



Red Boar's Baby (Shifter Agents #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Cesar Quinn Costa, chief of the Arizona Shifter Crimes Bureau, has never met his match—until now! A surprise baby/fake relationship standalone shifter romance.

Diana Reid, Park Service helicopter pilot and search-and-rescue operator, doesn't need complications in her life. Such as finding a perfectly healthy baby under mysterious circumstances near a crashed plane in the mountains. A shifter baby with a very unique shift form.

The only person she can think of to go to is Costa, her childhood neighbor all grown up. The two have an on-again, off-again arrangement to be each other's plus-ones at shifter social gatherings, but the agreement is: it never goes farther than that. The relationship is fake. It will never be real. And Diana never wanted more—at least not that she'd admit to.

But that was before she got a good look at Costa holding a baby

As for Costa, the legendary Red Boar of the SCB has known for a long time that Diana didn't want to make their fake arrangement real. They both have good reasons for keeping it that way. But when the fiery search-and-rescue pilot turns up on his doorstep with a baby in her arms, he begins to realize that he'd do almost anything to make her his own.

And when the crashed plane turns out to be the start of an unfolding conspiracy, two stubborn, independent people must learn to pull together as a team—or lose all they hold dear.

Total Pages (Source): 30

CHAPTER 1

“... and he climbed up on the windowsill yelling, ‘I’m a bird, I’m a bird!’” the very drunk girl wearing nothing but an oversized University of Arizona sweatshirt sobbed into Costa’s shoulder. “And then he jumped out the window!”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Costa said, trying to extricate himself from her watery clutches without upsetting her too much. He gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder and unloaded her on a female friend among the other kids in the dorm room, where she clung like a sad, drunken barnacle.

“It’s the third floor!” one of the frat boys protested. He appeared to be slightly less drunk than the others. “He has to have broken a leg, at least.”

“We have people looking for him right now.” In retrospect Costa wished he’d taken that duty. At the time, he’d thought that interviewing witnesses would be less of a problem than searching bushes and ornamental cactus gardens all over campus for an extremely stoned owl shifter.

He had been wrong. So, so very wrong.

“We’ve never had a pledge jump out the window, Officer,” another of the frat kids earnestly assured Costa with the slow-paced speech of a very drunk person trying to act sober. “This is the first time ever .”

“It was like he thought he could really fly!” the girl wailed. “I thought that was just a made-up, like, scared straight anti-drug thing! I didn’t think it happened in real life !”

“Especially when you’re just a little high,” one of the frat boys said. “I mean, mescaline, or—ow!” One of his buddies had stepped on his foot, gesturing wildly to the federal agent in the room.

Costa didn’t bother trying to explain he wasn’t that kind of federal agent. The Special Crimes Bureau, aka the Shifter Crimes Bureau, cared nothing about drugs; what the SCB cared about was investigating shifter-related incidents and trying to prevent their exposure to the world at large.

Instead of explaining, he went to the open window and looked down on the landscaped shrubs and sidewalk below. The sun was just peeking up over the horizon, painting the campus in golden light. If the kid had shifted and flown (the logical conclusion, since his clothes had turned up in a pile under the window and the rest of him was nowhere to be found), he could be miles away by now.

They wouldn’t even have known about it, except the campus security officer who answered the frat kids’ panicked call was one of the local shifter community and had called them. So here they were, running damage control. And Costa was here because he had been up for his habitual early-morning jog and was therefore one of the only agents available to answer the call, with only the skeleton night staff on duty.

Just as he was thinking that he should’ve spent an extra hour in bed, the radio crackled and Cat Delgado said cheerfully, “Got him, boss.”

“Unharm’d?” Costa asked, low, turning away from the window.

“Yeah, he’s fine. We’re going to hold him in custody for a bit until he’s—ah—back to normal.”

Meaning he was still an owl. “Do that,” Costa said. “Call the interns and get them back to base. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Did you find him?” the less-drunk frat guy asked.

“Yes, he’s fine, he’s sleeping it off.”

“But how’d he get dow?—”

“Pure luck,” Costa said. “Nobody else try it,” he added, scowling sternly, as some of the others eyed the window speculatively. “Good night, morning that is. Hope not to hear from you again.”

He went downstairs and out into the brisk early-morning desert air, where he paused to draw a deep breath to clear away the residue of stale alcohol clinging to his shifter-sensitive sinuses. It was spring in Tucson, by far the nicest time of year, when the desert bloomed and the oven of summer had not yet begun to bake. And he could be out jogging and inhaling the crisp scent of creosote bush and mesquite and desert wildflowers, but no, he was here interviewing tanked 21-year-olds with a staff that consisted, at the moment, of Delgado and two interns, the only people who were available in the middle of the night on short notice.

It had been most of a year since the devastating blow of last summer’s shifter plague, and the office was still struggling with ongoing staffing issues. They had been lucky, Costa knew, not to lose more people. But he wasn’t okay with losing any people.

Cesar Quinn Costa, chief of the Southwest SCB, was a large man, muscular but not heavy, with an athlete’s grace and light, quick steps. His hair was a slightly grown-out mop of dark red, at this time of year lacking the paler, carrotty sun-streaking that it would develop in summer. The call from a slightly desperate Delgado had come just as he’d been halfway through his single pre-run cup of black coffee. He was wearing drawstring sweat pants and clunky running shoes, with a sweatshirt over a bare chest that he’d thrown on against the desert chill as he went out the door.

At least he fit in on a college campus.

“I’m outside the dorms,” he told Delgado over the radio. “Where are you?”

“Parking garage, chief. Main gate.”

He set off in that direction on the paths that looped through the campus, loping in a slow jog. He hadn’t made it far before a horse clattered up beside him on the bike path.

It was a beautiful, well-toned pinto quarter horse mare, patterned with great splashes of cream and roan coloring. The horse wore no saddle or bridle. There was a woman on its back attempting to stay on by clinging to its mane while also trying to hold on to a small bundle which looked like it was rolled up in a pair of jeans.

“Why are you a horse?” Costa sternly asked the horse.

“We thought it would be a good way to cover more ground,” the girl on the horse’s back panted. “And we were right. Ow, my butt.”

“No offense, Dawes, but I wasn’t talking to you.”

The rider, Fifi Dawes, slid off with another small “ow.” She was older than a typical intern, in her early thirties, pillowy and soft-looking, and generally didn’t look well suited to athletic field activities. She probably should have been the one to stay in the office to staff the phones. But the interns had already rock-paper-scissored for it before Costa got there, and decided to leave the kiwi shifter, so fine; he figured he’d let them make that decision, and it wasn’t like a kiwi was going to be any more useful in the field than Fifi’s capybara. They were all new hires, so he was trying to give them as much leeway to do their own decision-making and team-building as possible.

Turning into a horse in the middle of the U of A campus was really pushing the limits of his patience, though.

“Get your pants on, Boyd,” he told the horse. “Not here; find somewhere discreet.”

The mare flattened her ears, but delicately pulled back her lips from her long, strong horse teeth and neatly took the bundle of clothing from Fifi. It was tied up in her belt with a loop to clench between her teeth, which suggested to Costa, ominously, that she had a habit of doing this. She trotted off in search of a place to change, evidently oblivious to a pair of sleepy-looking students walking to the cafeteria who had pulled out their cell phones to take pictures. Costa figured it wouldn't hurt since they didn't have footage of her shifting, but he was going to tear her a new one as soon as they got back to the office.

“Stay with her until she gets dressed, then both of you head over to the main gate parking garage and meet up with Agent Delgado,” Costa told her. “I'm going there now. By the way, I want an unauthorized-shifting-in-the-field form on my desk from each of you before you leave today.”

“Is that the SH-24 or the SH-36?” Fifi asked, wide-eyed and eager to please.

“Both,” Costa snapped, rather than admit that he couldn't remember. The forms came down from central HQ and changed all the time.

He reached the parking garage in considerably less than a good mood. One of the agency's SUVs was parked on the lower level, with Delgado perched on the hood, holding a grease-stained paper sack. She was a slim, athletic woman, her long, silky black hair tied back in a practical bun. As usual for field work, she had camouflaged the scaly lizardlike side of her head so that it simply looked like she'd shaved it. Delgado was a chameleon shifter who did not fully shift; instead she changed her skin, but she had to concentrate to hold it. In the dimness of the parking garage, he

could see the faint glimmers of scales above her ear that were no longer quite covered up.

“Hey, boss.” She slid off the hood and held out the small sack. “Fries? I was starving.”

Costa shook his head, although the smell of grease and salt was tempting. “My body is a temple, and I’m not gracing the temple with those saturated fat bombs first thing in the morning.”

“Your loss,” Delgado said, reaching into the bag. “Jessie and Fifi checked in and said they were headed over.”

“I’m going to guess you only talked to Fifi, since Jessie is a horse.”

“Oh, dear.”

“At least they’re together. I told Fifi to stay with her until she’s changed, in both senses of the word. Where’s our fugitive?”

Delgado jerked her chin at the backseat. Costa peered through the tinted window. There was a cardboard box on the backseat with Delgado’s jacket in it, and snuggled down in the middle of that, a small owl with its eyes closed and beak open. Through the window, Costa could hear faint, high-pitched snoring.

“He’s a Western screech owl,” Delgado said. “According to the birding app I installed during the Falcone business last year, anyway.”

“Did he screech?”

“No, he nibbled my fingers and fell asleep. If he gets sick on my jacket, he’s paying

for it. Is there any cleanup left to do?”

“Nah,” Costa said. He leaned a hip against the rear fender and regretted passing up the fries. That cup of coffee was a long time ago. Wrenching his brain away from food and back to business, he went on, “Someone should follow up with the college kids in a day or two, just to make sure none of them did any more investigating on their own. I doubt it, though. Everyone up there was so baked or drunk that I’d give low odds they’ll even remember it in any detail. One of the interns can handle that job.” It seemed a fitting punishment for Jessie Boyd, assuming she could manage to do it without turning into a horse.

“What about Sleeping Beauty? What do we do with him?”

“If he doesn’t need medical attention, find a cozy patch of cactus in an out-of-the-way location, stick him in a hollow and let him sleep it off. If he shifts before he wakes up, he’ll get a valuable life lesson.”

“Wow, boss. You’re mean when you don’t get your beauty sleep.”

“Mean? You haven’t seen me mean yet. He’ll wake up naked, regret his life choices, and hopefully won’t do it again. The follow-up agent ought to check in with him too.”

The two interns arrived just then. Fifi looked nervous. Jessie, who was now a tall, tanned young woman with her hair in sun-streaked brown braids, appeared buoyant. She was definitely getting all the crap busywork he could find for her over the next couple of days, Costa decided.

The SCB’s interns were the lifeblood of the organization in their own way, an ever-changing group of shifters and humans who were too untrained, inexperienced, unqualified, or uninterested to be field agents. They filled in with office tasks that

ranged from filing paperwork to picking up lunch, as well as providing warm bodies for legwork on simple, mostly harmless cases like this one.

Careless shifting, however, needed to be nipped in the bud before it turned into everyone's problem.

"Boyd, did anyone take a picture of you shifting?" he snapped.

"Course not," Jessie said. "I'm careful."

"No you aren't. Consequently, you're on social media duty for the next few days, with special attention to horse sightings around town. Downvote or be prepared to send a takedown notice on anything valid, and see if you can find something unrelated to us to call attention to instead."

At least Jessie had the common sense not to argue, though he could see her thinking about it. Instead she said smartly, "Yes, sir."

She either had the makings of a great field agent or a terminal pain in his ass. Possibly both.

"Permission to head home, sir?" Cat asked just as smartly.

Case in point.

"Yeah, drop off the feathered menace, take the interns to the office for a half-shift, then hit the hay. It's Caine's day off, so you were the duty agent overnight, right? You should've been off hours ago."

"Thank you for noticing," Delgado said. "Come on, ladies, let's go find a perch for our feathered friend. Need a ride, boss?"

Costa shook his head. “I’ve got my car.”

He was parked all the way across campus, but it was a pleasant walk. The sun was fully up now, the air growing warm and perfumed with a wealth of lovely spring scents. Tucson was as lush and verdant as it was ever going to get. Costa wondered if he might take off early this afternoon to make up for the interrupted morning. Tomorrow was Saturday; he could get out in the back country, maybe camp overnight?—

Oh hell. Not this weekend. At least not tonight.

Costa took out his phone as he walked. Yep, several missed texts on the family chat. Ignoring those for now, he paged through his contacts to the one labeled ACME NO 1.

He wondered if she’d be up yet, but of course she was. Like him, she was an early riser. She answered on the first ring.

“Let me guess,” said the warm, low voice, thrumming with pleasant amusement at his expense. “You need a date.”

Costa nearly tripped on perfectly flat pavement. He stopped walking and sat on a low wall beside an ornamental shrub planting. Diana had no idea—no idea—what that voice did to him. It was a voice made to be a late-night radio DJ, smooth and warm and easy. A voice that uplifted, a voice that comforted.

“Don’t I ever just call to say hi?” he asked, keeping it light.

“No,” said Acme No. 1, otherwise known as Diana Reid, but she sounded amused rather than annoyed. “We don’t have that kind of relationship. You know, my coworkers think you’re the world’s worst boyfriend.”

Costa laughed; he couldn't help it. She had that effect on him. "I strive to be the best. Anyway, you're right, I have a sudden need for an emergency date. Tonight's the big family to-do for Great-Uncle Rodrigo's eighty-seventh birthday at the family ranch. The whole clan is going to be there. Sorry about the short notice; if you can't make it, I get it."

"Uncle Roddy is how old? My gosh, how time flies. And I haven't been out to the ranch in absolutely ages." She turned serious. "I actually would like to come, Quinn, even though I think at this point I'm down a date or so in the tally?—"

"I'm at your disposal," Costa promised.

