opinion on the subject, flat out telling him it was time to get mated and have a few cubs of his own.

*"And if you want my opinion, you'll leave those anorexic glam and glitz types alone. They're only good for looking pretty on your arm and emptying out your bank account."*

Kam hadn't argued. He'd dated his fair share of women who fit the description.

*"Now if you want a shot at happiness, you'll take my advice and travel to bear country during mating season. There you'll find a woman who's not afraid of breaking a nail and will keep you young all your days like your grandmother does me. Mark my words."*

Kam liked to believe he'd gone to Alaska for a break from it all, to commune with nature and to finally finish work on his property. In retrospect, he admitted no one went to the wilderness before the start of one of Alaska's harsh winters for either purpose. He'd spent the long season in solitude, taking stock of himself as most would when left alone with no company for months on end. With the thaw, he had emerged ready to find a mate, like the few remaining bear shifters, and in spite of the odds, he'd found her. His Amanda.

Her life, safety, and happiness were paramount to him, and while he considered the mission she'd set herself on of vast importance, he wouldn't allow her to be put in jeopardy for her family or any other shifters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once Cheryl was fully admitted to the ICU and Regan was installed as her self-appointed bodyguard, Amanda was eager to drop in on Helena to see how she was doing. They rounded the corner in time to see a Pride male ducking out of her room,

pulling the door tightly closed in his wake. He rubbed at spot on his forehead, then stiffened when he spotted Amanda, Leo, and Kam.

"I take it she's awake?" Amanda questioned the male, whose cheeks were turning bright red.

"And in rare form."

As she pushed the door open slowly, Amanda had the feeling she should be waving a white flag.

"I swear, if you come in here one more time telling me what Lance said... Oh, it's you, habibti." Helena's tone softened as she entered the room. "And I see you brought guests."

Amanda couldn't believe how much Helena had improved since their last visit. Although few faded lacerations were still visible on her face, Amanda was happy to see her coloring had returned to normal. Much of the equipment had been removed, and based on her casual position atop the bed's covering, she was pretty sure Helena was moving about freely.

"You're looking good, tant," Amanda said, moving across the room to her.

"Well, don't sound so surprised, dear. You know I've never been a layabout."

It did her heart good to see Helena returning to her jovial self. "This is him," she whispered softly in her surrogate's ear as she leaned forward to kiss Helena's cheek.

Leo followed suit but quickly stepped back to allow for introductions of the newest member into their family.

"A bear." The lilt in Helena's voice and her raised brows illustrated her surprise. "Don't be shy, dear boy. Come and greet the nicest mother in the entire Spoils Pride. You're sure to get those prissy kitties' panties in a bunch."

Kam relinquished his hold on Amanda's hand for the first time since they had left the factory.

Amanda bit back a smile, wondering if Kam had ever been shy a day in his entire life. "His name's Kam Victor."

The surprised look on Helena's face brightened even more. "Well, this is a double pleasure then and certainly worth watching those foppish felines fall all over you." She reached for Kam and placed a kiss on his cheek.

"So you've heard of me?" he asked, pulling back slightly.

"Who hasn't? The Victor Bear Clan is one of the oldest. I remember being a young girl and meeting a Roanoke Victor on a trip to England once. I'd say you hold a strong resemblance to him."

Kam smiled. "That's because he's my grandfather."

Helena nodded. "And how is the rake? I was too young for him to spare a second glance at, but he was always very nice to me and extremely popular with the other shifters -- until he met your grandmother, of course."

Kam threw back his head and let loose a loud laugh. "My grandmother will be happy to meet you; it seems my grandfather has selectively forgotten his youthful escapades and swears she is making half of them up."

"You've made a strong alliance indeed, li'l daughter. The funny thing is your father has yet to realize it."

As much as she was glad to see Helena and Kam hitting it off, it bothered her that her surrogate obviously knew more about her mate than she did. Almost afraid of how much would be revealed, she switched topics.

"We found Cheryl. She's here in the hospital."

"Here?"

"My guys found her just as Boyle's men were going to do to her what they thought they'd done to you."

"How badly was she hurt?"

"The doctor said her injuries looked worse than what they were." Amanda left out her unconscious state since or Dr. Fielding's grim prognosis. Even the revelation of her being a doppelgänger didn't seem to change his opinion. "She's just a few doors down and might be ready for visitors tomorrow. Dr. Fielding will be her attending."

"So you know she's not a regular human?"

"Yeah, we found that out too."

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before, but there was no time for everything and quite frankly, I don't know how helpful it would have been since I'm not quite sure what she is."

"Kam called her a doppelgänger," Leo provided, dropping into a chair and picking up a magazine, a sign that he was already bored with the conversation.

"They're supposed to be extinct. Are you sure?" Helena looked between the three of them.

"She confirmed it herself," Amanda said.

"Well, isn't this just a day for surprises? So who was it behind this thing and where's the artifact?"

"The men who shot you and beat Cheryl are dead. A man named Boyle and a white-haired man were mentioned. Does that ring any bells?"

"Boyle worked on the site, but I didn't see him the day I was shot, and I don't know who this white-haired guy could be. I'm sorry."

"No worries, tant, we have some other leads we're going to try. We're not going to give up on it that quickly."

She smiled. "I know you won't, habibti, just be safe."

"No need to worry about that, Helena. I'll make sure she's taken care of," Kam reassured her.



Helena shot Amanda a knowing look and smiled. When Kam said his good-byes and turned to leave, the woman pretended to fan herself and swoon.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was bound to happen; she'd only hoped it wouldn't be so soon when she was so physically and emotionally exhausted she didn't think she could see straight. There were two things she wanted: food and a comfortable bed, and if she could have both at the same time, she'd know what true utopia felt like. Instead what she got was a highly professional football blitz executed in true Pride fashion. Young felines who'd probably manned their posts all day just waiting for their return descended on them in the hotel lobby, seeming to come from all directions.

"Go away, Tommy." Amanda tried dismissing her barely twenty-year-old cousin. He was one of a group of ten, and from the looks of things, another four loitered about trying to blend in. *As if.*

"Can't do that, A.J. Uncle Lance wanted to know the moment you came back."

"You make that call, twerp, and I'll have you eating the phone," Leo snarled.

She could see the intimidation on the younger lion's face but gave him kudos for not backing down.

"That wasn't my job, but it looks like it's all taken care of." He nodded in the direction of a young female who waved at them with the cell phone in her hand.

"Move out of the way, little cub. My mate's tired." Kam didn't quite snarl. He didn't have to; when he took a step forward, his sheer size alone had the younger man backing away.

"Look, I'm supposed to tell you to meet them in the main dining room," Tommy got out in a rush, eyeing the shifter wearily.

"You've delivered your message; now go." Kam kept his voice low, but the youth reacted as if he'd bellowed the order. The other relaxing felines made themselves scarce to avoid having Kam's attention directed at them.

"Go on up to bed. I'll tell L and M you were too tired," Leo volunteered.

Leo's offer was like music to her ears, and she desperately wanted to take him up on it but thought how unfair it would be to pull her brother into the crossfire.

"No, you go ahead. It's time I got this out of the way."

"You mean *we*, don't you?" Kam asked.

Amanda was too tired to argue; plus she needed to conserve all her energy for the showdown ahead. A tiny part of her admitted it would be nice to have Kam there for moral support. "Why not?"

It was no surprise that the dining room was completely empty when they entered. Her father probably had the hotel manager jumping through hoops to reserve the space, no matter how many other guests were put out. When Lance Spoils wanted something,

everyone else snapped to make it happen. There was an inkling of pleasure in knowing he wouldn't get his way in having a say in who she'd taken as a mate.

They were shown to a table in the middle of the room. Of course. Even in the absence of people, her parents would want to take center stage.

"Should we order up anything for your folks?" he asked, taking the seat next to her.

Amanda didn't make any bones when Kam placed their order, requesting two *K* specials. She didn't ask what it was, just hoped it was fast in getting to the table. "I'm sure they've already eaten. My mother is a stickler for having her meals at a *reasonable* time."

Kam chuckled. "I hope that's not something you're planning to enforce with our children."

And have them hoarding snacks in their bedroom like she and her siblings had as children? Not bloody likely. The waiter's sudden reappearance with their food prevented her from answering. She practically salivated at the sight and smell of two fresh pieces of salmon being laid in front of them. She groaned in near-orgasmic delight after forking in a mouthful. Her first inclination was to savor the bite, but her hunger demanded more.

"This is heaven." She cut through the tender meat with a fork. She took Kam's own deep sigh of contentment as agreeing with her sentiment. He was definitely a man who enjoyed food. There was a natural elegance in the way he used his fingers to pluck healthy chunks of fish from the plate and suck them into his mouth. In fact, it was downright sensual. She didn't care that she was openly staring at his mouth or that her thoughts were turning away from food to a more carnal hunger.

Her parents walked into the dining room as he dropped the last morsel into his mouth. "And here comes hell."

Kam rose to his feet, waiting until her parents were seated before retaking his place. She didn't miss her mother's displeased look as she scrutinized their plates.

"Did you find out anything useful today?" her father began as he took his seat.

"We still have other leads to chase down, but the men responsible for pulling the trigger are dead. There's still no indication who's completely behind all of this, although we think it's a shifter."

"I know she can be bit annoying, but why would another shifter want to kill Helena?" her mother asked, looking as perfectly coiffed as she had when they had last seen her.

Lance sighed deeply. "She got herself a job on an archeological dig and, long story short, thinks they may have unearthed a shifter relic."

"But...but how is that possible? She was supposed to be exiled to the family home in Egypt," Julia sputtered in outrage.

Amanda rolled her eyes heavenward. "That doesn't matter, Mom. What we should focus on is that there's an artifact in the possession of someone willing to kill for it. Obviously, this person knows something about it, and we need to know what it is and why the hell they wanted it so bad."

Her mother looked embarrassed. "Of course that's important... I was just wondering."

"We still have a lot of legwork to do, but Amanda really needs some rest, so we'll have to cut this visit short," Kam stated plainly.

Her father pinned him with a look she didn't want to decipher. "There is still another matter at hand here for discussion."

Amanda waited with bated breath for what was to come.

"If the discussion involves Amanda taking me as her mate, we can end the conversation now." When her father would have spoken, Kam continued. "I understand that I'm not what you envisioned for her, but what's done is done. There is nothing you can say or threaten that will change that either. You might not ever like us being together, but in time, you can either accept it or get used to a life without us or your future grandchildren in it."

Her mother's pristine composure began to slip. "Well, you can't just threaten --"

"It's not a threat. Now, if you'll excuse us, it's been a long day." Kam didn't wait for a reaction. Even as he helped her out of the chair, her parents gaped at him in silence as if he'd just sprouted a second head.

"I don't think anyone has ever talked to my parents that way, least of all to my father," she confided on the elevator ride to their room.

Kam shrugged. "I would have preferred for our first real sit-down to be a more festive occasion, but I'll not sit by and be chastised like I'm some newly weaned cub. Your father has already made his feelings abundantly clear not once but twice today. That's about all I can stand."

Maybe it was the effects of the day, but watching the way he had handled himself with her folks and hearing the authoritative tone now made him all the more appealing. There wasn't a Pride male alive who would have attempted that speech, and yet Kam had done so without hesitation.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm still in shock."

"I hope I didn't offend you."

She smiled. "Not at all. I kinda liked it."

He quirked a brow at her. "You did?"

She slid into his arms. "Yup."

He growled low when her hands gripped his shoulders and she pressed herself forward. "Maybe it's not a good idea to start something we can't finish."

She quirked a brow at him. "Who says we can't?"

"It's been a long day, Amanda."

"Oh." She withdrew as the doors glided open on their floor, only to be pulled back into his arms.

"Don't read anything into it; I saw the way you looked after that psychic exchange with Cheryl. Kitten, you snored in my ear all the way back from the hospital, so you can't tell me this day hasn't taken its toll on you."

That did it. "I do not snore."

"You do, and you're adorable at it."

"Whatever, it's your loss." And hers too, but she wouldn't let him know it. "I think I'll just take a quick shower and hit the hay." His hands dropped to his sides when she pulled away, and Amanda didn't want to admit how much she hated the loss.

True to her word, she stripped out of her clothes in the master suite, reluctant to look at the still-rumpled bed where he'd conquered her so completely earlier. She'd never experienced bondage before and was curious to see how far they could take it. But it was obvious nothing would be happening tonight. Kam had yet to make an appearance in the bedroom, and by the time she stood under the hot spray of the shower, she wondered why.

"Amanda?" His voice was like silk all over her, warming her in a way the heated water couldn't.

*That's more like it.* She couldn't hold back the smile that spread across her lips. "Yes, Kam?"

"I need the addresses you saw in your vision with Cheryl."

That wasn't what she expected to hear at all. "Why?"

"While you're resting, I want to do a little research and see what I can find. I'm sure Boyle expected his men to check in today and let him know the deed was done. He's probably in panic mode now."

She reached for the shower nozzle. "I should help."

"You should rest first and allow me the chance to help out. It's not necessary to take the full brunt of this, especially when it's something that could be of interest to the entire shifter community."

He was right. The fact that a shifter could be behind all this meant they had to be careful with information and utilize the abilities of those already in the know. As much as she hated to admit it, Kam was right about her being drained. Still, it didn't mean she liked him using it as an excuse to put her off. Amanda rattled off the information, and her heart sank when she heard the soft *click* of the door as he left. By the time she climbed into bed, there was still no sign of Kam, and she felt the familiar loneliness that had haunted her the day he had disappeared into the woods. Mercifully, sleep claimed her before she could do something as emotional as cry.

## Chapter Thirteen

She'd kill whoever the hell was on the other end of her cell phone, was her first waking thought as she reached for the object responsible for intruding on her precious sleep. It had only been a couple of hours since she'd closed her eyes. She stared at the empty spot next to her. Where the hell was Kam, and why wasn't he reading the riot act to whoever thought it a good idea to call so late at night? The overly crumpled sheets next to her indicated he'd lain down at some point, but he was gone now. He was up, so why wasn't he answering?

"Yes." She didn't hide the irritation in her voice.

"Finally."

"Mother," she groaned.

"Well, don't sound so excited to hear from me. Yes, it's your mother. You know, the woman who spent an entire day in labor with you."

It was never good when her mother started a conversation with a guilt trip. She usually wanted something from her or, worse, was about to put her in a very sticky spot with her surrogates. Either way, Amanda didn't like her options. "Can't this wait until morning? I just closed my eyes."

"What are you talking about? It's almost nine a.m. Don't tell me you expect to sleep the day away. I know you're newly mated, but it doesn't do to just lounge about, especially with your mate off --"

She shot up in bed. "What did you just say?"

"Huh? Say about what?"

Amanda pulled her phone away from her ear as her mother prattled on. To her surprise, her mother was correct. It was nearly nine a.m. Her eyes darted to the heavy drapes that were drawn tightly, effectively blocking out all light.

"What did you say about Kam?"

"Umm, he went off with Leo and your father this morning, something about the artifact again."

"He what!"

"No need to shout, dear. Plus I'm sure you're scowling, and that will only give you lines. Although I'm not sure why you'd ever scowl again, having landed someone like Kam Victor."

Amanda didn't miss the lilt in her mother's voice as she said his full name.

"I can't tell you how many times I told your father we should just arrange your marriage before you attached yourself to one of those prestige-seeking Prides. Picking a prize like Kam Victor makes up for mating a nonlion. Although I wish you'd told me who he was yourself instead of letting me hear it from Helena. I swear, that woman couldn't wait to call me last night to gloat."

"Mother --"

"I guess I can't blame her much. Who wouldn't want to brag, knowing their daughter managed to snag Kam Victor, *the* most sought-after bachelor in the shifter and nonshifter worlds?"

If her mother referred to Kam by his full name one more time as if he were the most amazing thing since man walked on the moon, Amanda was going to gag.

"You need to roll your happy self out of bed, because I'd like to come up and discuss the concept I've developed for your official mating ceremony."

"My what?"

"Don't think you're going to fight me on this either. You can't mate with someone like him and not expect a mother to want to officially announce it to the world in proper fashion. There will be no speculation over who you are when this is over. Now, have you given thought to hyphenating your name? Having the Spoils and Victor names linked would really cinch it."

Amanda felt like she'd just woken up in the twilight zone, and she wanted out before Rod Serling manifested on the edge of the bed. "Stop it, Mother. The last thing on my mind right now is a mating ceremony. We're already mated, remember? So that's that. Now tell me what you know about where they were going today. Better yet, how long ago did they leave?"

"They were up and out at the crack of dawn, but your father wasn't specific."

Even if he'd provided the exact coordinates of his destination, her mother probably wouldn't have given her the information. She was a woman on a mission.

Amanda threw back the covers and propelled her body into motion as soon as her feet hit the floor. "Okay, Mother, I gotta go."

"You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack. I'll call you later, bye." With that said, she flipped the phone closed and went about a needless search for Kam. The only thing her quest turned up was a brief note providing his cell phone number, the door codes, a description of

where he'd left the bag containing her clothes that Leo had given him, and what appeared to be an order for her to get some rest. Next to it was a key card for the elevator. By the time she dialed the number he had left, she was seething with anger at him for excluding her from the operation and with herself for being so out of it she hadn't even heard him moving about that morning. The phone went straight to voice mail. Calls to her father, brother, and even Rex yielded the same result, which only agitated her more. She prowled the suite for the next few minutes, contemplating her next move. A shift would do her good, and a hunt would definitely take the edge off. What she wouldn't give to be back in the open Alaskan wilderness instead of in the cramped city.

She recalled Kam's request for the addresses and cursed herself for giving them to him without any assurances that she wouldn't be left out in the cold on the investigation. Remembering the computer room she had come across in her quick search, Amanda decided to do a little digging of her own. Maybe she couldn't go hunt down wild game, but she could do some tracking of a high-tech nature. Armed with a cup of joe from the impressively stocked kitchen, she sat down in front of the computer and let her fingers do the walking.

After an hour of searching, she'd still learned nothing of use. The three addresses were associated with three very different names. Two identities belonged to men and the other a woman, all of them different ages, ethnicities, and locales in the city, and none had an obvious relationship to one another. She'd have to track down each lead to see which one turned up a rat, but first she wanted to shed some light on the enigma that was Kam Victor. She typed his first and last name into the search engine. Her mothers' reactions to him were enough to stir up curiosity, especially since her biological mother had done such a quick about-face where their mating was concerned. She'd expected the query to return one or two specific listings, not multiple pages. The mouse hovered over the first link while she debated with herself. The next time she saw Kam, she could ask him directly. But in the end, the desire to know was too great and she clicked. His entire life lay for the world to see, with the exception of his shifter classification.

Kam Victor, age forty, never married, no known children, son of Jack and Gracie Victor, grandson of Roanoke and Gabrielle Victor. His sister, Ashley, and he were heirs to the Victor billions. A portion of his fortune was in his family's oil company where he held the position of chief technical officer. What was just as impressive was the wealth he'd accumulated on his own in the field of engineering and robotics. He'd earned two degrees from MIT by the time he was twenty-three, and his privately owned company boasted exclusive government and hospital contracts. And she thought she'd have to bring him into the modern era. One article she found estimated his net worth at twenty-five billion dollars, putting him in the running for one of the world's wealthiest men. With homes in Russia, Montana, and Switzerland, Kam was described as a virtual recluse. She'd only found a handful of photos for him, and those seemed to be intentionally orchestrated press opportunities. It was no wonder her mother had such a

change of heart. Their union would launch the Spoils into royal-family status among the shifters.

By the time Amanda was done, she felt light-headed, and her hands visibly shook as she shut down the computer. She wasn't certain how long she sat there staring at the black screen, but she forced herself out of the daze. She needed activity and had three leads that would provide the perfect distraction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kam was restless. He had never been an overly patient person -- even in his business dealings he believed in making quick but informed decisions -- so sitting in the cramped interior of Rex's truck with his brother and father-in-Clan for the past half hour was wearing on his nerves. The bickering of the felines over the proper disposal method for the man secured under the sturdy plastic covering of the cabin's long bed only made matters worse.

"I still think dumping him on Chamus Pride lands would solve the matter of disposal quickly enough." Leo pushed the issue.

"The decision will be for Helena and Cheryl to make, and we'll speak no more of it," countered Lance.

The sound of sweet silence filled the cab as three pairs of eyes focused on the club on the adjacent street.

"Pretty busy for the middle of the day," Kam observed. He watched as another utility vehicle double-parked, unloaded a passenger, and moved on. It was the third such happening since they had arrived. There was no telling how many others had entered the club before their vigil began. If the sniveling rat, Boyle, was to be believed, his boss was planning a private showing of the relic in just a few hours. The man knew little else, which wasn't surprising. If a shifter was responsible for hiring Boyle, he had considered the human an expendable asset and therefore not worthy of knowing the details of his plan.

"We should go in," Leo suggested. "You know, blend in."

"Your sister was right; you do watch too much TV," Kam said, not taking his eyes off the door. "Do you think these guys are just waltzing in off the street? No, this is definitely an invitation-only deal. We'll need a plan." His gaze wavered as a familiar form caught his eye. It couldn't be. But it was.

Coming straight for them was his mate. He sat stunned, as if watching an approaching apparition. Only she was very real. As further confirmation, his cock throbbed while his eyes drank in the sight of her. Like the day before, she was clad in a pair of jeans with a black tank that hugged her form like a second skin. Thick hair was pulled tightly into a massive fluff ball away from her exquisite face. It was a youthful look that she carried very well. The closer she came to the vehicle, the harder his cock throbbed, reminding him of the torture he'd endured the night before by forcing



himself to keep his hands to himself while she got some much needed rest. He watched while she pulled out her cell and discreetly tapped it before walking past the vehicle as if she didn't know the occupants inside. His fingers tugged his small rectangular phone free from the pocket of his jeans, and he pressed the button that would give it life. Kam watched her retreating form until she turned the corner and was hidden from view by a concrete building.