"—But I'm on a callout. You just happened to catch me in the office while I still have cell coverage, but I won't be here for long. We're all hands on deck for an S he could pick it up later. He'd jog from here to the office. It was about ten or twelve miles, give or take a little. He'd done longer runs than that—not generally on a workday, but it wasn't too hot. It would give him a chance to clear his head, get himself straightened out, and think about work rather than Diana Reid.

Not thinking about Diana was a good plan. A great plan, even. Too bad it never worked.

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CHAPTER 2

Above the eroded stone pillars, pinyons and sycamores of the Chiricahua massif, a helicopter hovered under the control of Diana Reid's strong, capable hands.

"That's B6 on the search grid cleared," she said to the man in the seat beside her, who nodded and marked the map on his knees. "Base, B6 clear, moving on to B7."

"Negative, Rescue 22." It was Caroline on the radio, Diana's favorite dispatcher out of the Cochise County sheriff's office. "We have a report of smoke sighted in D9. Could be nothing, a hiker, who knows, but you're the nearest. Check it out."

"Roger, Base." Diana switched to private intra-helicopter communications on the headset and turned to her copilot. "Luis, hand me a water bottle and a granola bar. It's been a while since lunch."

Luis made a show of shock. "You're staying hydrated without me having to nag you? Where's Di and what did you do with her?"

Diana snorted. She set her course and planted the bottle between her knees. "Got a hot date tonight, if all this works out for the best. If not, I need to keep my strength up."

"You still dating that asshole over at the SCB?"

"Hey!" Diana said. Her annoyance was genuine. She got to carp about Costa not keeping up his end of the strange deal they'd made years ago, but it was like making

fun of family; you didn't let other people do it. "He's fine. I'm fine."

"I'm starting to think you made up this boyfriend just to keep the single guys at the station off your back."

That hit too close to home. "I wouldn't want to steal you away from Alvero," she said, naming Luis's husband. "Costa might try, though. I can bring him in one of these days and introduce you. He'll get along great with the rest of you shitheads."

Luis flipped her off and tore open the granola bar wrapper for her so she could eat without needing both hands.

Luis was a paramedic, a middle-aged former biker with a competent air of "been there, seen it all" and a no-nonsense attitude that made him one of her favorite partners for this sort of work. He was 5'5", shorter than her, but built like a tank; she had once seen him wrestle a delirious six-foot hiker to the ground, throw the guy over his shoulder, and haul him to the helo.

And he was a shifter, which could also come in handy. When it was just the two of them on a callout, they could be completely candid discussing the possibilities—should an S it's down a gully. Luis says he sees something that might be wreckage. Investigate on foot? Over."

The radio crackled, breaking up as the mountain peaks interfered. "You want to wait for backup?" the dispatcher asked as the static cleared.

"Is it close?" In situations like this, with possible severe injuries, every minute counted.

"You see anywhere nearby someone could land a plane?"

“Not at all,” Diana said.

“Then no. The only other ‘copter we have available today is working the grid north of you, near Mt. Graham. Probably an hour, two hours before we could have someone down there. Maybe more.”

“Then no,” Diana told her. “We’ll go in on foot. We’re going to be out of touch for a bit, but if we don’t check in, let’s say in twenty minutes, call in the cavalry.”

“Copy, Rescue 22.”

Diana moved in for a light touchdown in the clearing. It was less nerve-wracking than many landings she’d made before. She shut down, and the rotors beat their way to stillness. The echoing silence of the mountains filled her ears, along with the pings of the cooling engine.

“You could stay here,” she began.

“Hell no, you may be the boss of me in the field, but I’m not letting a lady go out there alone.”

As she was probably meant to, Diana rolled her eyes and shot him a sneer. She climbed out of the helicopter and got her bearings. The ravine was below them. It was chilly this high in the mountains, not yet spring as it was in the desert beneath. There was still snow on the high peaks. She zipped up her jacket and pulled a baseball cap over her thick dark curls. It was easy to sunburn quickly at this latitude and altitude, even though she was perpetually tanned from all the time she spent outdoors.

“Got reception?” she asked Luis, who was holding his phone up. Her voice sounded loud to her in the stillness.

“No bars, doesn’t even look like it’s able to do emergency calls. We are isolated .”

“And the radios won’t be much good in this,” she muttered, looking down at the twisting ravine and the mess of broken rocks, hills, and gullies below them. According to the helicopter’s altimeter, they were at about 5,000 feet. That was a lot of rough ground, steep cliffs, and deep holes to swallow a signal.

Luis had already started down, his movements sure and competent. Diana followed him.

The ravine quickly closed out all visibility except a slice of cloudless blue sky above them. The air, although cool, was fragrant with pine and crisp, dry brush that snapped underfoot.

“Smell that?” Luis murmured.

She started to ask if he meant the pine, then realized what he did mean. There was a faint smell of smoke in the air, acrid and garbage-y rather than the clean scent of woodsmoke. As they descended further into the ravine, she began to catch petrochemical whiffs.

“Gasoline?” she asked.

“Aviation fuel, most likely. Could be you’ll get that hot date after all.”

His tone was light, in the blackly funny way that all first responders had of dealing with the life-and-death situations they dealt with every day. But Diana’s stomach tightened. There were lots of options for what might be ahead of them, and many of those were nasty.

“Think we should sing out?” Diana asked.

“Call and see if there’s someone alive down there, you mean? Dunno. How likely you think, if there’s someone down there, that they’d be friendly?”

Yeah, that was the problem. They were too far off the beaten path and it was too early in the season for backcountry hikers. They were both quiet for a moment, considering the options: gangs, drug runners, angry survivalists.

“They had to’ve heard us land,” Diana pointed out. “Sneaking up on somebody hostile is just gonna make us more likely to get shot. Better if we give them time to get away, if that’s what they want.”

There were times when her job might involve investigating a suspected drug camp or illegal grow operation, but this wasn’t one of them. She just wanted to find the accident site and locate survivors.

“I’d better yell out, then. Don’t want ‘em to think a woman’s up here alone.”

Diana glared at him and bellowed, “Hello down there! We’re here to investigate a plane crash. Can anyone hear me?”

As the echoes of her voice died away, she heard small rustles in the brush. A couple of birds burst from cover and took off down the ravine, their wingbeats fading in the distance.

“Good lungs on you,” Luis said.

“Just for that ‘woman alone’ crack, I really am going to introduce my boyfriend to Alvero.”

Another few moments of climbing down the increasingly steep ravine, and the fuel smell became stronger.

“No passengers, right?” Luis asked, confirming for form’s sake what they both already knew.

“Right. Just the pilot.” According to the company, the plane had been flying out empty to pick up a cargo of live chickens in Alamagordo.

Luis cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hello! Anyone alive down there?”

He shook his head when there was, once again, no answer. Diana pointed up to a snapped-off pine branch just above their head height. The yellow wood gleamed, and the scent of pine sap was fresh.

“Crash site,” she murmured.

“Or something. Big storm, maybe.”

But it was swiftly clear that something violent and dramatic had happened here recently. When Diana clambered over a boulder, she sighted the tangled structure of an airplane just below her, nose down in the ravine, wings broken and crumpled.

“Sonuvagun,” Luis muttered. “We found it.”

He started forward, paramedic training taking over, but Diana touched his arm to stop him. She took a moment to look at the site. There were no obvious dangers. The smoke was gently twisting up from the engine, which had been half ripped out of the nose of the plane, but nothing was actively on fire—though recent crash sites with spilled aviation fuel were always dangerous, especially in a confined area like this with nowhere to run. She saw no one moving.

“Hello?” Diana called.

There was an abrupt flurry of motion from near the plane, under one wing. It sounded more like an animal than a person, something thrashing around in the brush.

“I’ll investigate the cockpit,” Luis said quietly. “You check that out.”

He was taking the harder job, Diana knew. But unlike the half-playful, half-protective chauvinism that her male coworkers indulged in, this really was his job, just like flying the helicopter was hers. She had first responder training, but Luis was the one who worked with drug overdoses, suicide attempts, ugly ranching accidents, and domestic violence four days a week. Whatever he found here, he was capable of dealing with it both professionally and emotionally.

So Diana crawled beneath the crumpled airplane wing, seeking the source of that furtive fluttery movement. “Hi there,” she called soothingly. Was it a pet? A wild animal trapped by the crash, maybe injured?

She glimpsed a quick flash of something moving, and felt an odd twist in her gut.

A shifter?

Shifters could recognize each other, but there was no scientific explanation for how they did it. For most people, it was visual, but Diana, like everyone else she’d talked to, couldn’t narrow it down any more than “you just know.” Some people spoke of it as a tingling feeling or a kind of adrenaline rush. For Diana it was more nebulous, a vague sense she couldn’t put her finger on. And she thought that might be what she was feeling now.

“Hello?” Diana called softly. She squirmed under the wing. It had crumpled like a sheet of paper in the force of the crash, folded up accordion-style and wedged against a boulder. She had to fight her way through a brush-choked crevice in the rocks, the bulk of the airplane above her.

It seemed unlikely that anyone had survived the crash. But she'd encountered odder things. It could be a kid, or, as she'd thought a moment ago, a panicked and possibly injured shifter trying to flee. An escaped pet, a smuggled exotic animal—it could be a lot of things.

But when she finally fought her way free of the brush, picking twigs out of her hair, nothing could have prepared her for what she saw.

“Oh my,” was all Diana could say.

It was a baby.

CHAPTER 3

The baby was naked, and it was a girl. She lay on her back, light pink and rosy, a bit dusty but not hurt or even sunburnt, as far as Diana could tell. Her face was screwed up as if she couldn't decide whether or not to cry.

And she was a shifter. As Diana crawled over to her, not wanting to alarm her, she could feel it strongly—but also with a faint undertone of ... something . She had never felt anything quite like this before.

“Hi, sweetheart.” Diana was no baby person; she had never changed a diaper in her life. What she did have experience at was soothing scared, hurt people. And a baby was still a person, just a small roly-poly one.

Diana reached carefully for the little girl. As her hands came near the round infant body, the baby seemed to make her decision about whether Diana was a threat or not. She let out a single healthy-sounding squall, and then shifted.

Abruptly, instead of a little girl, there was a baby animal that seemed to consist mostly of legs. It was lying on its back, as the girl had been, and it flailed frantically, waving its legs all over the place.

“Whoa, careful, you'll hurt yourself!” Or escape into the brush, as the baby evidently had been trying to do when Diana startled her. Diana hadn't realized that baby shifters' ability to walk was so advanced compared to their human age. But she didn't remember learning to walk any more than the next person, and she hadn't made a habit of being around small babies.

It was hard to tell what exactly the little girl turned into, except that it was something in the general hoofed animal family—deer? Gazelle? Whatever she was, the child thrashed herself upright, more or less—at which point Diana became aware of a brand new problem.

There was something terribly wrong with the little girl's back. Even as Diana got over her initial wave of shock and horror, the baby flexed some tiny muscles and then Diana realized that what she had initially seen as an awful injury was actually a pair of stubby, unfledged wings that flapped wildly.

“What?” Diana said aloud. No deer had wings. And the rest of the baby was definitely something of the deer-horse-cow variety. Nothing like that had wings because wings were adapted from front legs and that meant this baby had a whole extra pair of limbs on her back.

All of this ran through the analytical part of Diana's mind, and then she realized that she was about to lose the kid in the thicket. Not wanting to hurt her, but unable to think of anything else to do, she shrugged out of her jacket and slung it as carefully as possible around the struggling child, capturing her as if in a butterfly net.

It was at this point, as she tried to contain about twenty thrashing little hoofed legs, that Luis climbed down from the top part of the wing rather than going underneath as she had.

“No survivors,” he reported, his face and voice grim. “The pilot didn't make it—what have you got there?” Diana was engaged in trying to contain the child gently, but she heard his voice change when he realized Diana had something alive with her. “Is that a shifter?”

“It's a kid, a shifter kid. I don't think she's hurt. She's just scared. Give me a hand here.”

Even as she spoke, the struggling bundle collapsed in her arms and suddenly she was holding a jacket-wrapped baby who began to cry.

“Uh,” Luis said as Diana thrust it at him.

“You’re a paramedic, you handle this.”

“I’m not good with babies,” Luis protested, awkwardly taking the bundle. “It really doesn’t come up as often as you’d think!”

“You probably have more experience than I do, which is none!”

“Yeah, but you’re—” Wisely, he hesitated.

“A what? A woman, Luis? Yes, and? It’s not like the parts come with a manual!”

The baby was crying loudly enough, muffled in Diana’s jacket, that she took it back out of pure sympathy. It was true that she had no idea how to hold a baby, beyond vague hints gathered from TV, but she cuddled it close to her body and that seemed to help. The wailing faded to muffled whimpers.

“Luckily it hasn’t been too long since the crash,” she said to Luis over the top of the baby. “She will have been doing okay out here in her shifted form. Oh, stop looking at me like that.” She’d caught his awww expression. “I said I’m not good with babies, but I’m also not an idiot. I can figure it out on the fly. We need to get back to the helo and report in. What did you find inside? Any sign of her parents?”

“No, it fits the information we got. No one in the plane other than the deceased pilot. There were some ropes and cages and things, which makes sense if they were transporting animals on the way back.”

Diana didn't ask if the pilot was a shifter. After death, it was impossible to tell, unless they had been caught mid-shift. "I want to take a look."

Helping each other and passing the baby back and forth, they climbed over the wing. Once they were on the other side, Diana gave the baby to Luis, who held her with a little less nervousness now that she was no longer crying. With her hands free, Diana clambered up the side of the plane's tilting, damaged fuselage. The side door had popped open in the crash. It looked like this was how Luis had gotten in. Diana leaned inside to have a look.

As Luis had said, the pilot was dead. She didn't linger on that part, although she noticed in passing that Luis had respectfully covered his face.

Instead she looked around the inside of the cabin. Luis was right, it looked like ropes and some small cages may have been used, or intended to be used, for restraining animals. But there was no sign of any animals now.