What the devil was she doing there?

His silent question was verbalized by the two males in the rear of the cab.

"I told you so." Rex's statement reminded Kam of their brief debate earlier when the three males climbed into his vehicle minus Amanda. Rex was the only one who seemed completely unfazed by Amanda's appearance and kept up his vigil out the window.

*"If you think she'll be content to play the little woman while we're out tracking down leads, you really don't know your mate well."*

The comment had struck a nerve, forcing Kam to stamp down a flash of anger. He didn't like the fact that the man knew more about his mate than he did. *"I'm certain she won't be pleased, but it can't be helped."*

Rex had snickered at that point and shifted the car in gear. *"Wouldn't surprise me if A.J. turned up where we least expect her to."*

Obviously, the wolf had been right. Although he'd hardly believed Amanda would be waiting in their suite with bated breath for his return, he certainly hadn't thought she'd search them out. He stared impatiently at the phone while it took long seconds to power up and register signal strength. In the next instant, his phone rang.

"What are you doing?" There was a tad more bite to his voice than he intended.

"I could ask you the same question, but I don't think now's the time to jump into that argument. Meet me on Third; there's a park there." Her own irritation went unmasked.

"Amanda --"

The phone beeped, indicating the disconnected call.

"Hmm, guess even you can't curb my daughter's stubbornness, Victor."

Kam didn't like the level of amusement in the elder Spoils's tone; in fact, he liked it better when the man chose to ignore him altogether.

Kam didn't bother to answer, which only inspired laughter from Leo. Annoyed and still sporting a raging hard-on, he unnecessarily barked to Rex the location Amanda had provided.

## Chapter Fourteen

Three shifters strode toward her. Their builds and arrogant gaits had every eye in the park on them. So much for discretion. But she couldn't really fault them for their natural prowess. A passing female jogger slowed her steps and turned to jog backward a few paces, giving each man a once-over in an obvious show of interest. Amanda resisted the urge to throw a stick in the woman's path when her interest focused on Kam a little too long. She shook off her annoyance. It wouldn't do to get distracted by insignificant things; even her desire to read Kam the riot act for leaving her behind had to be suppressed. She did her best to keep emotion from her face as the men followed her to a more isolated section of the park.

"You're getting a bit sloppy in your old age. Boyle's place was a shambles." She addressed Rex after stopping in a private alcove.

"Yeah, it wasn't exactly a *stealth* mission," he replied, fixing his male companions with an accusatory look. She wasn't fooled. There was no vehemence in his easy tone.

Actually, her description was a bit of a dramatization. Men of their size could have made a considerable mess in the tiny, orderly apartment, but they had only left a few telltale signs of their presence. If not for her special training and shifter senses, she would have been none the wiser to their presence in the apartment. Regardless, it was still enough of a mark for her to retrace their steps and discover Boyle's itinerary with the address to the club. His penchant for cleanliness and organization made it easy for her to navigate through his dwelling and uncover other things of interest missed by the others.

Earlier, the miniprofile she'd built up of the man had expanded as she discovered the truth about his name. After her first lead had proved to be a complete bust, her next stop had been a storefront PO box in a less-than-favorable neighborhood where the owner paid little attention to the tenants renting the mailboxes. She'd sat in her rental car double-checking the next address on the list when a name she'd looked at earlier

seemed to leap off the page. Bryan Oliver Yale. Laughter bubbled up inside her at the information staring her in the face. Boyle was really Boyale, a combination of the man's first and middle initials and his last name.

Amanda abandoned the memory as she stood facing the three shifter males. "I'm assuming you have Boyale on ice somewhere?"

"He'd probably welcome a little ice where he is," Rex answered.

"You didn't?"

He caught her meaning and immediately dispelled the conclusion. "Although I don't doubt hell will be his final destination, we haven't sent him there just yet. He's in the bed of the truck. I had a nice circulation system added after my last mishap, so he'll be fine, albeit very uncomfortable."

Amanda was satisfied with the answer. Although she was certain Rex had extracted any useful information from the man, she wanted to offer Helena and Cheryl the final say in what was done with him.

"So how exactly did you find us?" Kam asked.

For the first time, she looked directly at him. It was amazing to her how magnificent he looked adorned in clothes. He was dressed casually in loose-fitting jeans and was sporting a gray T-shirt instead of the black from the prior day. She disliked the way her heartbeat sped up as she gave him her full attention, feeling like a schoolgirl facing her latest infatuation.

Amanda pulled the blue date book from her back pocket, holding it up for all the men to see while extracting an elegant-looking card. "This was left behind."

The expression on each man's face was enough to make her smile, but she refrained from gloating. "The soiree you were staking out was meant more as a meet and greet. The real deal won't happen for another couple of hours. Seems that our Mr. Yale had an invitation to today's event in his possession meant for Alex Kier."

Her father made a disbelieving sound. "I've known Hardap Kier for years and doubt very seriously he would agree to his son engaging in such a meeting. I'm hard-pressed to believe that Alex would have even entertained the thought."

"The host may have targeted wealthy shifters he believed would have little problem in going outside of their family's chain of command." Kam offered the analysis after examining the invite.

His statement was valid, considering some of the shifters she'd observed going into the club from her own post. None of the ones she recognized were heads of their families; in fact, it would take a miracle to elevate some of them into the ranks of consideration for future leadership.

Amanda shrugged. "Which may be why the invite never made its way to Alex. He's not Alpha material, and he's happy with his status within his Pack. At any rate, it's a good thing for us that Mr. Yale kept the invite in his possession, because there was another address embedded within it."

A rapt audience stared at her in silence. "A classified instrument was used to imprint the cards," she explained.

She felt the immediate tension in Kam's body. "Imprinted how?"

"There's an electronic code ingrained in the fiber of the card. It acts like a serial number, only the bar code is invisible to the naked eye. We need a minidecoder --"

"A mini-authentication decoder, or MAD as they became known," Kam provided. At her startled look, he continued. "My company designed the units for the military. I was under the impression they'd be used by specialized units. It appears they're handing out both the imprinter and decoder like candy."

Amanda recognized the agitation in Kam's voice. "Not likely."

The fact that the devices were being utilized so freely was a true cause for concern. She had used the unit many times herself while in the service of the government, but Uncle Sam hardly handed them out as parting gifts. Rex had a penchant for acquiring all types of classified items and had given her the flash drive-sized unit as a gift at her last birthday, claiming he'd definitely violated a few laws by giving it to her. For sentimental reasons, she'd kept the unit close, never imagining it would be used in her civilian life.

"The person is military." There was no way to confuse Kam's statement for a question.

"Or possibly has connections who can procure the devices." Amanda didn't give the men a chance to ponder the information for too long. "We don't have much time before the second half of this meeting happens, and I'd like to see us in place long before the others arrive."

"Should we call for backup?" Lance questioned, and Amanda felt immediately uneasy about having her father, brother, or even Kam along for the mission. None of them were military trained.

"Can we call your two guys from last night?" she asked Rex.

His quick affirmative answer was also his way of vouching for the trustworthiness of the men.

"Good, we'll have them meet us near the locale and do a little recon."

Rex pulled out his cell, pausing briefly to ask her, "I take it we'll need a masking agent?"

"If you can get your hands on some. Tranqs would be nice too. Betas or not, we'll be dealing with a roomful of shifters and need whatever advantage we can get."

Rex nodded, punched in one number on his phone, and within seconds was rattling instructions to his team. Being ever prepared, Rex undoubtedly had a stash of the masking agent at his disposal locally. Unlike the imprinters or MADs, the formula was a specially kept secret even from the military. Rex's eldest sister had developed the compound in her early university years and had perfected the experimental substance

only a few years later. Amanda had been sworn to secrecy before he'd doused her with it on their first mission, and she had honored that oath.

"What masking agent?" Although Kam asked the question, she could see the query etched on her father's face.

"It conceals a shifter's scent," Rex supplied after ending his call. "It's safe with no side effects; I've used it many times myself. I'll have to ask that you gentlemen keep the knowledge of its existence a secret. Few people know about it, and my sister would kill me if she knew I'd let another cat out of the bag."

"Your sister?" Kam and her father said in unison. The comical looks on their faces had her biting her bottom lip to keep from smiling.

"Hey, she's been playing mad scientist since we were kids and is now a big muckety-muck at NASA."

The description of his sister didn't inspire the confidence her position should have. Carol Taolore was a brilliant, renowned scientist, and Amanda was grateful to her for all her side discoveries.

"Look, I've used it several times over the years, and I'm fit as a fiddle, but I can understand if you two want to sit this out."

"Of course not," her father blustered.

Kam fixed her with a look that said he didn't approve of any of this. "It would probably be best if you fell back on this one, Amanda. The entire thing is sounding too dangerous."

Her jaw tightened, and she saw Rex take a step back. "I'll pretend I didn't just hear you say that."

"Pretending won't change anything. You've put yourself in enough danger as it is. Do you honestly think I'm going to let you walk into an unknown situation and risk your life?"

"Oh don't you dare start up with that alpha male crap again, Kam Victor. I've fought in defense of this country while you jetted around on your private planes or tinkered around in your labs. If anyone should fall back, it's you."

Kam growled his annoyance. "I am your mate, Amanda."

Adrenaline pumped through her system. "Yeah, I know, and I'm sure you'll continue to remind me every day, but understand that no amount of chest thumping will get me to back down on this."

"You're determined to fight me at every turn."

She shrugged. "It's very possible, and a question you should have pondered before invoking archaic Victor Rites."

"What I should do is toss you over my shoulder and carry you back to the hotel."

She took a stubborn step forward, as if daring him to do just that. "I'll fight you the entire way."

He didn't flinch, in fact didn't budge in the slightest, just stared at her with arrogance great enough to fill all outdoors. She matched his look with her own unwavering stare, while Rex and her father did their best to fade into the background. As opposed as her father might still be to the match, he wouldn't interfere in a conflict between them. As mates, both she and Kam had rights over each other, and at the moment she knew he perceived her persistence in continuing the mission as her usurping his need and right to protect her. Perhaps a standoff wasn't the best way to get him to back down.

"If it will make you feel better, we can partner together. That way you'll be able to see that I'm safe." The suggestion was out before she had a chance to fully digest its implications. The last thing she wanted was Kam breathing down her neck during the operation.

"Agreed, but with one additional stipulation."

*Of course.* "And what might that concession be?"

"You fall back while we do recon on the location. Once the area is secured, you can join *me*."

She didn't miss the emphasis on the word *me*. Amanda clenched her jaw, which kept it from coming unhinged at his statement. She cast a look at her father, who seemed to be paying particular attention to a cherry blossom tree. Rex, too, avoided her gaze by fiddling with his cell phone before taking his slow time to reholster and secure it. Unless Kam was being abusive, the other males would have to stay impartial or risk challenging the shifter.

As much as it pained her to agree to his conditions, she did so with a terse "okay" before insisting they get going to their rendezvous point.

"So what's this about the Victor Rites?" her father asked as they made their way back through the busier part of the park. Amanda groaned and wished she were anywhere else but there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Situated on several acres of commercially zoned land, an abandoned paper factory sat in a state of disrepair just waiting for a team of bulldozers to put it out of its misery. Nestled in a dilapidated industrial park, the exchange point looked like the set of an action-adventure movie. She half expected Jackie Chan or Bruce Willis to come swooping through with guns blazing at would-be bad guys. The remoteness of the location afforded the isolation needed for an exchange or a bloodbath.

The paper factory's address housed two small concrete buildings and a warehouse that dwarfed the others. Its size and central location made it the perfect meeting point for anyone looking for privacy for a large gathering. Parked in another abandoned factory about a half mile away, Amanda listened as the men gave an all-clear signal. She didn't wait for Kam's return to collect her as if she were some sort of helpless female.

Instead she weaved her way across the distance, hugging the sides of buildings or blending into overgrown brush. She was mindful to stay on constant alert, listening and looking for any signs of activity, as there were plenty of buildings where a person could lie in wait or hide from her team's sweep.

"A.J., Papa Bear is making his way back to you," Rex informed her over the secured com.

She smirked at the nickname assigned to her mate. "No need, I'm right outside of the meeting place."

"Roger that," Rex replied with an obvious smile in his voice.

Kam's answering expletive came through loud and clear, but he made no other sound of reprimand. She didn't fool herself into believing he wouldn't have something to say on the matter later. Amanda shrieked as she rounded a corner and found herself pulled into one of the three reported warehouse entrances. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the dark interior while her assailant thrust her against a metal interior wall. Fangs extended, she went into automatic defense mode and easily sank her teeth into the hand that covered her mouth.

"Dammit, Amanda, it's me," Kam hissed in low tones, dropping his hand.

"Sorry, didn't know," she mumbled, feeling a bit pleased that he'd received a bit of punishment for the surprise attack. "The good thing is we know the masking agent is working."

"The good thing would have been for you to stay with the vehicle and let me come to get you as planned."

She shrugged as best she could with her body still pinned between him and the wall. "I didn't see the point in waiting around. We don't know when someone will surface, and having you backtrack for me is just a waste of time."

"Woman, you need to stop taking unnecessary risks."

"What risk? You all swept the area, right? And I can most certainly handle myself."

Kam snarled.

"Oh, save it for someone who's scared of your big, bad bear act."

"If we were any other place..."

"You'd what? Tie me to a bed and force yourself on me? Sorry, been there, done that already. Now if you'd kindly move, we have work to do."

"I'm tempted to turn you over my knee now and show you the way a disobedient mate is dealt with."

"Try it, and you'll be drawing back a bloody nub where your hand once was."

Kam growled low in his throat, and for a moment she thought he might just call her bluff. Instead his head swept down and his mouth covered hers in a kiss that took her breath away. There wasn't a shred of tenderness in the assault as his tongue breached her mouth to plunder and dominate. The aggressive move wreaked havoc on

her senses, pulling her immediately into the maelstrom of his supremacy. He stroked and tangled his tongue with hers, forcing her head back farther to allow him full access. A familiar throbbing started in her cunt, and she moaned into his mouth at her own response. Part of her agonized sound had to do with the inconvenient locale he'd chosen to prove his point, but the rest was her own frustration with how quickly he could force a reaction from her. The kiss ended as quickly as it had begun, leaving Amanda feeling completely frustrated.

"Come on, I'm anxious to get this over and done with," he said, preceding her into the shadows. She cursed under her breath at her racing heart and excited body, which screamed for more of his touch. She wanted to hate him, to truly loathe him, but that wasn't the case. Reluctantly, she accepted she'd never be able to muster those emotions toward him.

As a team, the unit worked with minimal communication in the factory, quickly setting up mini-eyes and ears to allow them to monitor the meeting from a secondary location, an abandoned textile factory where their two vehicles were housed. With everything in place, the only thing left to do was to return to the watch point and wait.

"We have movement," Rolf, the tiger shifter, said from the back of their surveillance van. "One SUV and one van heading for our location."

"Turn on the internal eyes," Amanda ordered, holstering her knife in an ankle strap while she avoided Kam's disapproving stare. He hadn't said more than two words to her since the three had piled into the van, leaving her father, Leo, Rex, and the other wolf shifter on the outside. She swiveled in the built-in metal chair to see seven split-screen monitors flicker to life. "This may be our guy," she said to no one in particular, knowing her words were conveyed to each man via their two-way headset.

Vehicles drove past the front of the factory they'd wired and parked just outside of visual range. Another camera caught the hangarlike door being pushed open to let the diminishing sunlight into the open space. She counted four men busy at work, unloading a long table followed by metal chairs. It was obvious from their build they were shifters, but none possessed the white hair described by Boyale's men.

"He's on his way," one of the shifters in the building called out to the other three men. They doubled their efforts to get the tables and chairs in place.

"We didn't get a chance to do the sweep," another of the men barked back.

"Yeah, well, he won't know that," the first man replied.

"There's a third vehicle coming," Rolf said, but her eyes were already on the screen capturing the arrival of another SUV.

"It's him," she said as the feed caught the tops of the heads of the four occupants. The white-haired person was shorter than the other three shifters who emerged and immediately flanked him. Obscured by the positioning of the camera and the angle of the high-topped vehicles, the faces of the individuals remained anonymous.

"Are we ready?" Rex asked in low tones.



"No. Let's wait a little longer to see what they reveal. We'll need more evidence when we bring the charges up to the Body of Elders." They were armed to the teeth with tranquilizers of high-enough doses to lay several elephants down but the potential for casualties wasn't lost on her. The repercussions from the Packs, Clans, Schools, Flocks, or Prides of anyone slain weighed on her mind. Her goal was to bring the assembled group in alive with the substantiating evidence of their crime.

Two burly shifters came into view in the warehouse, each sporting long blond hair.

"Bears," Kam sneered as if the involvement of his kind was deplorable.

"Do you know those guys?"

"They're Nim Clan, hired guns to anyone willing to pay their price. I wouldn't doubt if they were the ones responsible for getting the imprinters and decoders. They're a crafty pair. Our paths have crossed a time or two." His clipped tone and succeeding silence let her know there were no warm and fuzzy feelings between them.

She would have asked him more, but at that moment the white-haired shifter came into view. At first, only the back of his head and a long mane of snow-white hair that reached to his midback were visible. Then he turned to face the camera as if he knew it was there and looked directly into the lens before turning to the men. Amanda wasn't sure what she expected, but the near-adolescent features of the man were certainly not it. He looked to be barely out of his teens and yet old at the same time. It was his eyes. When he had looked up at the camera, she'd glimpsed a wisdom reflected there that was enough to send a chill down her spine.

"Are we ready?" His voice was gentle, sounding seemingly innocent. She half expected the men to ignore his soft-spoken question.

"All set, boss."

She wasn't sure whom the response came from as she watched the white-haired man-boy venture deeper into the warehouse to a table that had been placed several feet away from the three other aligned ones. Amanda recognized the jeweled box he carried as the one from her vision. It was cleaner now, managing to look perfectly polished and ancient at the same time.

He set the box on the table, taking up a rigid stance behind it.

"The others will arrive soon."

"You gotta be joking." There was no disguising the amusement in Rolf's voice. "This kid is Mr. Big? He doesn't even look like a shifter."

"In your line of work I'm sure you've learned not to be fooled by appearances," Amanda admonished. For the sake of the men outside of the van, she described the scene inside the warehouse, making sure to provide a description of each man and any visible weapons. Then, like the men in the warehouse, they waited.

Thirty minutes passed with light activity in the building while the men prowled the interior restlessly, all except for the white-haired man, who hadn't so much as twitched since taking up his statuelike position.

When he suddenly turned his eyes toward the camera once again, Amanda almost gasped. "Our guests are arriving, gentlemen," White Hair informed them.

"Now that's freaky," Rolf commented, just as riveted to the monitors as she'd been.

She silently agreed, watching as three vehicles passed their first surveillance cams, and a minute later four more followed. An interval of several more minutes passed, bringing with it the arrival of two additional cars, one of which flew diplomatic flags.

There was minimal chatter as the new arrivals took the offered seats of their host. Amanda was surprised to see two females she hadn't witnessed in attendance at the club earlier.

"Well, this is a lot different from our earlier accommodations." A guest offered his poor attempt at adding levity to the situation.

"If this space isn't to your liking, please feel free to leave. I'm sure none of us will be offended in the least," White Hair addressed the would-be jokester. The silence that followed was meant to give the man the option to leave with quiet dignity. When he remained seated, White Hair continued. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming today. I must apologize for the secrecy behind all this, but what I'm about to show you will be...life altering."

"Yeah, we heard all the double talk earlier," an elegantly dressed female shifter huffed. "Can we just get on with it? You want something from us; otherwise you wouldn't have sent your little enticing notes, so what is it?"

"You're quite right, Miss Palassi. I do want something of great importance from each and every one of you."

"How much?" a male shifter asked, looking uncomfortable.

White Hair waved his hand dismissively. "You can rest assured it's not money, Mr. Malandri."

She'd heard enough. As a predator, Amanda recognized the game he played in toying with the group, but to what end she wasn't certain. "Let's get ready to saddle up, boys."

Leo arrived at the open doors at the rear of the van, looking less than enthusiastic as he gave his sister a half salute. "Reporting for duty."

"Just keep your eyes and ears on the monitors in case there are any surprises."

He nodded his understanding, yet she still knew he sulked over having drawn the short stick and being left with monitor duty.

She eased out of the van behind Kam, with Rolf on her heels. "Your job is the most important of them all."

"Don't try to placate me, A.J. It was the luck of the draw, and as much as I'd prefer to be in there guarding that pretty little head of yours, I'll have to be content to do so from here."

She shook her head at his comment and gave her brother a playful shove. *God save me from overprotective males.* Amanda joined the rest of the men double-checking equipment and preparing for the all clear from Leo.

"All right, guys, the perimeter is secure. The guards are still inside the building," Leo said over their headsets.

She counted that bit of information in their favor. "Let's not waste time, gentlemen. Radio silence will be maintained for everyone except Leo."

On her mark, the men filed out of the building, keeping a tight formation until they reached their destination, and then each paired off to take their positions.

"Talk about droning on about nothing," Leo sighed in their ears. "I'm starting to think his plan is to bore them to death. And it looks like the natives are getting restless."

Earsplitting feedback streamed from the headset, and Amanda cringed, ripping the unit away from her sensitive ears reflexively. Around her, similar reactions took place as the men tore the devices from their heads. Questioning looks went up all around. She signaled the men they would be flying blind before proceeding to use rapid hand gestures to initiate their plan of attack.

The small contingent of shifters swarmed the building, filing in through the unlocked doors. Amanda and Kam took the main entrance, rushing into the warehouse with guns drawn. The element of surprise worked in their favor, allowing them to quickly neutralize the hired guns with rapidly fired tranquilizers. The shifters fell to the ground before they could reach for their weapons in defense. The surprised looks on their faces immediately gave way to dazed ones before each man went out for the count.