Diana leaned out and saw Luis sitting on a rock, jiggling the baby on his knees where it looked like he had been giving her a quick exam. "She's in good shape, though she'll need food soon," he said. "And even more important, fluids. Luckily she hasn't had much time to get dehydrated, but it's dry out here and she's young."

"And cold," Diana murmured. But the baby didn't seem hypothermic. She had probably spent most of the time since the crash in her shift form. She was scared, but not much worse than that, it looked like. She'd been incredibly lucky.

But that left a number of questions, such as why the plane had crashed, how the baby had survived, and whether there had been anyone else on board.

"Once crash investigators start crawling all over this, we will have lost our chance to tuck away anything that gives away the existence of shifters," she said. "So this is our

only opportunity.”

“You want to hold the baby, or?—”

“You seem to be doing fine.”

But they ended up trading off, and Luis was the one who crawled around in the wreckage and eventually came back empty-handed. “I dunno, there’s trash, but I can’t tell what’s useful. You want to look?”

Diana shook her head. “I didn’t see anything at a glance, and if you didn’t either, there’s probably not much that we could find. Let the investigators handle it.”

“You think we’re gonna get in trouble? We’ve basically left fingerprints everywhere and then walked off with evidence.”

“We were first responders at a crash. We did due diligence in checking for survivors. Of course we left traces, it’s impossible not to.”

The baby had fallen asleep in her lap. Diana told herself firmly that this was not a maternal urge stirring in her chest. She stood up carefully, trying not to disturb her burden too much. “One of us can climb holding the—oh, drat it!”

The baby spasmed in her arms and shifted. Suddenly Diana was dealing with legs and wings everywhere. The baby spilled out of the jacket onto the ground, and as Diana hastily crouched down to catch her, Luis said, “What the heck?”

Right, he hadn’t seen the wings yet.

“She’s not a normal shifter,” Diana explained.

This time, instead of running away, the baby nuzzled against Diana's chest. Her nose was incredibly soft. Okay, that was definitely a wisp of a maternal urge trying to fight its way out. Diana ruthlessly suppressed it.

The little girl's shift form was adorable. She had a tapered, delicate muzzle and huge dark eyes surrounded by thick lashes. Her ears were enormous, flattened against her neck as she quivered nervously. Her small nose was black, her fur buff with cream markings. The wings looked like they were growing in buff and cream with black banding, although it was hard to tell since they were still so small, lacking the full growth of flight feathers. Diana guessed she could get airborne by fluttering, and she might have flown or glided in the crash, which was Diana's best guess for her survival.

But as for what kind of shifter she was, Diana had no idea. She had never seen anything like her before.

"What do you suppose she is?" Diana asked.

"I have absolutely no idea." Luis crouched down and cautiously petted the tiny wings. The baby wobbled wildly, her legs trying to go all directions at once, and Diana caught her with a hand under her belly. "I mean, if not for—these, I'd say she's a pronghorn, or some kind of antelope or deer, I'm not sure exactly. But ..."

"There's no such thing as a winged antelope."

"Not normally, no."

The baby decided to stop dealing with her uncooperative legs and lay down with her head in Diana's lap. She closed her long-lashed eyes.

"Do not say anything," Diana said to Luis.

“I was just gonna say it’s the cutest darn thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ll accept that, but if you say one word about womanly instincts, I will end you.” Lightly stroking the tiny head, Diana looked up the ravine. “Come on, let’s get back up there. We’re already past our check-in by now, I bet. Let’s just hope Caroline didn’t send the entire county emergency department after us.”

It was a difficult scramble up the ravine, passing back and forth the jacket-wrapped baby (now an antelope and evidently determined to stay that way). After a while, Luis went ahead, and Diana finally emerged from the brush—sweaty, covered in leaves and twigs, clutching the baby—to see Luis wave at her from the helicopter.

“No reception on the radio,” he said when she joined him at the machine. The baby was a baby again, snuggled against Diana’s shoulder.

“Right,” she sighed. “We’ll have to take the machine up to get reception and then call it in.” She looked Luis in the face. “You know we can’t let anyone see her shift.”

The paramedic’s face was serious. “I know.”

“Once we’re able to hand off the crash to the investigators, we’ll take her straight back to town.” Diana hesitated. There was a protocol for these situations; the baby should go to a hospital, where she would be thoroughly examined and her parents sought. That was the best thing for her, too, in some ways. But in others ... they had a responsibility to protect her shifter nature from exposure.

“What are you thinking?” Luis asked, chucking the baby under the chin. The little girl waved her arms and grinned.

“Her or me?”

“Either of you.”

“I don’t know if we should report finding her,” Diana said slowly. “Luis, I just don’t know. We gotta contact the SCB about this. They can help with finding a shifter-friendly foster placement and keeping her out of the regular hospital and foster system. But they’re not here, and we can’t get them here in time. We have to decide whether we’re going to report her or not.”

“She didn’t get here on her own,” Luis pointed out. “There wasn’t supposed to be a baby on that flight. She was kidnapped, or—something.”

“I know. And that’s the other thing. What if we enter her into the foster system, and she’s immediately kidnapped again? Or something else happens to her?”

Luis rubbed his mouth with one sturdy hand. “If anyone finds out we falsified a report and hid a baby ...”

“I know. Our careers will be toast.” Diana stroked her palm lightly over the baby’s fuzzy head. “I’ll set my career on fire if it’s needed to do the right thing. I just don’t know what the right thing is. And once the decision is made?—”

“—There’s no going back,” Luis agreed. “I’ll back whatever your move is.”

Diana grimaced. If only there were shifter emergency personnel on the scene, other than the two of them. She and Luis had dealt with shifter-related medical emergencies before, and she had worked with the SCB to help cover up shifter incidents. But there was no one to call in this isolated place, no one but the two of them to make a decision. Once they got in the air and reported in, whatever they told the dispatcher was going to be the account of record.

“Listen,” Luis said quietly. “If it’s her physical welfare you’re worrying about, we

can take her to my place to give her a full exam. I have medical supplies there, because I sometimes treat shifters off-books. After that, I don't know."

"After that," Diana said, and the rightness of her choice crystalized even as she spoke, "I know a guy."

CHAPTER 4

As the lowering sun slanted through the windows of Costa's office, he ran through a quick check of work emails and messages on the intra-office chat—from which he deleted yet another anonymously posted “feral hogs” meme and its associated cluster of “haha” emoji.

It was either Delgado or Caine; they'd found an online treasure trove of the things and kept sending them to him or leaving them on his desk. Someone in the computer department was definitely in on it, because they were the only people who had the know-how to post things anonymously on the intranet. He had been running the place long enough to know that making a big deal out of it would only make things worse. Everybody loved a boss with a sense of humor. Anyway, he'd been hazed a lot harder than this as a new agent.

Still. There would be retaliation. He was positive Caine was in on it, even if Caine hadn't been the original instigator, and the guy had a wedding coming up at some as-yet-unannounced time in the summer or fall. Which meant Costa had a bachelor party to plan.

Oh yes. There would be payback.

Speaking of the devil. Caine caught him stretching his hamstrings in the hall by the drinking fountain. As Caine sauntered up in his usual sunglasses and dark suit, Costa teetered wildly, nearly fell, caught himself and leaned casually on the wall.

“You're here early, Caine. Know anything about any recent posts on the office chat?”

“Haven’t even checked it,” Caine said, perfectly straight-faced. “So what’s this about you showing up at noon, drenched in sweat and staggering?”

Costa glowered at him. “Nearly every part of that is a lie. You weren’t even here.”

“You ran all the way here from the U of A campus, didn’t you?”

“It’s only, what, ten miles?”

“More like fifteen.”

“Whatever. Can’t a guy jog fifteen miles without everyone giving him the side-eye?”

Caine swiveled around to lean his shoulder against the wall. “Something’s eating you.”

“You get engaged and suddenly you’re all touchy-feely,” Costa grumbled. “I liked you better when you had no sense of humor, hated everyone, and barely said ten words a year.”

“I still hate everyone, especially you,” Caine retorted. “So this is the thanks I get for coming in while the sun’s still up. Fine, keep your problems to yourself and run your feet off.”

“Thanks, I plan to. You’re here early, so I’m gonna head home. I have a family shindig and a date to prep for.”

“A date with?—”

“A date with no one who is any of your business. Walk with me to my office; I’ll give you a quick rundown of anything to watch out for on the night shift, although

there isn't much happening these days."

"Are you limping?"

"No," Costa snapped.

Luckily shifter healing would make short work of blisters.

* * *

He'd had one of the interns retrieve his car from campus earlier, so he picked it up from the employee parking garage beneath the Arizona SCB's desert facility and drove home. It was a gorgeous commute, warm and beautiful, the early evening sky painting the desert in a thousand shades of blue, pink, and gold.

Costa stopped by a grocery store to pick up a fruit plate and a medium-priced bottle of wine. He texted Auntie Lo to let her know what he was bringing, then turned off his phone to avoid the reciprocal flurry of texts that he could guess the content of by heart, namely:

- We have plenty of food. So much food.
- But can you pick up this grocery list on your way.
- Never mind, forget items 2 and 19, cousin L is getting those.
- But here are six more things to pick up.
- Are you bringing that lovely Diana girl? When are you doing the proper thing and making her your wife, Cesar Quinn?

Maybe, he mused as he let himself into his condo, he would see if Di was interested in staging a fake breakup tonight, just to get the family will-they-won't-they dance over with once and for all. She would throw herself into the drama; he just knew it. That lovely drawling late-night-DJ voice was just as sexy when it was yelling at him, as he knew from experience.

No, if he ruined Uncle Roddy's birthday party with a breakup fight, the aunties would never let him hear the end of it. They would probably also set out to reconcile him and Diana ... oh God. It could, in fact, be worse.

A quiet breakup with no witnesses around, he decided as he put the wine on the counter, the fruit plate in the fridge, and shed his rumpled sweats on the way to the shower. A big public blow-up would be satisfying in its finality, but unfortunately the family would talk of nothing else for years. What he wanted was for them to forget all about it, and Diana, and him.

He stepped into the shower with a groan of relief.

If Di can't make it tonight, then let's make this the night, he resolved as hot water sluiced the dried sweat off his skin and the soreness out of his aching ligaments. He could report the breakup tonight, and tell Diana she was no longer his fake girlfriend the next time he saw her. Yes, that ought to work.

He ignored the unhappy shiver that went through his middle at the thought. It wasn't like they were actually together, so breaking up should make no difference; it would be more real than anything else about their relationship. But just thinking about it felt disloyal somehow.

Diana would thank him, he thought firmly. He scooped a handful of all-in-one shampoo-conditioner and worked it into his hair.

Actually no, he mused, sudsy water sluicing over his shoulders. Diana would hit the ceiling if he broke up with her without telling her. She would want a say in it, and anyway, they needed to get their stories straight.

He reached for a towel. Fine, then: if Diana couldn't make it tonight, or even if she could, they would plan their impending breakup for sometime between tonight's engagement and whatever family or work event fell on both of them next. Which was what, Di's workplace's spring greet-the-new-hires picnic, probably? It was a little unnerving to realize that he knew the date by heart.

He was halfway through shaving when there was a brisk knock at the door, and a fresh ripple of pleasant anticipation coursed through him.

Diana. She'd made it after all.

"Hang on, I'm coming."

Half-shaved, towel around his waist, Costa went to get the door, only realizing as he reached for the doorknob that it was possible he was about to scandalize some Mormon missionary or Boy Scout popcorn-selling parent. Oh well, life's tough sometimes.

He opened the door.

It was only once he saw Diana on his doorstep that he realized there were, possibly, some good reasons not to expose his mostly naked body to his fake girlfriend as she stared at him.

Diana was not dressed for a date, fake or otherwise. She wore her typical work clothes, a khaki Park Service shirt and a pair of extremely dusty jeans with practical boots. In fact, she was covered with dust from head to foot. Her thick dark curls were

tucked under a baseball cap, spilling in a loose ponytail down her back. Her face was, as always, so beautiful he could get lost in it, a strong jaw and snub nose with a deep tan from her many hours outdoors. She was holding something in her arms, which Costa barely glanced at, a bundle the size of a large ham that was wrapped in some sort of soft fabric.

“I hope that’s a dress you’re carrying, or at least a nice blouse.”

“I—what?” Diana blinked, wrenching her gaze away from his bare chest. “I need to—come in.”

“Stop ogling the merchandise. Fake boyfriend, remember?” Costa held the door for her as she hurried inside with a furtive glance around. There was an almost comical air of nervous alertness to her, and she visibly relaxed once she was inside. “Did you steal a dress?”

“What dress?” Diana said.

“For the shindig tonight? Unless you’re planning on going as-is, which I don’t have a single problem with, but you might want to take a shower?—”

“Oh, right, that. I forgot. Look, we’ll deal with that later. I have a bigger problem.”

“You stole something more expensive than a dress?”

“Could you put a shirt on?” Diana said. “It’s very distracting.”

Costa grinned and folded his arms, intentionally flexing. “Sorry, distracting from what? Maybe if you’d change into your?—”

At that point the object she was carrying squirmed, made a small peeping noise, and

extruded a tiny pink arm. Costa, who was leaning a hip on the arm of the couch, very nearly lost his balance and also his towel.

“Is that a baby? You stole a baby?”

“I did not—” Diana began indignantly. “Well, okay, I did, technically, but?—”

“You what?”

“Will you let me explain?”

“Only if there are actual explanations!”

“Here,” Diana said. She thrust the bundle in Costa’s direction. “It has been a really long day, it’s not over yet, I drove here with a baby on the floor of the backseat of my car?—”

“What?”

“—which she handled very well, by the way, not that I didn’t panic every time I passed a highway patrol cruiser— Costa, take the baby —and I need a drink.”

Costa took the baby because otherwise it looked like Diana was about to drop ... it? her? on the floor. The small weight settled against his chest, warm and heavy and soft.

Diana, free of her burden, marched into the kitchen. Costa followed her, jiggling the baby. From what he could see of her in the blanket, she was adorable, very pink and healthy with a mop of light brown curls.

“Di, did you kidnap this baby?” Costa asked Diana, or more accurately, the dusty and

very nicely shaped ass of her jeans, as Diana rummaged in his fridge's vertical freezer.

Diana's answer was mumbled. She straightened up and unerringly opened the cabinet where Costa kept the hard liquor.

"Di."

Diana poured two fingers of whiskey over ice. She took a swallow.

"Okay. That's better. There is a story here, which I will tell you as soon as you put some damn pants on."

"Can't, I'm holding a baby." Costa looked down and jiggled the baby some more. The small round face, topped with a dusting of dark fuzz, blinked up at him and then, very charmingly, smiled. "Hi there, you adorable little kidnap victim. Di, whose baby is this?"

"I have no idea." Diana took another swig of whiskey. "Trust me, if I knew, I'd—well, okay, possibly not give her back immediately, given that there are some highly suspicious circumstances involved in however she got to where I found her?—"

"Okay, so you found her," Costa said patiently, feeling like he was pulling the story out of her with tweezers, one word at a time. "And where was that, exactly? Yes, hi, you're still very cute," he added as the baby grabbed a handful of her blanket and pulled it into her mouth. "No, don't eat that. Di, any information you want to add, you can drop in at any time."

"The Chiricahua mountains."

“You found her in the mountains?”

“I found her next to a crashed airplane, the one we were looking for. My paramedic ride-along was with me. Luis. I think you met him at the park employee spring mixer last year.”

“Yeah, sure,” Costa said. He had a sharp memory for faces and names, but the various events to which he and Diana had accompanied each other as a plus-one fake date all ran together in his head, as did the many people he’d met at them.

“He’s willing to keep her secret for now. He gave her an exam and said that she seems healthy, and we fed her at his place with some emergency formula he keeps in his supplies. Then I, um, made a blanket nest for her in the rear footwell of the car and drove straight here, because all I could think of—” She abruptly snapped her mouth shut.

Costa found himself wondering how she was going to end that sentence, but he was pretty sure he knew where she was going with it. You’d fix things . Somehow, for all the ups and downs, he and Diana did seem to have that going for them.

“You drove here from the Chiricahuas?”

“From Sierra Vista, where Luis lives. It was about two hours and I sweated buckets the whole way. Head on a swivel, terrified of getting stopped. I must have looked like an absolute lunatic.”

For tact’s sake, and also because Diana had a strong throwing arm, Costa decided not to point out that nothing about the way she was telling this story helped with that impression. “Do you have any baby supplies at all?”

“Oh right, Luis gave me a couple of extra diapers. He keeps some stuff around. I

should probably go out and get them,” Diana said. She set down her whiskey glass.

“Maybe first you can tell me why in the Sam hill—” Costa always found himself turning into his granddad when he was irritated and trying to keep a lid on it. “—you walked off a crash site with a baby? Did you actually find her in a crashed airplane?”

“In the brush near it,” Diana said. “Oh wait, I left something out?—”

“You think? Just one thing?”

“She shifted when I found her. I think she must’ve shifted and got out of the crash that way.”

“Oh, she’s a shifter,” Costa said. He should have realized; now that Diana mentioned it, he felt the slight frisson of recognition that shifters felt for each other. It was strangely distant in this baby, though, even more than in most young children.

The baby was now trying to grab handfuls of his chest hair.

“Yes, hi, still cute,” he said, detaching her one-handed. “Thanks for burying the lede, Di. At least this explains why you didn’t want to report it. Sort of. You need me to put out feelers and see if anyone in the local shifter community has reported a kid missing lately, maybe try to find a foster family until we can find where she comes from?”

“Yes—no—okay, yes, probably, but you haven’t seen what she turns into.”

Costa sighed. At this rate, he was never going to.

The baby chose that moment to twist in his arms, nearly fall out of them, and began to wail.

CHAPTER 5

Costa found that it was impossible to have a conversation with a crying, flailing baby in the middle of it. Diana impatiently reclaimed the baby and started trying to soothe her with inexperienced jiggling. Costa made a couple of attempts to politely offer corrections, which got him glared at. He decided to take advantage of the opportunity to go upstairs, get properly dressed, and call Auntie Lo and let her know that he wasn't going to be able to make it tonight.

He got Auntie Brill instead— oh good, the nice one —and unchivalrously threw the entire blame on Diana.

“Sorry, Auntie B. Di's working tonight, and I promised to keep her company.”

“Oh, you dear,” his aunt said. In the background there was clattering, shouting, and a babble of voices that gave him an odd blend of homesickness and relief to be missing the circus. “What a sweet boy you are. —No, not with those, that's the nut-free batch! Isn't she a helicopter pilot?” she went on without missing a beat, while someone complained in the background. “How are you going to help with?”

“She's on call for search and rescue,” Costa said swiftly. “So it's just going to be hanging around drinking bad coffee and seeing if she gets called out, but I didn't want to let her do it alone.”

“It sounds like things are finally working out for you two,” his aunt said hopefully. The entire family seemed to be convinced that his relationship with Diana was on the rocks—accurately enough, to be fair—but could be repaired with time and family

meddling. “Well, you just have a grand evening, and we’ll make sure to put aside some nibbles for you.”

The nibbles would probably feed him for a week.

“Give my regards to Uncle Roddy,” Costa said with a rush of sudden guilt. “Tell him I’m sorry I can’t make it.”

“Jay-Jay will be sad he can’t see you. He’s training his new pony, and he can’t wait to show you the new tricks they’ve learned.”

Costa closed his eyes briefly at his nephew’s name. “I’m sad I can’t see him, too. Please tell Jay and Jenny that I’ll—I’ll try to get out to the ranch this weekend, at least for the afternoon, but I don’t know what work’s going to be like, so I can’t promise anything.”

“We’d love to see you, dear.” His aunt’s voice was gentle, even though she had to raise it above the commotion in the background. “Honey, I said not there ! —Do bring Diana too if you can, love.”

“I will.”

He hung up, cutting off the babble of loved voices into sharp silence. Downstairs, he could hear an occasional soft giggle or coo, so it seemed like Di had gotten the baby calmed down again. Costa took a deep breath, grabbed a previously worn shirt off the back of a chair, and went downstairs as he shrugged into it.

Diana was walking around the living room with the baby cradled in her arms, her head bent low over the small bundle, speaking in a soft voice.

The lamplight cast her in soft shadows, and her face, bent over the baby, was gentle

in a way that he had almost never seen it.

The picture she made was so gorgeous, so domestic, that for a shocked instant it took his breath away. He stopped with one hand on the buttons of his shirt. Then she looked up and saw him, and the softness faded into her more usual expression of slightly sardonic curiosity.

“What were you doing up there?” Diana asked.

“Calling the family and letting them know we can’t make it.”

Diana shook her head. “You shouldn’t have to cancel on my account. We could—uh—we could take the baby with us, maybe? We just have to make sure she doesn’t shift?—”

“No,” Costa said, as horror sank through him like a knife through soft cheese. “No, no, no. There is no universe in which the two of us going to see my family with a baby would end in anything other than endless requests for baby pictures and a wedding date. We would never know peace again. Do not do this to me, Di, I beg of you.”

Both corners of Diana’s mouth curled up into a smile she was evidently struggling and failing to suppress. “Okay, no baby.”

“You were telling me what she turns into when she decided to throw a fit.” Costa went into the kitchen. “Actually, since we’re not going anywhere, how about I open this wine and also pull out this fruit plate.”

“Quinn, I was in the field for six hours today, and I’ve been taking care of a screaming potato ever since. I do not want a fruit plate. I want something massive, greasy, and full of protein.” She sighed wistfully. “An enormous platter of your aunt

Maura's enchiladas would go down really nice right about now."

"They're an hour's drive away, but tell you what, I can Doordash something if you will just, for the love of God, tell me what that child turns into."

"Oh," Diana said. "Sorry, I didn't realize I hadn't. Uh, she turns into a winged antelope."

There was a brief pause, punctuated by some small cooing noises from the baby in Diana's arms. Then Costa said, "A what?"

"A baby antelope, with wings. She's very cute. But you can see why I brought her here."

"Are you sure ?—"

"Cesar Quinn Costa, are you about to ask me whether I'm deluded or simply lying?" Diana asked, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"No, not at all, I'm just saying, there could have been a tree branch behind her, or?—"

"It was not a tree branch , for the love of?—"

The baby began to fuss louder.

"—socks and little monkeys," Diana said, modulating her voice to a baby-soothing rise and fall. She continued in that tone even as she went on speaking to Costa. "This kid has wings. I didn't just see them, I touched them and felt the draft when she flapped them at me. I don't have any idea what she is, or why she was next to a crashed plane in the middle of nowhere, but I didn't want to risk having her vanish

into a lab or worse, if the wrong person saw her, and that's even aside from the risks of a shifter going to a normal hospital. You get me?"

"I get you," Costa said, similarly quiet and calm. He put a hand over the baby's head, uncomfortably aware of how her small, fuzzy scalp nearly vanished under his large palm and his sun-tanned fingers with their light dusting of reddish hair. "We're going to want our agents to take a look at the crash site, and we'll need to share info with the other agencies already working there."

Diana let out a sigh, and her body relaxed a little, making Costa realize how tense she had been. Her eyelids half closed for an instant. "I knew you'd be the right person to bring this to."

* * *

Half an hour later, they were settled down on the couch with the baby between them and a pizza on the coffee table. (Costa had drawn the line at ordering enchiladas; he knew it would be a pale shadow of the far better Tex-Mex spread he was missing at the family ranch.)

Costa had texted Mavis Begay, head of the Arizona SCB's medical and science department, to come by his place this evening when she had a chance. Then Diana filled him in with a much more detailed and less chaotic description of her day. When she wasn't panicking, as it was now clear to him that she had been earlier, she was a thoughtful and careful witness, even providing photos of the crash site on her cell phone.

"What agency is investigating the crash?" Costa asked. He had opened the bottle of wine after all and poured them both glasses.

"National Transportation Safety Board and the local authorities."

“What about any items from the site—evidence, that kind of thing? Where’s that go?”

Diana shook her head. “The NTSB will be looking into the cause of the crash, so they’ll have the flight recorder and any other evidence they retrieved from the airplane’s body or engine. But there are also, obviously, concerns that it might have been used for drugs or other smuggling, so the sheriff’s department will be working with the DEA and ... oh, I don’t even know who else. These kinds of situations are a jurisdictional mess.”

“Then I’ll add to the mess and get the SCB involved tomorrow,” Costa said cheerily. In a perverse way, he enjoyed wrangling with other law enforcement departments. It was like a martial artist having a throwdown with a good strong rival of an equal fighting class. He’d take it in a hot minute over having to talk to drunk college students or the bureaucrats who controlled the bureau’s funding.

“Do you think I did the wrong thing?” Diana asked anxiously. “Taking the baby, I mean.”

The reminder that Diana had in fact committed a serious crime washed over him. It was followed an instant later by a mental reminder that running a secret federal bureau that dealt with crimes which were often unprosecutable meant a lot of coverup. The fact that Diana had chosen to run her own freelance coverup didn’t make it morally wrong. If one of his agents had done the same thing, he would have yelled himself blue in the face and then backed them up.

“I agree with you that it’s better to keep her out of the official reports for now.” Without meaning to, Costa ran a hand lightly over her sleeping head, once more feeling the soft brush of her peach fuzz on his palm, and noticed Diana following his hand with her eyes; he had to wrench himself back to business. “One thing I definitely want to do tomorrow is contact our Seattle bureau. A couple of years ago, they had a case involving shifters being experimented on in labs. This might be

another branch of the same operation, or someone connected to it. Actually, maybe I'll send an email tonight."

He was tapping out a brief note to Pam Stiers, the Seattle bureau chief, when there was a sharp knock at the door. Diana got up and, after some murmured conversation, came back with Mavis Begay. She was a small, brisk Navajo woman from a family of pronghorn antelope and deer shifters. Although she had been at the SCB since before Costa's time, there was only a faint streaking of gray in her black bun.

"I was afraid of this," Mavis said tartly. "You do a couple of house calls, and everyone expects it. Where's the little one? Oh ." She picked up the baby with great care, producing a sleepy stirring of the small, plump limbs. "Hello, darling. Oh, she's lovely."

If there was one thing Costa had not expected, it was his no-nonsense department head turning into a mushy sap over a baby. But that continued to be the situation as Mavis gave the baby a thorough examination on a folded blanket spread on the kitchen island, cooing baby talk in between asking Costa and Diana a series of cogent, sharp-tongued questions.

"Ohhhh, who's a perfect bababa, youuuu, right here? —and what was the elapsed time between the disappearance of the plane and the time you found her on the hillside?"

"I'd say about five or six hours," Diana said. Her usual rock-solid confidence wobbling, she looked like she had been called into the principal's office. "She was a little dehydrated when we found her, but not otherwise injured. My partner examined her on the scene and later at home," she added defensively. "He's a paramedic."

"Ooh yes, you've got toes ," Mavis informed the baby, "ten little toesies—Any reports of a missing child in the last few weeks, anything like that?"

“We haven’t had time to look into it,” Costa said. He could hear a note of defensiveness in his own voice, not unlike Diana’s, and reminded himself firmly that he was Mavis’s boss, for cripesakes. “You’re the first person I called. I wanted to get your take on this before I alert the night shift.”

“Caine?” Mavis asked, and Costa nodded. “Could be worse. He’s very discreet. Why don’t you have him come here?”