"Stay where you are," Amanda informed the guests situated at the tables. A few had the decency to look guilty for being caught at the gathering, while others managed expressions of haughty indignation that would have made lesser shifters cringe. Now in such close proximity, she recognized the very distinct scents of the nine guests and six guards. Her gaze darted to the one man who'd looked particularly uneasy earlier. An Atlantean. She exchanged looks with Kam who, like the rest of her group, cast curious looks at the shifter. Atlanteans rarely participated in activities with other shifters. Her father had often reported how their seat among the Body of Elders was seldom filled. The bottom line was that they had an inherent distrust for nonaquatics, so for one to be sitting in a room full of them was nothing short of a miracle.

"Looks like you have every shifter species represented," Amanda commented. Everyone in the room was a shifter except for the white-haired man. He wasn't their kind. Neither was his scent human; his overwhelmingly sweet fragrance was unlike anything she'd ever encountered. He looked completely at ease, despite being in a room full of people capable of transforming into some of the deadliest creatures in nature.

Even the SWAT-style tactics they'd executed only moments before didn't seem to faze him.

"Now that you *all* are here, I do. I must commend you on your skilled abilities, although I'm not surprised." He directed his statement at her. He hadn't moved from his post and looked every bit as relaxed standing behind the table as he had before they entered. Either he was a politician in training or the man really felt he didn't have a care in the world, even with two guns trained on him and his guards completely neutralized.

She chose to ignore his statement, instead directing him away from the table with her gun.

"I'm sorry but I can't do that, not until I've gone over what's in this chest."

Someone groaned dramatically. "You mean finally?"

"Who are you?" Kam asked at her side.

The young man smiled with a brilliance that struck her in an odd way. She felt a sudden urge to lower her weapon and glanced to her other side to see Rex's two men do just that before pulling the guns up firmly again.

"You can think of me as an emissary, but it's really of no importance who I am. What matters is who you all are."

"I'm going to need a map to get to this guy's point," Miss Palassi said.

"Always so impatient, Miss Palassi. That will continue to be your downfall in life if you don't learn to be more self-controlled."

The woman's face turned three shades of red. "How dare you talk to me that way! You don't know anything about me."

He quirked a brow. "No? Then how is it that I managed to get you and everyone else assembled here today? I would argue that I know each and every one of you quite well."

The hyena shifter shot daggers at him with her eyes but kept her mouth closed.

"Don't worry. I won't go spilling any beans about any of your secrets. I'm a...man...of my word."

"So what do you want with them, and what does it have to do with the artifact? You've certainly seemed to go through a ton of trouble and lives to get your hands on it," Amanda said.

"Ah, so the doppelgänger has been very forthcoming with information, I see." His eyes concentrated on her, and she felt as if they could see right into her soul. "No, she did much more than share information; she shared herself with you. I must say I'm pleased. Being the last of one's kind can be very alienating. I was quite worried she'd continue to hide her true identity."

"Save the false concern. Thanks to you, she was severely beaten and almost killed."

The smile slipped from his lips, and the demeanor of his face changed, sagging momentarily into a frown. As unbelievable as it seemed, Amanda was hard-pressed to doubt his sincerity. "The men had very clear instructions on what they were to do with her, and I assure you it didn't involve beating or murder."

"And you're going to tell me shooting and leaving my mate for dead wasn't part of your plan either?" her father roared from several feet away. His voice echoed loudly through the ample interior.

"It wasn't."

If he was lying, she couldn't tell. "And Dr. Anderson?"

"Is safe."

She didn't try to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Wow. So I guess that makes you completely innocent and absolves you of any crimes. The only problem is we have your right-hand man, who I'm certain will fess up to the truth with little coercion, in our custody."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Yale. I trust he is in good health still, or have you taken him to your surrogate mother for proper dispatching?"

"What do you know about it?"

"It's basic shifter law."

"But you are not a shifter. So I ask again, what do you know about it?"

"More than I have time to share at the present."

"How about getting to why you're here now and what that has to do with the artifact."

White Hair sighed deeply. "The artifact represents the next stage in man's evolution."

"Evolution! You bloody well summoned me from halfway around the world for a Darwinist theoretical discussion?" a leopard shifter snarled.

"Theory? Don't tell me you're some religious zealot? You can't actually believe that 'God' created the world and all its inhabitants in seven days. Give me a break." Miss Palassi shot the shifter a look of wintry disapproval.

"And you'd rather believe we crawled out of the muck?"

"At least it can be proven."

Amanda let loose a loud whistle to silence the escalating discussion. "We're not here to debate science and theology." At least she hoped not, because she'd rather tranquilize everyone in the room than engage in the age-old argument.

"While I'm inclined to agree, our friends have touched on an important aspect of why we're here," White Hair added.

Her finger went to the trigger of her gun. "Go on."

White Hair eyed her weapon with an amusing look before he looked between Miss Palassi and the leopard shifter. "What if I said you're both right?"

"I'd say you're a PC politician too afraid to take a stand for fear of offending anyone."

White Hair nodded. "I understand your cynicism, but I'm not in any position to cater to the emotions of earthkind."

*Earthkind?* Why would he phrase something that way?

"What exactly is your position then?" The gruff quality of Kam's voice was a sure sign that he was becoming as annoyed with the cat-and-mouse game as she was.

"I would suggest that both opinions stated are correct, and I would challenge you all to embrace that science and religion coexist in perfect harmony, being both yin and yang, if you will. It is only the limited thinking of earthkind that forces the two to be oil and water."

"And you know this for a fact?" the Atlantean asked in disbelief.

White Hair nodded.

"Okay, I'll bite, since it seems the only way we'll find out what exactly it is you have in that chest, assuming you know yourself," Amanda said.

He tipped his head at her. "It contains the next phase in human evolution."

The leopard rolled his eyes but remained quiet.

"An ancient artifact contains the next phase in human evolution?" The disbelief in Amanda's voice was more than evident.

He nodded, standing silent as if letting the information sink in for the rest of them.

"That's a load of balderdash. We've heard enough. Let's take this guy and his goons with us and let the Body of Elders muddle through his nonsense. We have these other folks on video; the BOE can investigate them at their leisure," Rex chimed in.

"Hold on a second," a male wolf interjected. "We haven't done anything worth being brought to the BOE over."

"I'm sure they'll be interested in your presence here today," Amanda said matter-of-factly.

"Do you really think that's necessary? After all, I did give my word to these people that I would keep their secrets should they accept my *invitation*," White Hair said without the slightest bit of urgency.

She processed his words. "Secrets? You mean you blackmailed them to come here?" Actually, she didn't need his answer. The uncomfortable looks on everyone's faces were response enough. What the hell could he possibly have on all of them?

"That's not important." As he spoke, she had the sneaking suspicion he was replying to her inner thoughts instead of the question she posed. Amanda dismissed the notion. The only creatures believed to be endowed with the power of telepathy were Atlanteans, and that wasn't even a proven fact. Her grip tightened on her gun.

"I think the Body of Elders will be very interested in all information surrounding this situation."

"Why don't we leave them out of the discussion for the moment? In fact, why don't we decrease some of the anxiety levels in here all the way around?"

Amanda didn't get a chance to ask what he meant as her attention quickly shifted to the rapidly heating metal in her hand. When it reached a level capable of scalding her hand, she dropped her weapon and stared at it in disbelief. From the loud clamor around the room, she guessed the other members of her team were having similar experiences.

Kam moved quickly, stepping forward as if to shield her with his body from potential harm, all the while raising his gun to take aim at the nonshifter. The weapon discharged with a whistling sound seconds before her mate issued a loud curse and his armament went clattering to the cement ground next to her own. Still shaking her throbbing hands for relief, Amanda moved from behind his bulky frame and watched in astonishment as the momentum of the tranq pellet slowed in midair, then dropped to the ground with a light *thud* without the white-haired man so much as wincing. He remained equally still as their discarded weapons levitated and flew to an empty corner of the warehouse.

"I trust there won't be a need for me to dispose of your holstered firearms?" White Hair raised a brow in query, but his warning was clear. "Now back to the matter at hand."

She had a hard time registering his words since her mind was still recovering from what they'd all just witnessed. Telekinesis. It was hard to fathom, yet her eyes hadn't lied. Besides, her hands still stung like hell from the heated steel.

"Oh yes, the pain. I'd nearly forgotten that."

Her already tense frame stiffened even more. She hadn't issued her complaint aloud and none of the others had voiced their discomfort. Had he read her mind?

*"Yes, but I think it's better if we not exclude the others, and again, I'm very sorry about the discomfort. The residual effects should be over now."*

The sound of his voice in her mind was equally as disturbing as the fact that he was correct in his statement. She stared at her hands, baffled. How was that possible? How was any of it possible? If she wanted answers, it meant hearing the stranger out. What else could they do? She made to sidestep Kam, but he blocked her movement with a restraining arm, and for several seconds she engaged in an awkward two-step with his back. Frustrated, she gave him a hard thump between the shoulder blades that served no purpose other than to allow her to vent a bit.

"I assure you, Mr. Victor, I mean your mate no harm," the stranger said in his relaxed tone.

Kam growled in warning as if the man's mere mention of her was offensive.

She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Please." When he still didn't move, she added. "If he so much as blinks at me wrong, I'll let you have at him."

After several more seconds, he moved stiffly to one side, leaving scant inches between them. It was the best she could hope for, given the situation. She just hoped

there'd be no need to test his halfhearted acquiescence. There was no doubt that he'd protect her at all costs.

"We're all ears, Mr...."

"Just call me...Larry."

She held back her snort of disbelief. It was inconceivable that anyone would name him something so plain. "All right, *Larry*, I think we're all thoroughly eager to hear what this is all about."



## Chapter Fifteen

Larry gave her an appreciative smile. "Ladies and gentlemen, you're not only about to aid in but to witness the rebirth of man as your forefathers did before you." He laid a hand gently on the box. "At certain points in your history we have come to deliver man's next phase of existence. Today is but another of those many instances."

A collective astonished gasp went up around the room.

"There is a special genetic marker in each of your DNA that must be sampled to bring this new life form into being."

"Well, if you think you're going to get any parts of me, then you're sadly mistaken," the leopard exclaimed, but was instantly silent.

"I think we've heard quite enough from you," Larry said. "And to dispel any of your other gruesome thoughts, I don't need to collect any bodily samples from any of you. Like I said there is a special code in each of your genetic makeup. Fortunately, I'm already in possession of this strand."

"So why call all of us here?" the Atlantean inquired.

A serene smile spread across Larry's face. "Call it sentimentality. One of your ancestors has always been present at a rebirth. All except for your kind, Kam, I'm afraid, but there is always a first time for everything." He looked between Kam and his mate before allowing his gaze to dart around the room.

"Okay, let me get this straight, whatever you are. You went through all this for some whacked notion of sentimentality?" Amanda spat. It was a good thing her gun had been taken.

He shrugged. "I'm old-fashioned that way. Besides, would any of you have come if I'd sent you an invitation to witness man's rebirth?"