Costa muttered a curse under his breath. He had temporarily forgotten one of the most useful things about Caine, and he and Mavis were two of the only people who knew it. Reaching for his phone, he tapped in a text. I need to consult on something at my place when you’re free. In person. But don’t come in directly, I’ve got company.

Setting the phone down, he smiled at both of them. “I texted him when I contacted you, Mavis. He ought to be here any minute.”

Diana looked slightly mulish. “You didn’t mention anyone else.”

Costa had been keeping Caine’s secret for years, but still his heart panged a little at lying to her. He wondered if Caine would be willing to let Diana in on it. “Caine’s discreet, like Mavis said.”

“Toesy-woesies! Ten of them! I need a hand,” Mavis said with an abrupt switch back to an adult register. “I need someone to distract her while I do a blood draw.”

Diana ended up with this duty, because Costa went to answer a knock at the door. It was Caine, arriving not two minutes after he’d received the text. He was just slipping his dark sunglasses back over his eyes against the bright lights of Costa’s foyer.

“Phone calls aren’t good enough?” Caine asked.

“No, I need you to see something in person.” Aware of the women in the living room, Costa lowered his voice. “Where’d you come through?”

“Garage across the street. Almost set off their alarm getting out.”

Costa snorted. “Now I’m picturing you blundering around like the Home Alone burglars.”

Caine’s expression didn’t change in the slightest. “Fortunately this particular family didn’t have a psychotic ten-year-old, just a Stairmaster that had clearly seen little use. I would have used a nearer shadow, but your building is unfortunately well lit, unlike most of this city.”

Due to the nearby Kitt Peak observatory, Tucson had strict light pollution regulations compared to most municipalities. Many of the outlying suburbs had no street lights.

“Use my garage next time,” Costa said. “It’s under the condo.”

“It’s full of your car. There’s not much room.”

“I’ll park closer to the side if it helps.”

There was a sudden commotion from the living room, a squawk, and a giggle. Caine looked curiously past Costa’s shoulder. “Who are your guests?”

“Mavis and—Diana.” He sensed Caine’s expression changing fractionally. “Do not say a word.”

“That’s right, I seem to recall mention of a hot date,” Caine remarked, the corner of his mouth twitching as he followed Costa into the living room. “I’m guessing things didn’t go as pla—is that a baby ?”

It wasn't often that Costa had the pleasure of seeing Caine truly surprised.

"I see your professional skills of observation are unparalleled," Diana said dryly. She was jiggling the baby against her shoulder; there were little sniffing sounds and a fat pink leg dangling down, which Mavis was just tucking back into the crook of Diana's arm with the rest of the baby. In her other hand she had a syringe. Diana kissed the baby's head. "It's okay, honey, we're done. The mean lady with the needles has taken all the samples she needs."

"For now," Mavis murmured, briskly capping a series of tubes. "Well, I can assure you that whatever else this child has been through, she's in perfect health. She's also definitely a shifter."

"We knew that, though," Diana said, then glanced at Caine.

"Yes, but did you notice how little you can feel it around her? Does everyone else feel that?"

There were nods all around, including from Caine, except Diana. "I can feel it just fine."

"You met her first," Mavis said. "She might have latched on to you. Parents can feel it most strongly in their own children."

Diana looked thoroughly discomfited.

"But it's pretty common with little kids for it to be wildly variable," Costa said quickly. "It was all over the place with my younger—with my cousins until their shifting settled." He noticed Diana give him a swift look, but then, she was aware of everything he was talking around.

“You said she’s definitely a shifter,” Caine said, observing Mavis with unnerving steadiness through his dark glasses. The smoked lenses made it hard to tell, but Costa thought he wasn’t blinking. “Are you talking about something other than the usual feeling?”

“Mostly just her reflexes,” Mavis said. She paused for a quick brush of her fingers across the cheek of the baby, who had stopped sniffing against Diana’s shoulder and was now observing the adults with wide eyes, framed with tear-matted lashes. “Are we friends again, beebee? I thought so. You are a very calm one. She’s not unused to being stuck with things,” she told the adults matter-of-factly. “What I meant was that she’s responsive to stimuli in the same way as a shifter. There are differences between us and humans, you know.”

“She—” Diana began, then stopped, looking at Caine.

“Okay, I want us on the same page about this,” Costa said, hands spread. “Azarias, you’re here because I’ve got a job for you tonight. For now, it’s going to stay off the books. I want open sharing of information between the four of us, but I want it to stay out of the reports and strictly need to know for now—okay?”

After there were nods all around, he and Diana began another abbreviated summary of the sequence of events that had ended with Diana showing up at Costa’s place holding an arguably kidnapped baby. At least by now they were getting the retelling down to a science, including why they wanted the baby to stay off-book.

“Winged antelope?” Caine repeated.

“I’d get her to do it for all of you, but she hasn’t shifted since I brought her here.” Diana adjusted the baby. She had moved to the couch, holding the little girl in her lap. “Oh, she’s asleep again. Poor little tyke.”

“Let me take her,” Costa offered. Diana’s arms must be tired. The sleeping baby twitched a little as she was transferred to his grasp, and then settled back to sleep, warm and heavy. Once again he was caught off guard with a gentler version of the way he felt when he looked at Diana with the baby, a soft flood of emotions sweeping through his inner landscape, changing it in some way he wasn’t sure how to deal with.

He became aware that the conversation had stopped and everyone was looking at him. Both women looked uncharacteristically soft. Caine was, as usual, inscrutable.

“What ?” Costa said flatly.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Quinn, but if you carry that baby around at work, you’re going to be breaking hearts and exploding ovaries all over the building,” Mavis said.

“Can we—” Costa began in his usual “back to business, people!” attention-getting meeting voice. Everyone wildly hushed him. “—stay on topic,” he finished hastily in a much lower register. “Azarias, I’ve got a to-do list for you that ought to keep you busy on tonight’s shift. You can outsource some of the less sensitive aspects to the interns, but use your discretion about what might be too revealing.”

Caine gave a simple nod.

“Okay. First of all, contact the Seattle bureau and get them to send down their files on the case last year, or maybe it was the year before, involving human experiments on shifters. I want everything they’ve got, and I especially want to know where the principle culprits got off to.”

“Missing kids,” Diana murmured.

“I’m getting to that. I want unresolved missing kid reports pulled up for—how old would you say she is, Mavis?”

“About seven or eight months, give or take a little. Although shifter children are often precocious, which might cause human agencies misinterpret her age. If she was a foster child in a human household, they could take her for a bit older.”

“Okay. Let’s say a year, just in case someone fudged the birth date. Missing child reports for the last year, for any child that could conceivably be her—white or Hispanic, female, born somewhere between six months to a year ago. That’d be a good job to hand off to the interns.

“Third. Find out which agency is working lead on this morning’s plane crash in the Chiricahuas, shouldn’t be hard to find the details, news is probably all over it. Actually, I want that too—news reports, names of reporters writing it up. Another intern job. And start the ball rolling on interagency requests for access to anything they’ve brought in for evidence?—”

He went on with everything else he could think of. Getting access to the evidence and the site. Flight records. When he wound down, he said, “Anyone else got anything to add?”

“You’re going to need to do something with that baby,” Mavis said promptly.

“Oh,” Costa said, his mind going temporarily blank. Right. You couldn’t just park a baby in the garage and feed it twice a day. Babies needed supplies, special food, and high-maintenance, time-consuming care. It was simultaneously not rocket science, something even the least educated person in the world had been able to do since the dawn of time—and totally incompatible with a bachelor’s house and a career that kept him away from it all day. He didn’t even have a dog.

Mavis looked back and forth between Costa and Diana, and then at Caine, who looked equally blank.

“I meant a foster placement,” she said impatiently, and all three of them relaxed, Diana with a little huff of breath—although, just for a minute, Costa thought he caught the briefest flicker of regret on her face. “Oh, come on, you’re all intelligent people, did you not realize there’s an entire infrastructure to deal with this sort of situation?”

“Of course we did,” Diana said, almost huffily. “But this is unusual. We can’t just put her in normal foster care when she might shift at any moment.”

“I know. We don’t have a dedicated shifter social worker here at the Southwest bureau, but the Seattle one does: Nicole Yates. Or I guess it’s Yates-Hollen now. Before I go to bed, I’ll drop her a line. It’s an hour earlier for them right now, so she ought to still be up. Conveniently for you, Quinn, she was also a key participant in the other case you mentioned, the one with shifter experiments. We can see if they’re able to loan her out for a few days, and if not, she can still help us get a local placement for the baby.”

“I remember now,” Costa said, a little impatient with himself, as the details of that case dropped back into his mind. It had been relevant to the other departments as one of the bigger things the Seattle bureau had worked on in recent years. “Thank you. How about for tonight—do you have?—?”

He hadn’t realized he’d made a slight move to hand the baby over to Mavis until she took a quick step back. “Good God, no. My house is the exact opposite of baby proof. I’m definitely not set up to take on tiny houseguests.”

“Well, neither am I. Caine—” Costa began.

“No!” Caine said, so sharply that his low, raspy voice rose to a pitch Costa wasn’t sure if he had ever heard from him before.

“You’re all a great bunch of team players, aren’t you?” Costa said. It was with both reluctance and a kind of strange, gut-deep relief that he resettled the baby against his chest, where she nestled down as if she felt she belonged there. “I’ll keep her here overnight, on the condition that I am tasking both of you weasels with finding a placement for her tomorrow night. If nothing else, we can put her with one of our agents who has kids. We can give someone a couple of days off if we have to.”

“I’ll get on that,” Mavis said, collecting her medical items back into her kit. But then she turned to look at the baby for a long moment. “And maybe soon we’ll have some answers to what she was doing on that plane, and how she got out there.”

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CHAPTER 6

The condo felt very quiet after they left. Diana rubbed her eyes and began clearing away the leftovers of the pizza and wine, since Costa's arms were full.

She knew she ought to get back in her car for the nearly two-hour drive home. But she was struggling to muster the energy.

"You have two bedrooms, right?" she asked Costa.

"Yes, but the second one is an office. There's no bed in it. The couch pulls out, but I'm not sure if I have sheets that fit it. I don't have guests over much."

As he spoke, Costa was walking around slowly, jiggling the baby against his chest whenever she stirred a little. He seemed to have settled into that cadence without even being aware he was doing it.

"You're good with kids," Diana said without thinking. She couldn't help remembering Mavis's comment: breaking hearts and exploding ovaries all over the building . It was true. Diana was absolutely not a domestic person, and had never really considered kids as a thing she was interested in. But there was something about Costa's big, muscled arms with a little baby nestled in them that turned her insides into strange new shapes.

"I was the oldest," Costa said.

"I remember," Diana half-whispered.

Costa cleared his throat. “I’m not just talking about—Marco.” Diana rarely heard him mention his younger brother’s name, and instantly regretted saying anything, but after a brief faltering note, Costa continued more strongly. “The cousins, too. Younger kids absolutely scampering around the place, and me the only responsible one in the bunch.”

“And me an only child,” Diana said with a lopsided smile.

They had grown up side by side on neighboring ranches, separated by a dry gully that frothed with water a few times a year. It was a strange thing sometimes, to know almost everything about Costa that you could know about someone you’d known your whole life—and yet as an adult, he was nearly a stranger to her.

What do you dream of? Do you love your job? Is this what you wanted to do with your life? Why do we never talk about these things?

But then he turned away and the moment of connection passed, leaving her feeling even farther away from him than before.

“I can take the couch,” she said after a minute. “Where are we going to put—uh—you know, we can’t just keep calling that baby ‘she’ and ‘the baby.’ We don’t know her name, but we need to call her something.”

Costa was briefly quiet, then he spoke suddenly, almost explosively. “We can call her Emmeline.”

Diana’s heart did something uncomfortable. “Your mother’s name.”

Costa looked away, not meeting her gaze. “I always thought I’d name my—well, that’s not happening, obviously,” he said gruffly, “so we’ll just call her Em for now. Better than Jane Doe.” He lifted the newly christened Em against his shoulder,

turning away from Diana.

The tension in the room had grown palpable. Diana brushed her hands on her thighs, although there was nothing on them, but it made her realize suddenly that her jeans were filthy. She hadn't changed or cleaned up from scrambling around on the mountain. "You know what? I need a shower before I wallow all over your clean sheets."

"That's assuming there are any," Costa said, but the corner of his mouth quirked up a little.

There were quite a lot of sheets in his hall closet, as it turned out, mismatched and different sizes. Diana supposed it wouldn't be hard to find some that fit the sofa bed. "And what about Em? We don't have anything like a crib. I guess we could put her in a box or something."

"I was thinking I'd make a pallet on the bedroom floor," Costa said. "With the door closed and nothing down where she could grab it, she'll be fine. I remember plenty of times one of the smaller cousins slept on a blanket on the floor while the rest of us did something else."

"Okay, so we already established I don't know anything about babies," Diana said defensively.

Costa looked at her, and she couldn't read his expression at all. "But you are good with her. You are—" He seemed to give himself a little shake, and his voice turned businesslike. "Okay, listen, if you want something to wear after your shower, you're welcome to borrow one of my T-shirts. I probably don't have much else that'll fit you. I'm going to go put down the little lady here so I have hands free to make up the beds."

“I—but—” Diana found that she was talking to herself. Taking a breath, she collected her choice of sheets and dropped them on the couch. Costa had vanished into the bedroom, where she could hear him talking idly to the baby, accompanied by rustling as he presumably made up a baby-sized bed.

She wanted to be in there too, and she couldn’t understand why.

Instead, she went into the bathroom. It was a typical bachelor’s bathroom, the edge of the tub and the sink cluttered with guy stuff: shaving things, a budget-sized all-in-one shampoo/conditioner, several different brands of muscle rub, some expired medication bottles. But it wasn’t a total mess, and it was clean enough that she didn’t feel bad about shedding her clothes and touching the floor with her bare feet. Although, Diana mused, her tolerance was probably higher than most; she’d been sharing close quarters with mostly-male flight and emergency crews for years.