He had a point, but that still didn't make it any easier to swallow. "Wasn't this all a bit over the top? Your sentimentality nearly cost two innocent women their life and did end the lives of three individuals," Amanda reminded.

"Perhaps, but my instructions in letting events play out were quite clear, so I cannot apologize for that. But please rest assured that in the instance of Mr. Boyale's associates, those men had already dodged enough well-deserved bullets in their collective lifetimes and caused far more pain than you can ever imagine. As for your surrogate and Ms. Boden, I am truly sorry that things became so complicated and that either woman was hurt. Oftentimes it is hard to find the benefit of tragedy, but I think before long Ms. Boden and Mr. Nardeau will come to appreciate their meeting."

"You can't be suggesting that Regan and Cheryl will become mates?" Kam took the words right out of her mouth. Amanda tried picturing the quiet, genteel woman with the crass, overbearing nature of someone like Regan. It was enough to make her post a contingent of personal guards in front of the woman's hospital room.

"You've mated with a lioness, and yet you find the union between a doppelgänger and bear unfathomable?" Larry countered.

She supposed. Poor Cheryl, she only hoped the woman would have the fortitude for what was in store.

"We've managed to get ourselves sidetracked once again. In all my years doing this, I've never experienced so much distraction. What say we stick to the topic at hand?"

"Exactly how many *years* have you been at this?"

He pretended to think. "Now don't I feel like an ancient artifact? Why don't we just say I was there to witness the dawn of mankind."

"That's impossible!" Lance exclaimed.

Larry cast a beseeching look skyward that seemed more for show than to express genuine exasperation. "I assure you that it's very possible. Don't be fooled by my outward appearance. My kind has been endowed with eternal youth for our centuries of service."

"Your kind?" Amanda probed.

"What a curious kitty you are, Amanda Spoils, but unfortunately, I can't indulge your questions any longer."

Normally, Amanda would not have been so easily dismissed, but she found herself effectively silenced as he flipped open the lid of the rectangular box, unleashing a beam of light that burst from the container. A single iridescent ray struck the warehouse's ceiling with a force powerful enough to make the very foundation shake. The aftershocks only lasted for the briefest of moments but were enough to have everyone bracing themselves. The light crawled its way across the ceiling, moving into every nook and cranny until it encompassed the entire expanse. There seemed to be no indication that the brightness would slow its steady movement as it continued its path down the walls in a seamless cascade.

Tension built in the room with the rapid progression of the light that continued to shoot from the box. In mere seconds, the entire inner building would be engulfed by the radiance. She half expected the light to be harsh to the eyes but soon discovered there was virtually no impact from the brightness to her sensitive eyes.

"Don't be frightened. Think of this cocoon as a sterilization chamber." Larry's explanation did little to alleviate the nervousness sweeping through them all. Kam took another cautionary step forward when the light raced across the floor toward them. Amanda placed a hand on his arm and found she needed the contact as much for herself as to calm him. She'd be lying if she said she didn't find the entire chain of events unnerving.

As suddenly as the ray of light appeared, it receded back into the box, leaving the illuminated warehouse in its stead. With the beam gone, Larry reached inside the chest to retrieve a glowing orb. Perfectly symmetrical, the ball of light seemed to swirl with iridescent shades of light in a continuous motion.

"He will be the first of his kind and endowed with the supernatural strength of a shifter, the ability of a seer, and the power of telekinesis."

Great, just what the world needed, another amped-up male, probably fully equipped with the arrogance of every male shifter in the room.

Amanda felt the waves of laughter in her head. *"You might find it funny to know both you and Miss Palassi are sharing the same thought."*

She didn't but chose to ignore his comment.

*"Is there a reason this evolution is occurring now? I mean, isn't it enough that we have the ever-increasing population of shifters roaming the earth now? Throwing another genetic anomaly into the mix seems a bit risky. Don't you think?"* Amanda asked.

*"Perhaps, but it's a necessary calculated risk for what's to come,"* Larry responded.

*"What do you mean by that?"*

*"Here we are, being rude again,"* Larry mentally replied. Aloud, he said, "This simple little orb will incubate for a normal human gestation period. Once the fetus is ready to take its first breath of air outside of this artificial womb, its aging will increase far more rapidly."

She was on the verge of asking exactly how rapid when she noticed the peculiar way Larry stared between her and Kam. It was obvious her mate was fully aware of this look as well from way his body tensed and he attempted to nudge her farther behind him.

"Amanda and Kam, it's been decided that you two should do the honors of being this new life form's surrogate parents."

Kam growled. "If you think you're putting that science experiment in my mate, you've got another think coming."

A light sound akin to a chuckle emanated from the smaller man. "No, it will be nothing so dramatic, don't worry. Luckily, mankind is at an advanced-enough stage where such rudimentary methods aren't needed anymore."

Amanda let loose a mental sigh of relief. She certainly didn't relish the thought of playing incubator.

"I believe your Seattle laboratory is equipped for the proper housing of the embryo, although I must urge you to incorporate titanium plating around the incubator approximately one month before the fetus comes to term. Trust me on this one."

"Trust? I'm not even certain that I haven't decided to kill you just yet."

In answer, Larry simply gave a slight bow of his head. "Once the child comes of age, you will be entrusted to acclimate him as you will your own children. Expect him to learn at an accelerated rate. I also would encourage you to begin stocking a well-fortified library now, as his desire for knowledge will be voracious."

Amanda shot Kam a curious look, wishing they could share their own private communication channel. Were they really ready to go forward with such a life-altering decision? She still didn't know if they could live together without someone getting seriously injured. Add to that being the parent to a newly evolved life form, and it all seemed like it would be a recipe for disaster.

"If you two wouldn't mind stepping forward, please."

There was a pregnant pause as Kam met her gaze.

"And if we say no?" Kam posed the question, never once breaking their stare.

"I never considered you might refuse. No one ever has." For the first time there was a skip in Larry's tone.

She hesitated before turning her attention to the man. "Is that an option?"

"Well, of course. Freedom of choice has always been a privilege granted to mankind; this situation wouldn't be much different."

Amanda felt a modicum of relief in hearing his response and turned her attention back to her mate. "What are you thinking?"

"It's not quite the way I thought we'd start our family."

She hoped her tone would sound light, but inside she was a riot of confusing emotions. It wasn't every day a person witnessed the evolution of mankind and was asked in the same breath if they would like to be parents of said creation. "Well, you have a leg up on me. I'm still grappling with this mating business."

"Aren't we all?" her father yelled from across the warehouse.

The pair ignored the remark.

"The kid could definitely do worse." Kam's casual comment was surprisingly calming to her nerves.

"Are you sure?" Her tone was unnecessarily low.

"Who better to raise a newly created being than a newly created family? We'll make it work somehow."

Amanda's heart swelled with the knowledge of what they would be agreeing to.

Parenthood. A family of her very own. One thing was for certain, it would be nothing like Pride life. Giving her attention back to Larry, she found herself unable to speak, choosing instead to nod their agreement as they stepped forward to where he stood holding the ball of light.

"Touching the orb will create a bond between you and the child. After, the orb must remain in the box until you move it to his gestation chamber. Once it's back in the box, only you will be able to remove it."

"Are there certain modifications we should be aware of in creating the artificial womb?"

"Other than the titanium plating, I'd have to say no."

Kam's brows furrowed in consideration. "Why titanium, and why during the last gestation month?"

"Let's just say your little guy will be eager to make his entrance into the world, and with the type of strength he'll possess..."

It gave her pause to think that a child could be capable of such force. By their very nature shifters were strong at birth, but the type of power he was hinting at was beyond anything she'd ever encountered in a cub.

*"You and Kam were selected for a reason, Amanda. Don't let fear of the unknown prevent you from doing what's best."*

"Amanda, hold out your hand," Larry instructed aloud. Wordlessly, she did as he requested. "I will place the orb in Amanda's hand and will need Kam to place his on top of it." The ball of light was surprisingly warm to the touch, its surface smooth and flawless, but she did feel something. A faint thumping pulsed from within. The sensation was mesmerizing. Kam's much larger hand swallowed the remainder of the globe.

"Do you feel that?" she asked, staring up at him, eager for him to acknowledge the miracle within.

"It's your son's heartbeat," Larry provided.

Her heart swelled with the thought. Her child. Their child. Love poured from her to the developing baby. She felt a flutter and could have sworn she heard a faint *"thank you."* It couldn't be. Had the baby really reached out to her? Had Kam heard it too? The bewildered look he wore was answer enough, but neither of them removed their hands from the special ball. If anything, Kam's fingers wrapped tighter around her own and the small orb in a possessive bond. It was a silent promise of protection she didn't doubt.

"We should put him back in the chest for now," Larry encouraged after several silent moments. Reluctantly, they allowed him to withdraw the orb of light. After their son was safely back in the chest, Larry looked out to the crowd.

"In spite of all of your differences and prejudices, you should know that your great ancestors started life in this same fashion. Entrusted into the care of someone who was unlike them, they were loved, nurtured, and cherished. This is how it has always been and how it will continue until the end of time."

As he spoke, Amanda felt a serene calmness envelop her. Larry's words conjured memories, not her own, of ceremonies past, a window into history that swirled through her mind. It was unbelievable to think that so many had opened up their hearts and homes in the centuries past. She wondered when the divide had occurred between the species of man and if there could be true peace and understanding between the communities.

In a near-vacuumlike fashion, the light retreated from the floor and walls back into the chest. Larry closed the box and handed it to Amanda with a gentle smile.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I must wish you a fond farewell. It's been a very *interesting* journey."

Kam was the first to find his voice. "Wait a second. You can't just drop this bombshell in our laps and walk away. Won't we need some type of instructions, a sort of what to expect from him as he grows?"

Larry laughed. "Now where would be the fun in that?"

And in a flash of light, Larry was gone. For several moments no one moved. Amanda was sure they all held their collective breaths as they waited for something else to occur. It did. A loud crash filled the warehouse as Leo forced his way through one door with guns drawn. All eyes fell on him, but it was Amanda who spoke. "Leo?"

His gaze darted around the room as if looking for possible danger. His gaze landed on their discarded weapons, and he sent Amanda a perplexed look.

"What the hell is going on here? I lost communication, and when I got here the doors were bolted closed."

Kam shrugged. "We were making a baby."

His comment sent a ripple of laughter throughout the building.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I still don't get it," Leo echoed what Kam now identified as the younger man's catchphrase for the fifth time since they'd left the warehouse.

"Someone else want to take a stab at explaining it?" Lance queried.

"Sure, as soon as someone explains it to me," Rex muttered following the group into the hotel lobby. "But first, how about a stiff drink and a hearty steak?"

While Kam could appreciate the other man's sentiments, his desires were vastly different.

"I'm going to freshen up and head to the hospital," Lance announced.

"Please send Helena and Cheryl my regards. I'll try to be by later to see them," Amanda said, and Kam felt a twinge of guilt at the joy he felt over her decision to postpone her visit. He knew he was being selfish, but he wanted nothing more than for them to lose themselves in each other for a few hours. Okay, perhaps a few months was far more accurate, but he'd settle for anything he could get at the moment. Silently, he followed her to the private elevator where she waited, cradling the chest in her arms.

"Should I order something up for us to eat?" Kam suggested once they were in the foyer.

"If you'd like. Personally, I thought I'd put junior here down for the day and treat his papa to a little raunchy sex." The offhanded way she made the announcement left him standing in her wake, processing the words over and over. Had she said what he thought she did or had his hormones finally pushed him over the edge? His eyes lingered on the generous swell of her backside as she rounded the corner leading to the hallway and disappeared.

God, how he hoped he wasn't imagining things, because he was certain he'd throw himself out a window if she rejected him right now. On heavy legs, he followed her down the hall that led to the master suite. He entered the room in time to see her pushing tight jeans over the swell of her rounded hips. It was hypnotic the way she shimmied, bent at the waist, and shimmied some more to get free. Each movement was like a shot of adrenaline to Kam's awakening shaft. He leaned against the doorjamb to watch her deliberate display, but even more to support his weakening limbs. Never had the female form been so beautiful to observe. Yet he knew he knew his reaction wasn't only to her gender, it was Amanda. His sweet, delectable Amanda. Only she could set his blood to boiling with a look, a touch, or just by being near. To think he'd lived years without knowing her and now he had her in his life. Words could not express all the emotions she evoked in him. She stripped out of her T-shirt and stood in a lace thong and bra ensemble that threatened to give him a coronary. Seeming to ignore his presence, she moved to the large windows and quickly set about the task of setting the heavy drapes free, or so he thought until saw her come away with the two thick, corded tassels. For the first time since he'd entered the room, she turned to look at him.

He arched a brow in query.

"I thought we'd do a bit more exploring with these little guys. That's if you're up to it, of course. If you're tired, we can postpone this for another --"

Kam didn't give her an opportunity to finish her sentence as he made quick work of closing the distance between them and lifted her into his arms. Her legs locked around his waist and her head dipped until her lips hovered above his own. She made a joyful sound before closing the distance between their mouths. Kam didn't mind the fact that she was the aggressor. In fact, he relished her wanton behavior and found

solace in it. He carried her to the bed but refused to immediately let her go, enjoying the hungry questing of her tongue. She pulled away only to draw him back in to nip and suck his lower lip before demanding entry to his mouth once again. She took and he gave eagerly. His breathing heightened and blood rushed to his cock, causing it to swell. His sac grew heavy with the need to release his seed in her warm womb.

Reluctantly, he broke the connection of their kiss. "Enough, woman, or I'm going to come before I can undress."

If he thought his words would be any type of deterrent, he was sadly mistaken, because Amanda found other ways to use her mouth to drive him insane. She rained warm kisses on his neck, nipping, sucking, and tugging in ways that were sure to leave tiny marks. But it wasn't the bruises he was worried about.

"God, Amanda, you have no idea what you're doing to me."

She chuckled, a deep, seductive sound that was just as effective in turning him on as her sensual kisses and love bites.

"Fine, if you're going to complain, I'll leave you alone." She untwined her body from his and stood to her full height on the bed, which succeeded in thrusting her breasts in his face. It was a temptation Kam couldn't ignore. He anchored one arm around her waist to keep her in place while the other made quick work of unlatching the front clasp of her lacy bra.

"Beautiful," he groaned before taking one dusky treat in his mouth. He toyed with the pebbled flesh, tugging it between his teeth while his tongue tortured the sensitive center. Amanda's soft gasps of pleasure were like music to his ears and an aphrodisiac to his soul. Fingers clutched his hair as her sounds of enjoyment grew to lewd mewling noises that only spurred him on. He switched his ministrations to the opposite breast, laving the twin peak with equally lavish attention until she was moaning uncontrollably.

"Too many clothes," she complained, making unsuccessful attempts to tug his shirt free of his pants.

She was right, but it was a problem easily rectified. Amanda whimpered when he pulled away, but she kept her complaints to a minimum as he made swift work of divesting himself of his clothes. His eyes remained riveted to her form through the entire process. As he undressed, she gave him a show that far beat any performance being played out in gentlemen's clubs worldwide. For his enjoyment, she rolled and gyrated her body with enticing slowness. For a finale, she twirled her way to her knees and rotated her hips in a fashion that would make the most skilled belly dancer envious before lowering herself flat on her back and working the stringy thong off while pumping and rotating her hips in slow arcs.

For several enthralled moments, Kam stood watching her beguiling movements, counting himself the luckiest man alive.

"Why don't you bring your big ol' self down here so I can show you what I have in store?"



Yup, he was the luckiest man.

## Chapter Sixteen

She'd never had the opportunity to play out her full wanton fantasies in the past, so sharing the experience with her mate added a special quality indeed. Amanda bit back her smile when Kam stopped gawking long enough to join her on the bed. He remained silent when she ordered him to the mattress's center. She saw his jaw visibly tense when she straddled his waist and took her time easing her body up and down his rock-hard form so that her mons could rub against the rigid length of his shaft. His hands reaching to grab the firm globes of her ass stilled her movements, and she purred while he kneaded the flesh with strong fingers. In answer, she rotated her hips. They both moaned as heat ignited their bodies from the motion. Amanda spread her legs wider, allowing her slick feminine folds to coat his cock while she rocked up and down his length.

"Slower, kitten, we have all night."

Easier said than done, the fuse had already been lit, and boy was she ready to explode.

A sharp smack to her backside sent stinging heat spreading across her ass. Caught off guard, she pressed her hips into him, and her clit pushed firmly against his rigid length. She paused for a moment but soon resumed her sensual ride up and down the length of his cock. Another stinging blow was delivered and she pressed forward again, only this time her cunt creamed a little more from the combination of pleasure and pain. Another, harder blow had her breath catching and led to her thrusting her pelvis in a steady rhythm. She braced her arms on his chest, staring deeply into impassioned blue eyes while her movements became even wilder. Her cunt throbbed and creamed even more.

"You're killing me," he rasped and administered another blow that left them both panting with need.

It took all the strength Amanda could muster to ease her weight from his body and sit back on her haunches next to his prone yet very aroused body. She swiped at Kam's hand when he would have pulled her back on top of him.

"Uh-uh. Now who's being impatient? At the rate we're going, things will be over before they begin."

He raised himself on his elbow. "I promise you won't regret it."

She didn't doubt that but wasn't quite ready to be done with him just yet. "Humor me."

"What did you have in mind?"

She reached for the tassels that lay forgotten on the bed and smiled at the interested way Kam's eyes followed the thick cords.

"Hmm, so you liked being bound?"

"I'll admit there were some merits to it."

His smile broadened. "Well, let me not be accused of denying my woman her pleasure."

When he would have reached for the ropes, she quickly snatched them back. "I was hoping you'd say that. Only this time I'd like to bind you."

"Me?"

She suppressed a smile at the surprise reflected on his face. "Unless you want to change your mind about giving me enjoyment?"

He quirked a dark brown brow in her direction. "Never that." With deliberate slowness, he lowered himself back to the bed and extended his muscular arms above his head. Their eyes connected and what she saw in the depths of his made her heart expand. "I'm all yours."

Amanda had half expected him to deny her this boon. His easy capitulation gave her a moment's pause, but only a brief one. A slow smile spread across her lips as she moved into position for her seduction. Straddling his waist was one thing, avoiding the raging erection he sported was another altogether. The glint in his eyes told her he was aware of her dilemma. Not one to be thwarted, Amanda repositioned herself above his rock-hard abs and took her time in attaching the first cord to his wrist and the bedpost. She double-checked the knot to make sure it was secure. Satisfied with the job she'd done, Amanda moved on to his other wrist. She worked steadily and her breasts swayed in his face. As she examined her handiwork, Kam took advantage of their positions to latch onto one dusky nipple. He sucked it slowly into his mouth until she felt as if her entire body would go limp.

"No fair," Amanda moaned, her pussy becoming wetter by the second.

"All's fair in sexual torture," he replied around the nub, giving it one last tug before relinquishing his hold.

Doing her best to bring her hormones under control, she pulled herself into a sitting position. "Which leads me to a few ground rules."

"This ought to be interesting, seeing as how I'm the one trussed up here."

"Complaints, complaints." She thumped his chest playfully. "Now listen closely. I'm in control, so there will be no more of your distracting caresses."

Kam didn't comment but looked above his head and gave a dramatic tug to his arms.

"Don't even try it. As you've just demonstrated, there are other ways to touch."

"Now who's the complainer? Besides, I thought kitties enjoyed a good licking."

"I guess that's something you'll have to explore at a later date."

The promise in his eyes sent a chill down her spine. "You can count on it."

There was no shyness to Amanda as she stretched herself down the length of his body.

Kam's barely audible gasp while she pushed her torso over his hard cock was a pleasure all its own. Unable to resist temptation, she used her breasts to trail up and down his rigid shaft. Nudging his thick, corded thighs apart, she settled in their apex, all the while casting inquisitive looks up at him. He watched her with an explosively heated gaze as he waited for what was to come next. Amanda took her time, first nuzzling one inner thigh with her cheek before switching to give the same affectionate caress to the other. Kam's staff jerked with her movements, but he continued his silent vigil, blue eyes unblinkingly following her every movement. With deft fingers, she reached for his engorged sac, gently stroking and weighing the stretched flesh until Kam jerked in response. It was a particularly sensitive erogenous zone for him, one that she'd not had an opportunity to fully investigate until that moment.

Boldly, her tongue snaked out to taste his salty flesh, and Kam's hiss of enjoyment urged her on to more aggressive measures. Seeming to have a mind of its own, her tongue swirled and danced around his sac, leaving him moaning in pleasure. Watching the ecstasy on his face only heightened her own arousal and pushed her onward.

"Fuck, kitten." The words came out on a groan while she sucked his sac into her mouth. His cock thumped and jerked in the air from her ministrations. Unable to resist the allure of his veined shaft, she took a firm hold with one hand and began what started as a slow pumping of him. His sac tightened in her mouth as she alternated sucking the smooth flesh with the up and down motion of her fingers on his cock.

He opened his mouth to speak but what emerged was a long, drawn-out moan as he arched into her movements. Maybe it was her control over his enjoyment or the way he responded to her that raised the level of her own excitement, or perhaps it was a combination of both. Whatever the case, Amanda found herself feeding off his excitement, craving the taste and feel of him. She levered herself higher, enjoying the expression of utter rapture on his face. She glided her hand down his cock one more time before covering it with her mouth, taking only the tip in at first. The tangy taste of his precum was like an aphrodisiac in her mouth. Kam growled her name in a way that barely passed for human. She didn't waste time swallowing as much of him as possible. She continued to massage his sac while sucking him slowly in and out of her mouth.

"Enough. Ride me now." It was the demand of a man using his last bit of willpower to keep his body under control, and it only added fuel to Amanda's lust-driven quest. Her head bobbed up and down as her mouth suctioned on his rigid staff. Savoring. Licking. Stroking.