As she stripped, she looked around curiously. She had been in Costa’s apartment plenty of times, enough to have used his bathroom on a number of occasions, but she never lingered. Now she found herself reading signs from the things around her, like a tracker noting its quarry’s behavior from paw prints. She wasn’t even sure what she was looking for. Even with the distance between them as adults, she was reasonably confident that he didn’t, say, have a secret wife and kids stashed away somewhere.

But she still felt an undefined yet intense urge to know , even though she wasn’t sure what exactly it was that she wanted so badly to know. She picked up the bottles on the rim of the sink, noting that most of them were for prescription painkillers. Work-related injuries? Pulled muscles?

Being completely naked, knowing Costa was right on the other side of the wall, also gave her a feeling she didn’t know how to interpret. She was used to showering with guys around, another aspect of her job. But this felt different. She could hear him through the wall now and then, occasionally saying something to the baby, and

realized she was straining to catch the words.

Ridiculous. She drew the shower curtain and did the usual new-bathroom dance of “where are the shower controls, how does the temperature control work, how long does this take to warm up.”

Costa had a nice shower. Very hot water, great water pressure. Diana sighed in pleasure as dust and dried sweat washed off her skin. Then she found that it was very difficult not to think about Costa in this very same shower, head tilted back, the same hot water that was currently rushing over her body hitting his face and streaming down his muscular chest?—

Diana grabbed the shampoo bottle almost angrily and scrubbed it into her hair. Costa’s stupid all-in-one shampoo was going to leave her curly hair a frizzy mess. Maybe I should buy some decent shampoo, leave it over here so I can use it when ?

—

She slammed the lid on that thought. When I take all the showers I’m definitely gonna be taking at my totally platonic not-a-boyfriend friend’s house?

Her unruly thoughts were taking all the fun out of this shower.

You know what would really be fun, would be if Quinn was in here with ? —

Diana groaned. She gave her hair a cursory rinse and stepped out. There were clean towels folded above the laundry hamper, into which she did not peek, and she rubbed herself down while definitely not thinking about Costa using the same towel before its last tour in the washing machine.

Her clothes were an unappealing sweaty and dusty clump on the floor. With the towel wrapped around her body, she cautiously cracked the door open and peeked out. Her

mouth was open to say Costa's name when she discovered he had left a small pile of folded clothing in front of the door.

She definitely wasn't disappointed that she hadn't had to call him over to bring her something to wear. Not at all.

He had left her a T-shirt and a pair of cargo shorts. Both were miles too big—she was going to need to hold up the shorts if she couldn't find something for a belt—but they were pleasant against her shower-clean skin. The T-shirt was very soft, and she fingered the fabric, wondering if it was a well-worn favorite, or if he'd found her the softest shirt he owned. Maybe all his T-shirts were like this.

I could pet them and find out.

Why on earth was her brain doing this to her? It was all this solo proximity, she thought. Normally when she and Costa spent time together, they were around other people as well.

She told herself firmly, as she tried to tuck the waistband of the shorts in such a way they'd stay up, that if she and Costa were actual friends, they'd hang out together sometimes. They were friendly, but one-on-one hangouts were the kind of things you did with friends. Staying up late drinking. Listening to each other's problems.

Friends do that kind of thing. That's friendship by definition. And we aren't.

We're just people who call each other when we need a fake date.

For a sudden, startling instant she found herself near tears.

Shaking her head at her own folly, she finger-combed her hair, gathered her clothes, and left the bathroom. She found that the couch had been folded down into a bed,

neatly made up for her. All the lights were off except for one in the kitchen, and Costa's bedroom door was shut.

No good nights, then.

She climbed into bed, settling on the creaky sofa bed and trying to find a position where a metal strut wasn't jabbing her in the back through the thin mattress.

"Good night," she whispered into the dark.

* * *

She hadn't expected to sleep well, but it had been an exhausting day. The next thing she knew, pale gray predawn light was filtering into the room, and soft, furtive sounds came from the kitchen, as of someone trying not to make too much noise, punctuated by an occasional muttered remark or exclamation.

"I see you still get up at zero dark thirty," Diana said into her pillow.

There was a muffled curse from the kitchen. "And I see you still have ears like a bat—no, sweetie, not there—Di, look out!"

"What?" Diana said, a second before something bounded over the back of the couch and slammed into her spine with what felt like the business ends of several tiny shovels.

"She turned into an antelope in the night," Costa said—unnecessary at this point, as Diana had rolled over in time to receive a faceful of tickly antelope kisses.

Diana sat up and cuddled Emmeline, who flailed with her knobby-kneed legs and then settled down in Diana's lap. Costa turned on a light in the kitchen.

“Sleep okay?” he asked over the sound of running water.

“Better than I thought I would,” she admitted. “I hope you’re making coffee.”

“Happy to report that you’re in luck.”

The coffeemaker began to sputter, and Costa came over to lean against the back of the couch. Diana firmly crushed an almost overwhelming urge to smooth down her hair, which even without the help of all-in-one shampoo had a tendency to dry into a shape that looked like it was going to detach from her head and tumble past a stagecoach at any moment. But she did tug the loose T-shirt a little higher on her shoulder—it kept trying to slip off—before she looked up at him.

And instantly regretted it. Somehow she had failed to remember that Costa would be in his sleeping attire too, which was roughly similar to hers (a T-shirt and shorts), except it fit.

Boy, did it ever fit.

The T-shirt wasn’t quite tight enough to be pornographic, but she could make out muscle definition that was going to have a starring role in her fantasies for months. The shorts that came down almost to her knees left most of Costa’s powerful thighs bare, and she got an excellent view when he went back into the kitchen to attend to the coffee. He was barefoot, which somehow made it hotter.

It wasn’t like she had never seen Costa in a T-shirt and shorts before; it was a hot climate, after all. But she had very rarely seen him like this : tousled and sleepy, bare-legged and barefoot.

“How about you, how did you sleep?” she asked, trying to be polite, but then it just sounded like she was either trying to make pointless small talk, or thinking way too

much about Costa in bed. Which, okay, she was doing both of those, but she didn't want him to know that. "I mean, did she keep you—oh, honey, don't do that." She detached Emmeline from chewing on the edge of the blanket.

"She was up and down all night," Costa said with a sigh. "Probably should have expected it, she was so deeply asleep earlier."

"I think she's hungry," Diana said, as Emmeline switched from chewing on the blanket to sucking Diana's fingers. "The formula I got for her is in my bag. It's by the door."

"I know. I gave her a bottle last night. Hopefully we didn't wake you up." He added thoughtfully, "If she stays this way, do you suppose we ought to feed her like an antelope, or a human baby?"

"She does have teeth," Diana remarked, separating Emmeline from her fingers. "I would think a bottle should be fine, though. They feed baby animals at zoos from bottles, don't they?"

"True," Costa said. "She's probably old enough to eat solid food anyhow. Or soft food. I guess I'll ask Mavis about it. I need to see if she's found anyone to hand the kid off to yet."

Right. The baby was someone else's, and neither Diana nor Costa could take care of her full-time. Diana looked down at the baby antelope curled up in her lap, looking up at her with wide, dark-lashed eyes. She ran her fingers lightly across the small wings, feeling them flutter.

"—doing today, Di?"

"What?" Diana asked, jolted back to reality.

“I said, what are you doing today?”

“Working, obviously. The first thing I need to do is check in with the sheriff’s office.”

“Do you have anything pressing other than that? I’d like to commandeer you for part of the day, if you don’t mind. I need to send a team out to look at the crash site, and I’d like you to fly them there. You know where it is, and you can show them where you found the kid.”

“Oh.” She thought her way around her feelings on it; she didn’t want Costa to think she would drop everything for him. But her initial reaction was eagerness. She did genuinely want to go back to the crash site. The mystery had personal significance for her now.

And, if she was to admit it to herself, she liked the idea of being able to bring a solution to Costa, or at least part of a solution.

“Di?” Costa prompted.

“Yes, of course. I’ll make sure I’m not needed urgently, but I doubt I am. Just put your team in communication with me.”

Costa nodded, then nearly spilled his coffee as Emmeline sprang from Diana’s lap and bounced to the back of the couch in a single wing-assisted leap.

“And that,” Diana said pointedly, “is your problem for a while..”

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CHAPTER 7

Diana left Costa feeding Emmeline, grabbed breakfast from a drive-thru, and drove at probably unsafe highway speeds to get home in time to change hastily and not be too late to the midmorning meeting to go over the crash information at the sheriff's office. Luis was there; he gave her a questioning look, she shot back a thumbs-up, and he nodded.

Costa texted her that he had the all-clear to send someone to the crash site, was sending over some agents who ought to be there about noon, and where did she want to meet them? As if realizing that this was a very no-nonsense block of text, he followed it up with a picture of Emmeline, apparently sitting in his lap and playing with a stapler on his desk; all Diana could see was the top of her head.

I see finding someone to babysit is going great, Diana texted yet. Exploded any ovaries yet?

Why do women say that? He followed it up with an "ick" emoji and then added, There's nothing sexy about exploding testicles.

Diana sent him a barf emoji and a thumbs down.

See?? he sent back.

Diana realized that she was grinning goofily at her phone, and hastily got her face under control. Have them meet me at the hangar for the sheriff's dept helo. I'll send you the maps link.

She got back a saluting-face emoji.

She got sucked into work and forgot to ask who he was sending, but when she finally pried herself away with the not-untrue explanation that another agency had her services for the afternoon, she found Costa's agents already waiting for her. Agent Caine she already knew. He was dressed just as he had been last night and every other time she'd seen him, wearing a black suit jacket and black jeans, sunglasses hiding his eyes, perfectly closed off and inscrutable.

There were two women with him that Diana didn't know, both of them giving off the slight tingle that meant they were shifters.

"You know we're going to be scrambling around on a mountainside, right?" she said to Caine. "If you want to change into more practical clothes, you can probably borrow something from the guys here."

"No," Caine said.

Diana shrugged—if he wanted to be wildly uncomfortable all afternoon, that was his problem—and turned her attention to his companions. One was a college-age young woman, deeply tanned with a blotchy patchwork of freckles. She wore a short-sleeved plaid shirt, jeans, and practical hiking boots, as well as a floppy-brimmed canvas sun hat. At least one person here looked like they'd been hiking at least once in their lives, Diana thought.

The other woman was in her thirties and wearing a short pink sundress over white jeans, with a pink bow holding back her blonde hair.

"Hi. I'm the pilot, Diana Reid. And I am going to insist on sunscreen, hats, and hiking boots for everyone here. Are you both agents?"

“They’re interns,” Caine said. “We’re short-staffed. Jessie Boyd and Tiffany Dawes.”

“People call me Fifi,” the blonde said, holding out a hand. “I’m sorry. What was that about sunscreen?”

Diana provided a tube of SPF 50 and, while the women slathered themselves, found a spare pair of her own boots for Fifi, whose feet were within about half a size of her own.

“I’m fine,” Caine said, but after a hesitation he accepted the sunscreen tube from Fifi.

“You are going to wear a hat or you’re not going out there,” Diana said. “If you get bit by a snake or twist an ankle in those shoes I suppose that’s your business, but I will not tolerate preventable heatstroke.”

There were a lot of hats available, most of them very far from stylish. Diana picked out two practical fishing-style hats with a canvas drape across the back and handed them out. Fifi gave a little sigh and settled hers over her fluffy blonde hair. Caine put his on with an expression that suggested he was enduring a mild form of torture.

“Mine’s okay?” Jessie asked.

“Yeah, and since you’re the one person who came prepared, I’m going to consider you my backup if either of these two falls off a cliff or passes out from the heat.”

In truth, it wasn’t that hot even down here, a pleasant spring day of seventy-five or so. But it was easy to become dehydrated at the high elevations of the mountains, so in addition to her other precautions she made sure there was plenty of readily accessible water in the helicopter, along with the usual emergency supplies.

“One of you gets to be my copilot,” she said. “Who wants it?”

Caine looked as unexcited as every other time Diana had seen him, but Fifi and Jessie were both practically bouncing on their toes. Diana smiled.

“Okay, one of you gets it on the outbound trip, then you’ll trade coming back. Agent Caine, you’ll be in the back. Have any of you been in a helicopter before?”

She got eager confirmation from both women that they hadn’t, and a grunt from Caine. Diana handed around headsets and showed them how to use them, then went through a brief safety lecture, and they were ready to leave.

She slid into the pilot seat and texted Costa.

Headed to the crash site now. Cell coverage is spotty to nonexistent out there. Anything special you want us to look for?

He texted her back a moment later:

owrieutpw4eroijccx444444444

And then:

I think you can guess who decided to put her 2 cents in.

Diana stifled a laugh.

Before she could respond, Costa’s next text came in.

If there’s anything there, I trust you and the team to find it.

Her chest filled up with a whole swirling cloud of butterflies, and the buoyant feeling stayed with her so intensely that she barely registered her passengers’ reactions to the

moment in a helicopter flight that most new passengers reacted to most strongly—the thrilling instant when they left the ground and began to hover.

I trust you, he'd said.

Inwardly, Diana shook her head at herself.

Yes, but we don't work when we're together, she told that hopeful inner voice. We tried it. And it didn't work then, and it won't work now, and we know why.

There was nothing to be gained by throwing both of their hearts off a cliff a second time.

* * *

Now that Diana knew where it was, the crashed red and white airplane could be seen in glimpses through the dense brush in the gully. She circled slowly to give her passengers a good look. Fifi, in the copilot seat, peered out of the helicopter's plastic bubble canopy in fascination.

It was clear that the crash investigators had been on site. Some of the brush was cut back—Diana could see the exposed ends of branches and stumps where chainsaws had been used—and there were trampled trails leading in and out of the ravine. All of this was going to make it even harder to find anything useful.

“How are they going to get that out of there?” Jessie asked over her headset from the backseat.