She heard the warning growl at the exact moment she recognized the distinct sound of splintering wood. The noise registered in her mind when Kam's freed hands pulled her up by her shoulders. A surprised gasp issued forth from her lips when she found herself staring up into his stern face and felt him driving into her hot pussy in a seamless motion. If her initial thought had been to protest, there was no way she could bring herself to do so with the exquisite feel of him sliding in and out of her. He plunged balls deep, only to retreat and repeat the penetration in an energized cadence. Firm hands on her hips kept him anchored while he pushed them into a frenzy they both craved. Deep thrusts soon gave way to more shallow ones, signaling the near end to his resolve. She greeted each plunge with equal vigor, pushing her way to the orgasm hanging just out of reach.

"Mine," he growled, fucking her harder, pounding her into sweet oblivion. The muscles in her stomach tightened with anticipation, and her heart thudded frantically in her chest. She would never get enough of the way he filled her, stretching her body with his swollen cock. Each thrust was a brand, his claim, his promise of pleasure.

"I'm going to come," she cried, never once breaking stride, needing the orgasm that barreled forward. Her body stiffened as the climax ripped through her. She couldn't move, at least not of her own accord, her body having been reduced to jerking spasms of completion. Her pussy clenched and milked his cock over and over until a roar of pleasure forced its way from his core while he filled her womb with his seed. One final thrust and his head descended toward hers. He captured her mouth in a kiss that succeeded in taking her very breath away.

She was most assuredly a lucky woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How long do you think you can ignore her?" Kam eyeballed the cell phone sitting on the coffee table where Amanda had placed it after a brief conversation with her surrogate. Since then, the upbeat ring tone signaling her mother's calls had sounded over seven times and gone unanswered.

She sighed. "I was hoping to make it through the rest of the morning."

The phone quieted but she knew it would be a short reprieve. Amanda snuggled into the soothing heat of Kam's naked embrace, wishing she could remain that way for a few more quiet hours. A long night of loving had led to the start of a lazy morning, which included the pair satisfying their bodies' physical hunger with a hearty breakfast on the media room's oversize sofa. It wasn't long before their never-ending lust segued into more carnal forms of gratification. Somewhere in between, guilt nagged at her, reminding her to check in on Helena and Cheryl. She was happy to learn they were

both in good spirits... Well, at least Helena seemed to be; her amusement was spurred on as she informed on Cheryl's would-be suitor. Her surrogate happily reported that Regan was making a nuisance of himself with Cheryl by insisting he wait on her hand and foot, much to the woman's chagrin. As much as Amanda wanted to think the mysterious Larry was wrong about the two forming any sort of lasting bond, Helena's remarks struck a chord with her. Perhaps Larry hadn't been so far off the mark.

Bobby Brown's once-popular tune "My Prerogative" filled the room for the eighth time that morning, and Amanda groaned low in her throat. So much for a reprieve.

"Hello." She did her best to sound groggy as she answered the call.

Kam didn't attempt to suppress his deep chuckle, and she slapped at his bare chest to silence him.

"I know you weren't asleep this whole time, so you can just quit the act right now, missy."

"Good morning, Mom."

"When are you and your mate planning to present yourselves? There are several people waiting to meet him, and there's still the matter of the mating ceremony to plan."

"Mom, we've had a very busy couple of days. We thought we'd keep a low profile today. And if you remember correctly, I told you there wouldn't be a mating ceremony."

Her mother made an indignant sound. "Well, that just won't do. Now, I've taken the liberty of picking out a few venues I think would be appropriate for the festivities. If we pick a date within the next month, we can still have a spring service."

"Mom, Kam and I aren't interested in the show of a ceremony."

"Speak for yourself." Humor laced his words, and Amanda shot him what she hoped was a scathing look. He didn't look the least bothered by it.

"Well, at least one of you understands the importance of this." Amanda wasn't surprised that her mother had heard his comment with her sensitive shifter hearing.

It was an argument she didn't want to have so early in the morning. Especially with only one cup of joe in her system. "We'll think about it and get back to you."

She didn't wait for her mother's reply. Two presses of a button had her ending the call and powering the phone down.

"You know you haven't heard the end on the topic."

Amanda shrugged, settling back into the comfort of his chest. "At least I've bought us a little more time."

"I think she has a point about having an official mating ceremony."

She groaned. "Not you too."

"I just think it would save on a lot of questions down the road."

Her head shot up at that, and she was surprised to note the seriousness reflected in his eyes.

"You're kidding, right? We're going to have the equivalent of a test tube baby with abilities far beyond other shifters and who can grow at an accelerated rate in nine months' time. I think the last thing people will be asking us about is why we didn't opt for a mating ceremony."

It was Kam's turn to shrug. "It wouldn't hurt anything."

A distant ringing prevented her from making a follow-up statement. For several seconds, they stared at each other. The ring came again.

"Isn't that your cell?"

Kam nodded.

"You didn't give them your number, did you?"

The boyishly apologetic look on his face was answer enough. "They are family now."

"Lesson number one about being a member of this family: leave as little contact information as possible or they will use it, and often."

The ringing stopped, most likely because the call transferred to a voice messaging system.

"So noted. Do all of your lessons involve avoiding your family?"

"Most do. I wouldn't want to frighten you, but lesson number two involves knowing how to plan a proper escape route."

"Are you feeling the need to go somewhere?"

The ringing started again.

She nodded this time. "Home."

"Ask and ye shall receive."

Her eyes widened. "You mean it?"

"All we need are clothes and junior in there."

"Those are the sweetest words you could have ever said to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you really going to deny her the mating ceremony?"

The subject hadn't been broached since their daring escape from the upscale hotel crawling with members of her Pride. En route to the airport, Amanda made a quick call to Leo, informing him that they'd be returning to Kam's Alaskan hideaway and would be in contact at a later date. Her brother laughed at the news and enthusiastically volunteered to be the one to break it to her mother. Normally, Amanda wouldn't subject her worst enemy to the tantrum Julia Spoils was sure to throw, but at Leo's insistence, she happily gave him the task.

"No," she answered Kam's question honestly. Even she couldn't be that cruel to her mother. Her mother lived for things like mating ceremonies, and with her daughter having mated into such a prestigious family, Julia would certainly want to pull out all the stops. "But I'll add the stipulation of having Helena give final approval on everything."

"Evil."

"It's time the queen had a taste of her own medicine. You're lucky your family isn't as whacked as mine."

"I wouldn't say that. My grandfather still chases my grandmother around, even at family functions."

"That's sweet."

Kam shivered. "It isn't when he finally catches her and rewards them both with a coupling, no matter who's around."

She didn't try to hold back her laugh. "You mean you've seen your grandparents going at it."

"On more than one occasion. It's something all of us grandchildren still promise to go to group therapy over and send them the bill."

"Even so, it's nice that they still *have* it."

He shuddered, but she wasn't fooled as he pulled her close.

"What about your parents?" She snuggled into Kam's arms, surprised at how cozy the seats were on his private plane. At that moment, they were somewhere over the northeast with the final destination being Anchorage, where Kam promised a small but comfortable Cessna would be waiting to take him to their home.

"Very much in love, but thankfully more modest in their affections. My sister and I are grateful for that."

"Is your sister mated?"

"Yes, to Regan's brother. She and her mate are raising two cubs of their own."

"It's so different from Pride life," she said a little too wistfully.

"We'll make our own rules. Do you think you can be happy with that?"

"Ecstatic. In fact, I can't wait until we get back to Alaska. I'm even looking forward to a more simple way of life."

Kam visibly winced. "Yeah, about that..."



## Epilogue

Amanda still couldn't believe her eyes. She felt as if she'd just stepped into a secret lair from an old James Bond flick.

"You had a cave equipped with all this." Her voice was heavily laced with awe, but she couldn't help it.

"I've been meaning to do upgrades for years, and it was a long winter," he rationalized.

Imbedded in the side of a mountain, the "cave" had all the outward appearances of being a run-of-the-mill, cold, dank, uninhabitable enclosure. A place her mother would definitely refuse to set a pair of her Manolos on. They'd only walked three feet into the wide mouth when they came to a dead halt in front of a slab of rock. A hidden panel revealed a keypad, which Kam promptly entered the code for. The slab retreated into the mountain, giving them entry into an open cavern that housed both a living room and state-of-the-art kitchen off to one side. For several seconds, Amanda stood back with her mouth agape, not sure she could believe her own eyes. The amenities were so vast it would have been easier to list what the cavern lacked instead of what it actually possessed. And boy, it wasn't lacking much. What wasn't evident could be found concealed in a wall, ceiling, or floor. Kam took great pleasure in showing her every gadget. He practically beamed as he demonstrated how to access a plasma television that folded into a rock face.

"For those many hours of football I'll have to teach our new son about," he offered at her narrow-eyed glare.

Her mind spun with all the secret compartments and various panels until finally she begged off. "Stop. I think I'll need a blueprint and manual to know where everything is and what each item does."

"Just one more item. This last thing I had installed was completely inspired by you. I had a crew come in while we were away."

"I can't think of anything else we need in here," she said in the middle of the bedroom they'd share for the rest of their lives.

"Maybe this will change your mind," he said, handing her a rectangular-shaped box.

She liked gifts and didn't waste time tearing into the wrapping. Laughter bubbled up in her at the item lying snugly atop layers of decorative paper. She retrieved the lightweight phone. "Does this mean no more smoke signals?"

"I can't make any promises. Most come back here to get away from all the trappings of city life, so it won't be easy convincing the other Clans to embrace the technology, but at least now we can communicate with the outside world."

That was something at least. She paused before asking, "You haven't given out this number yet?"

Kam laughed as he caught her meaning. "Nope, and just for the record, it's completely unlisted."

"That should buy us a little privacy, but I have to warn you, Julia Spoils is better than the CIA at finding out information." She wasn't kidding, but it wasn't something she wanted to think about at the moment. "I can't believe all the things you've done here."

"It's a passion of mine. Remind me to show you my workshop later."

"In your case I guess you can take the bear out of MIT but not the MIT out of the bear."

"I'm just a nerd at heart. Are you disappointed?"

"Hardly, but are there any more surprises I should know about?"

He pretended to think. "I'm sure I can come up with a few more, but first I'll need to start work immediately on getting a unit in place to transfer junior to. I'll need to call in a few guys, but we should have everything ready to go in under a week."

"You're that fast."

"No, I'm that good."

Amanda gave him a playful punch in the shoulder, which landed her right where she had wanted to be from the moment they entered their home, in his arms. "Braggart."

"Just confident in my abilities," he said, pulling her tighter. "In fact, I think it's about time you were reminded of just how good I can be."

She didn't protest as he tugged her shirt up. "You know, Mr. Victor, I think you're right."

 THE END 

## **Nia K. Foxx**

Nia K. Foxx is the proud mother of three beautiful, very active children and two...narcissistic cats who spend their days battling over territory. She began an interest in writing romantic stories at the age of twelve, trying her hand at erotica in '05. She's been enjoying it ever since. Nia loves to communicate with other readers of erotic romance and encourages anyone to email her at [nia@niafoxx.com](mailto:nia@niafoxx.com) or read free excerpts on her website at: <http://www.niafoxx.com>.