“They may not,” Diana said. “After the investigation is done, the owners will retrieve any parts they want from the plane, assuming it's not seized for evidence in a drug trial or similar. As for the actual wreckage, in a remote location like this, they'll

probably either try to sell it off to someone who's willing to cart the pieces out, or just leave it."

She had sometimes seen old wrecks on her flights, the remains of long-ago military or civilian aircraft left to slowly decay in the desert landscape. These days it was a lot less likely, between concerns about fuel contamination and the ready availability of salvage companies that could be found online. But this would be a difficult and expensive retrieval. There was no chance of getting road access anywhere close enough to truck it out.

The fact that Emmeline had survived, and survived in good shape, still seemed almost magical. Whatever the kid had gone through before she ended up on that plane, she had an angel watching over her now.

Diana found that the helicopter landing site was now marked with orange flags and a large survey tripod. She set down the helicopter in a scuffed and trampled circle. Crash investigators must have been all over the place yesterday.

Today it was deserted, as quiet and still as Diana remembered from her first trip with Luis. She shut down the helicopter, and they climbed out. Fifi blew out a breath as she stepped down and pressed her hand to her chest.

"Are you all right?" Diana asked her.

"Yes, I just—it's very different from flying in a big jet, isn't it?" She turned to look at the helicopter.

Diana reminded herself to be careful with the low circling and turbulence while carrying novice flyers. "Yes, it is. You all did great. Now, everyone grab your hat and a bottle of water. Yesterday my partner and I went straight down the ravine, but I saw a better way when we were flying over."

She had noticed a number of animal trails leading into and out of the ravine. It looked like the crash site investigators had been using them rather than bushwacking. After a short scramble along the descending ridge, she glimpsed a flash of sunlight off the fuselage below them, and they climbed down to look.

As she had observed from the air, the brush was now cut back, and it looked like all the loose items had been picked up. The door of the plane was open, and Diana risked a quick peek inside to find the dead pilot gone and some loose wires dangling where the flight recorder had been. The interior of the plane, which she remembered had had quite a bit of random debris, had been stripped aside from a small amount of trash, including a dropped water bottle that she supposed had belonged to one of the investigators. Careless behavior if this was an actual crime scene, but she reminded herself that no one except the SCB had any reason to think so.

“Who has the evidence?” Caine asked in his soft, rasping voice, right at her shoulder. Diana jumped and nearly banged her head on the door frame.

“The Cochise County sheriff’s office, most likely, aside from whatever the NTSB investigators took. Quinn—that is, Chief Costa was working on getting the items transferred over to your bureau, I think, or getting you access if they can’t.”

Caine nodded. He still looked wildly out of place in his black suit, and the hat did not improve the picture, although it did make it considerably more hilarious.

“Where did you find the child?” he asked.

“There,” Diana said, pointing.

Caine nodded again. He began moving around the plane, looking at everything and somehow managing to fade into the background in spite of his incongruous appearance.

The interns, having received no instructions, stood around awkwardly.

Caine, Diana inferred, was not used to working with a team. Well, it wasn't as if she was a stranger to either teamwork or crash site investigations, so she took the lead.

"Does anyone here have a good sense of smell in their shift form?" she asked the interns.

"I'm a capybara," Fifi said eagerly. "We have a very good sense of smell."

"Horse," said Jessie. "We're not bloodhounds, but we're all right."

There was no response from Caine, who was only intermittently visible on the far side of the wreckage. Diana decided to let him do his thing unimpeded. If he had a problem with her giving his interns instructions, he could complain to Costa about it.

"Well, I'm a roadrunner, so either of you is probably better than me," she said. "What I want you to do is shift, spread out around the crash site, and sniff around."

"For what?" Jessie asked, though she was already unbuttoning her shirt.

"That's up to you. Anything out of place. There will have been a lot of people tramping around this wreck in the last twenty-four hours, so you might find things they dropped, cigarette butts or water bottles. But try to pick out anything unusual," she finished weakly.

The instructions might be vague, but the interns, happy to have something to do, went to it with a will. They vanished in separate directions to undress, but soon Diana heard crashing sounds in the bushes and caught a glimpse of something large and brown moving through the brush. After holding still for a minute to be sure it wasn't a wild animal, she made out a pink bow on top of its head and relaxed.

Leaving them to it, she leaned into the plane to have a better look. She had intentionally dispatched them elsewhere, even though the inside of the plane was the most likely to have actual helpful evidence, because she didn't want to hand them the potential trauma of sniffing around where someone had died. They would probably have difficult cases later on. Better ease them into it. She smiled ruefully, remembering the first S in fact she saw what might be the entrance to several, although it was hard to tell the difference between a cave mouth and the inky black shadows cast by the desert sun.

"So, uh, you weren't kidding about the need, but I don't think the Dramamine had time to take effect yet," Fifi said faintly into the headset.

Diana glanced at her and saw that she was white other than a reddening flush of sunburn across her nose. "Don't worry, I'm going to set down as soon as I find a place."

She spotted a figure waving at them from the top of the cliff. When Diana did a cautious fly-by, it turned out to be Caine. Diana had no idea how he'd made it across the valley that fast. Whatever he turned into must be speedy. She circled slowly around the clifftop until she found a flat-looking place without too much brush and settled down in it.

"No luck," Caine said after the noise of the helo died away.

"I didn't think so," Diana said, helping a shaky Fifi out. "It looked like there might be caves."

"There are. Too damn many."

"Did you find anything at all?" Diana asked. She guided Fifi to sit on a rock, where the intern put her head in her hands. Diana handed her a bottle of water.

“No. Can’t tell where the shots came from, except that it was somewhere over here.” Caine sounded disgusted with himself.

“I think it’s time to head in and report.” Diana glanced around; the feeling of exposure was no longer quite so intense, but she disliked being this close to the former location of whoever had been shooting at them a few minutes ago.

“You go,” Caine said. “I’m going to keep looking.”

Diana frowned at him. His cheeks and nose, like Fifi’s, were starting to redden slightly in the sun, and he looked uncomfortable, blinking rapidly behind the dark glasses. “Are you sure? You know there’s no cell service or roads up here, right?”

“I’ll be fine. Tell Costa where I am.” He took a water bottle from the helo, and without another word, trotted down one of the animal paths leading down the cliff and vanished almost immediately from sight.

CHAPTER 8

“Someone shot at you?” Costa started to rise from his chair, nearly dumping the baby onto the floor. She squawked in protest, and Costa sat down and maneuvered the bottle back into her mouth.

He had Diana on the big wall screen in his office, which meant that he was able to see she was fine—dusty and a bit tired-looking, with a couple of unfairly adorable leaves in her hair, but fine. Being able to physically see her was probably the only thing stopping him from pitching the baby into the arms of the nearest person he could find and running out of the office immediately.

Controlling the urge, he asked, “Is everyone okay? Where are you now?”

“Everyone’s fine—well, except possibly Agent Caine. He insisted on staying out there to search. I don’t know how he expects to get back.”

“He’ll be okay.” Costa waved it off without bothering to try to explain. “But you’re unhurt? You and the interns,” he amended. “It was Boyd and Dawes with you, right?”

“Jessie and Fifi? Yes, they’re fine, aside from a slight case of airsickness in Fifi’s case. We’re at my place, and they’re taking turns using my shower.”

“And you didn’t see anything of the sniper at all?”

“Other than the flash of light, which I guess was probably off a rifle scope, no.” Diana hesitated, adjusting the phone she was using to video chat with him. He could

catch glimpses of a living room behind her with the blinds partly drawn to keep out the brilliant midday sun. “I don’t even know if it was one person or more than one, or whether we were the intended targets. If they were aiming at us, they weren’t a great shot, but they did have the sun in their eyes.”

Costa jiggled the baby in his lap, who was starting to fuss a little. “And you said the interns smelled something strange?”

“The interns and Caine. He said that it’s possible it might be related to, uh, the trouble you had last summer. He wasn’t sure, though.”

“Great,” Costa said grimly. “That’s all we need.” He decided to put the possibility out of his head for now. “We should know more soon. I’m having the artifacts from the crash transported to the SCB offices. They’ll be over here in a day or two, once the wheels of bureaucracy finish grinding.”

“That’s some pretty fast grinding for bureaucracy.” Diana smiled, a lovely tug of her flexible mouth that made him want to brush his finger across the corner of it, not to mention giving him some entirely different mental images for grinding. Abruptly her lips parted, distracting him sufficiently that he barely registered her next words at first. “We found something else.”

“What?” Costa asked, wrenching his brain back on topic.

“A business card of sorts. Caine’s got it, so I guess you’ll see it whenever he shows up again. All it had on it was a red lion device, kind of like medieval heraldry. Just that and no other information. For all I know it could be promo for a restaurant opening or something, but it looked like it could be important.”

“Where’d you find it?”

“On the plane. Caine found it tucked into a seat cutout on the floor.” Diana frowned a little. “Are you sure he’ll be all right out there? He doesn’t have any way to contact anyone.”

“Caine can take care of himself. If he doesn’t check in soon, I have a secret weapon.”

“What’s that?”

Costa grinned. “I’ll call his fiancée.”

This won him a bright smile on her tired face. “I didn’t even know he had one, but I would love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Tell me if anything new comes up?”

“Will do. See you later.”

His office seemed less bright, somehow, with Diana’s face off his screen. The baby had finished her bottle and was drowsing on his lap. Costa tucked her into the front carrier that Mavis had brought in that morning along with some other baby supplies from her extended family, and went off to see how the investigation was going.

Walking around the building with a baby strapped to his chest turned out to have exactly the side effect everyone had predicted: he couldn’t go anywhere without people awww-ing at him or stopping him to look at the baby. Also, there were questions. He was tempted to say “She’s evidence in an ongoing investigation” but for now, he simply put them off by telling people he was babysitting for a family friend.

He was eventually able to unload the baby for a while at the lab, where Mavis wanted to run some more tests. Costa hung around to watch, unable to stop himself from hovering protectively until he realized he was doing it. Reminding himself that she

was perfectly safe in the hands of Mavis and her team, he retreated to his office to try to get some actual work done.

The afternoon wore on, and he was genuinely about to call Gilly on Caine's behalf when Caine walked into his office, looking exhausted and dusty and sunburned underneath a—was that a fisherman's hat?! He was limping slightly.

"I hate to admit this, but Diana was right about the footwear," he said, throwing himself down on the couch against the wall. "I'll be picking thorns out of my ankles for days."

"Is that a sun hat you're wearing?" The image of Caine in his dark suit, dusty though it was, with a floppy-brimmed hat shading his face would stay with Costa for a long time.

Caine reached for it as if he'd forgotten he was wearing it, looked at it for a minute, and dropped it on the couch beside him with an expression of loathing. He took off his sunglasses, pinched the bridge of his nose, and leaned his head back against the wall.

Costa got up and closed the blinds, plunging his office into dimness striped with golden late-afternoon sunshine. He was aware that Caine was prone to migraines after being out in the sun too long.

"Thanks," Caine said without raising his head.

"Need anything else?"

"Coffee'd be great. And food. I haven't eaten all day, and I've been doing a lot of shadow-shifting."

Costa picked up the intercom phone and requested some food and coffee sent up his office. Then he sat beside Caine on the couch.

“Diana filled me in on your sniper problem. Did you find anything?”

“Not really,” Caine said, cracking an eye open. “I found the vantage point that our sniper had been using to observe us across the valley, but there was no one there. I don’t know where he went. There’s a cave system back in there, and I spent some time exploring it. I should have been even more capable of finding him in there than outside. No signs, though.”

“Think he shifted?”

“I’d guess so, and given the situation with the kid, I’m also guessing an unusual shift form. I just don’t know what. I have a lot of talents, but tracking isn’t one of them, especially in sunlight.”

There was a tap at the door, and Cat Delgado came in with a tray. “I heard you’re back,” she said to Caine, setting it down on the table by the couch. “I also suspected the boss hadn’t eaten lunch either, and absolutely no one in the building is able to give me a straight answer about why you’re walking around with a baby, Chief.”

“By design,” Costa said dryly.

“So I figured I’d volunteer to bring up some food and hang around until answers drop out of one of you.” Delgado straddled a chair backward and crossed her arms over the back of it. She was in her casual hanging-around-the-office look, with her unusual physical features on full display, the scales across the side of her head and one slit-pupiled lizard eye. She could hide it in public, but generally chose not to bother in the office.

“I could order you out,” Costa remarked. “Does anyone around here remember that I’m in charge?”

Delgado looked expectant. Caine raised an eyebrow and reached for a sandwich from the tray. Costa sighed, picked up a sandwich, and filled her in briefly.

For some reason, Delgado seemed to get stuck on the whole situation last night, specifically the Diana elements. “She brought you a baby?”

“Well, where else was she gonna take her, the laundromat?”

“Boss, not that it’s any of my business, but you guys have been dating how long now?”

Refreshed with painkillers and food, Caine was now observing Costa intently; Costa could feel it through the dark glasses. Abruptly Caine said, “Are you two actually seeing each other?”

“What?” Costa said.

“What?” Delgado echoed. “She’s his plus-one to, like, everything.”

“You need to spend more time thinking about your jobs and less time thinking about my love life,” Costa said pointedly.

But Caine was still looking at him in that peculiar, pointed way. “They go to functions together, it’s true. But I don’t think I’ve ever seen them together otherwise.”

“ You avoid every group function if you can help it,” Costa said.

“You don’t have any pictures of her on your desk.”

“You don’t have any pictures of Gilly on your desk.”

“That’s for security purposes,” Caine said stiffly.

“Game, set, match. Every relationship is different.”

“Yes, but—” Delgado protested. “Maybe she wants to take it to the next level.”

“Maybe there isn’t a next level to take it to,” Caine muttered.

“If you’re done gossiping, can we work now?” Costa said shortly. “Di said—that is, I understand you found a business card on the scene.”

“Or something.” Caine reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and retrieved a small plastic bag, which he passed to Costa. “It had slipped into a recess in the floor. Looked like the crash investigators either didn’t see it, or considered it too insignificant to keep.”

Costa turned it over to look at both sides, then shrugged and handed it to Delgado. “Any ideas?”

“I don’t know. Could be a promotional coupon or a game piece. Just about anything.”

“I know it’s a long shot, but take it down to the lab and see if they can pull anything off it.”

Delgado nodded and rose.

Once she was gone, Caine laced his long fingers over his knee. “So. Diana.”

“Will you shut up?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it. Nobody saw it. You’re close-mouthed about your relationship; well, lots of people are. But in your case, there isn’t a relationship to talk about.”

Costa glared at him. “Don’t go around telling people.”

“I’m the absolute master of keeping secrets,” Caine said solemnly.

“Yeah, I saw that when you and Delgado were speculating about my love life two minutes ago.”

“If you seriously ask me to, I won’t,” Caine said. “But why on earth would you?”

“You really want to know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to know.”

Costa got up and walked to the window, looking out the stripes between the blinds at the desert landscape slowly turning sunset colors. “We were together years ago. A very long time ago. We lived next to each other. Adjacent ranches. We grew up together and started dating in our senior year of high school.”

“I didn’t know that,” Caine said quietly.

“Yeah, well, it didn’t work out.” He pushed away the memories. “It really, really didn’t work out. We wanted completely different things out of life. But we stayed in touch, and a while back, we both realized we had a similar problem. My family kept pestering me about settling down, and she was constantly getting hit on by the guys she works with.” A sharp frisson of jealous anger swept over him at the thought, there

and gone.

“So naturally, like any sensible person, you decided the way to resolve this problem was to pretend you were dating each other.” Caine’s voice was as dry as the desert outside.

“It’s a logical solution,” Costa said stiffly.

Caine gave a sudden, barked laugh. “You’re not dating her, and yet, she shows up at your house with a baby when she could’ve gone anywhere else.”

“No, she couldn’t have. She needed my help.”

“She wanted your help.” Caine laughed again.

“Stop laughing, Azarias.”

“I’ll stop when it stops being funny.” Caine wiped his eyes and put his sunglasses back on. “I just appreciate that you’ve fucked up your love life much worse than I ever did, and in a novel way, too.”

“Caine.”

“I’m done. I swear. However, if you ever want to talk?—”

“And be mocked?”

“You know you enjoy a little mocking in your day.”

“Only because I know you’ll cheat in a fight,” Costa said, but he was grinning.

“She’s good for you, Quinn,” Caine said seriously. “That thing that didn’t work out—maybe you should try it again.”

Costa’s grin faded. “Mocking is fine, or at least unavoidable, but I don’t need advice. And on that note, take the rest of the day off. I’ll find someone to cover the night shift. I know you couldn’t have had more than a few hours of sleep since last night’s shift, and you’ve been out in the sun all day. Get some rest, have a nice evening with Gilly, and come in tomorrow.”

He waited until after Caine left—because there was likely to be another round of mocking in the wings if this next part got out—and then called down to the lab and asked Mavis if she’d found a placement for the baby yet.

“Not yet. The Seattle office is working with us, but it isn’t easy.”

“I’ll take her overnight again, then,” Costa said promptly. “It won’t be a hardship; I already had her at my place for one night, and I have some things for her there.”

What he didn’t want to examine too closely was why the idea of a night alone at home suddenly seemed so unappealing. At least with the kid around, he wouldn’t be lonely and he wouldn’t be bored.

The fact that the baby was leaving soon too—whenever they found her parents, or a permanent foster placement—was something he also refused to look at. He’d deal with that when it happened.

CHAPTER 9

“Thank you for letting us clean up at your place, Ms. Reid.” Jessie’s sun-streaked brown hair straggled over her shoulders. Both interns had showered, and Fifi was wearing a caftan of Diana’s (the only thing in Diana’s closet that fit Fifi’s much bustier and curvier figure) while her dust-covered and branch-torn sundress went through an abbreviated wash and dry cycle in Diana’s laundry room. Fifi’s sunburned nose gleamed with aloe vera gel provided by Diana.

“No problem. But next time, I’d suggest wearing sensible boots and jeans for field work,” she added to Fifi.

“I know,” Fifi said woefully. “I’m not an outdoorsy person.”

Jessie nudged her. “Don’t worry. I’ll show you the ropes.”

Earlier, Costa had texted a picture of Emmeline asleep on a rug on the floor of his office. Diana had to use firm willpower, and the fact that she had company, to stop herself from pulling her phone out to look at it repeatedly. She wasn’t even a baby person, and it wasn’t just the baby, it was Costa’s strong sun-browned hand curled protectively over Emmeline’s tiny soft head.

Stop it.

Her phone vibrated and she took it out in the hopes it would be another baby picture. It wasn’t, but it was from Costa.

Evidence still at Cochise Cty Sheriff's Office, tied up in red tape. If you're in the area, go take a look?

She texted back, Look for what?

Don't know. Send me pictures.

"Quinn—that is, Chief Costa wants me to go look at the evidence the investigators collected," she told the interns. "Do you two want to come along? It's your case, after all."

They were eager, which Diana supposed boded well for their ability to handle field work. With Fifi back in her slightly rumpled sundress, sunburn showing pink on her exposed arms, Diana drove them over to the sheriff's office and chatted with the deputies, all of whom knew her.

"I don't have a warrant, but I'm doing some work with a government bureau out in Tucson."

"Oh yeah, Costa's office. They told us to expect you. Come on back."

The evidence room was concrete-floored and fiercely air conditioned, making all of them shiver after the late afternoon warmth outside. The deputy searched the shelves and took down a box containing neatly labeled bags.

"There's not a lot here. I think the NTSB has the rest of it." She put it on a table and snapped on a bright light over it. "You can examine it here if you like."

"Is Diana back there?" A voice echoed back into the evidence room. A minute later Luis came in. "It is you. Thought I heard your voice. I wanted to let you know a guy was looking for you earlier."

“A guy?” Diana echoed, thinking of Costa. “Big guy, red hair?”

“Big guy, blond,” Luis corrected. “He was wearing camo. I would say he looked like someone you might be friends with, except ...” He hesitated. “He felt dangerous to me. I don’t know. I told him I couldn’t give out information about other employees.”

“Did he come to the sheriff’s office?”

Luis shook his head. “Park Service. The fact that I’m here has nothing to do with you; I didn’t even know you were back here ‘til I heard your voice.” He glanced around, but the deputy had gone back to the front. Luis quickly mimed holding a baby. “How’s the ...”

“She’s doing well. Here, I have pictures.” Diana pulled out her phone, and as Luis looked at the two women: “They’re friends. Federal agents. They’re helping me work out what was going on with her.”

The interns shook hands with Luis, Diana showed him the picture Costa had texted her, and there was awww-ing all around.

“The man who came in asking about me—when was this?” Diana asked Luis, while the interns passed her phone back and forth and cooed.

“A couple of hours ago, I guess. A while before I drove over here.”

So after they’d come back from the mountains. She didn’t find it especially plausible that someone could have driven from the Chiricahuas to Sierra Vista, where the sheriff’s office was located, in that amount of time, although she supposed it was possible if they had an all-terrain vehicle stashed nearby and got to it quickly. But it could easily be someone in touch with the sniper.

“What exactly did he ask? I mean, did he ask for me by name?”

“No, not exactly. I think he said, ‘Is the lady helicopter pilot around?’ Something like that.”

Diana frowned. It was true that female helicopter pilots were a relatively select club, so most people in her professional circles simply knew her because of that. But it bothered her to have someone asking questions about her under the circumstances. “Shifter?” she asked quietly.

“No. Human.”

She didn’t like this. But it could be completely unrelated. “Thank you for not giving out anything. If he comes back again, could you tell me? And maybe see if you can get a picture? Come up with an excuse if you have to. I don’t suppose he was on any cameras while he was there.”

“Dunno. I can check.” Luis gave her a worried look. “You think it’s about the kid?”

“I don’t know. I hope not.” She retrieved her phone from the interns. “Okay, let’s see what’s in here. Luis, feel free to stick around if you want.”

There wasn’t much to see. As she’d thought, it was mostly trash. The most interesting thing was a rope cargo net, which presumably had been used to hold things down, but not necessarily on this trip. Diana photographed it diligently for Costa’s sake, but she couldn’t see anything that was worth sending over to the SCB. It was just stray items that had shaken loose in the crash, an aviation manual and a couple of soda bottles and some granola bar wrappers.

“I suppose the next thing is going to be talking to the company that owns the airplane, and that’s out of my hands,” Diana said, putting the junk back in the box with some

disappointment. She had really enjoyed being part of the investigation for a little while.

Luis touched her shoulder. “Hey, if you find out where the kid belongs, let me know, huh? I’d like to know if she gets back to her folks.”

“I will,” Diana promised.

She drove the interns back to where she’d met them at the helipad with a vaguely sad sense of a door closing. Jessie and Fifi seemed disappointed as well.

“Do you work with the SCB regularly?” Jessie asked. “I’d love to go for another helicopter ride.”

“Not usually. Every once in a while, when they need a pilot, but mostly I’m doing my own thing. And it’s really too far for me to drive over regularly.”

“That must be tough if you’re dating the boss,” Fifi said.

Oops. She had temporarily forgotten. “Yeah, it puts a strain on the relationship.” To say the least.

She saw the interns to their car—actually Jessie’s truck. The sun was setting, and as they drove away, Diana inhaled deeply of the sweet evening air.

Her phone pinged with an incoming text. She looked down and smiled involuntarily at Costa’s name.

How’d it go at the sheriff’s office?

Nothing useful, Diana texted back. She hesitated; she wanted to add that her part in

this was ended, that it was over to the SCB now, but she didn't want to. The urge to stay connected to the case was still incredibly strong.

Instead, she texted, Where is little Em tonight?

The response was a photo, adorable Emmeline tucked into a blanket, looking up with her wide eyes. Diana's chest did that thing again.

Right here, Costa texted. Nowhere else to put her for now. I can handle another night of lost sleep.

Diana stood with her phone in hand, the evening breeze sweeping over her. And for an instant, the urge to drive up to Tucson was so powerful it nearly overwhelmed her. If she started driving now, it wouldn't be too late by the time she got there. And then?—

And then what? Another night spent on Costa's couch, followed by another morning of temptation, aching for what she didn't have?

Have a good evening, she texted quickly, before she lost her senses entirely. And then, possessed by a playful urge, she added, Kiss Em for me .

There was an unexpectedly long pause, as if Costa was trying to decide how to respond. He finally marked her text with a heart emoji, and that seemed to be that.

Diana walked to her car. Not for the first time, she found herself wondering if working with the SCB would really be so impossible to manage. She lived almost two hours' drive away, especially in commute traffic. But maybe she could consult? There were other options than a full-time job with the agency. Perhaps they could use a regular pilot. Maybe she could do field work. She was good at it, and it had caught her off guard how much she'd enjoyed working on this case with them.

In the end, she supposed, it wasn't worth upending her life completely. She liked her life; she liked her job. She could gamble on a roll of the dice, offer to continue working the case with Costa's people, see if she was capable of working with—and perhaps for—Costa without losing her head ...

But the far more reasonable thing was to go to work in the morning as usual and put all of this behind her. She could ask Costa to keep her in the loop when and if they found the place where Emmeline belonged. That was the only part that really mattered; there was no reason why she needed to continue to be involved with a plane crash investigation.

Staying out of it would be the sensible thing. The non-risky thing.

When did I turn into a person who doesn't take risks?

Maybe that was what growing up meant, she thought, a little sadly.

She passed by the exit that would have taken her toward Tucson and continued home.

* * *

Two hours later, her house blew up.

CHAPTER 10

After Em fell asleep in his lap, Costa put her down on the bed he'd made for her on the floor of the bedroom. He wandered around the condo, with an open but largely untouched beer sweating on the kitchen island, picking up or covering up anything that a little girl who turned into a baby antelope could possibly get into. This seemed to be nearly everything he owned.

The wall-mounted flatscreen TV played quietly in the background. Costa was only half paying attention to it. He'd flipped to a news station with the thought that some random news item might shed light on Emmeline's unusual situation. At the very least they could find out if there were newsworthy developments in the crash, which so far didn't seem to be the case.

“—explosion and house fire in Bisbee ?—”

He stopped and pivoted to stare at the TV.

The reporter's voiceover was interspersed with footage of flames and firefighting vehicles. Diana lived in the small town of Bisbee, near Sierra Vista, and Costa's heart clutched.

There was no reason to think she was in any danger. There were several thousand people in the town. What on earth were the odds that Diana was involved in a random house fire? But now that he was looking at the screen, he couldn't shake the fear. That could be Diana's house. He'd only seen it a few times, picking her up; it was a perfectly ordinary small ranch house. There were any number of houses that looked

like that. But it could be her house.

He called the SCB.

“Hey, boss.” It was the deceptively lazy voice of Vir, one of their computer analysts. “What’s up?”

“Perfect, you’re exactly who I need. There’s a house fire in Bisbee. Should be some chatter about it on emergency channels. Look it up and text me the address.”

“On it, boss.”

He hung up, reached for his beer and dropped his head away. He might need his head clear if this turned out to be something.

It’s not. You know that. House fires happen every day.

The TV screen had cut away to talking about a golf tournament when Costa’s phone vibrated. He looked down at the screen and stared at the text for a moment as if he could make it change to something else.

That was Diana’s address.

He pulled up Caine’s number before he was even aware that he was doing it. Caine answered on the first ring. “I thought you said I was—” he began.

“I don’t care what you’re doing,” Costa interrupted. “I don’t care where you are. I need you at my place now.”

He hung up.

There was a moment in which nothing happened, then a thump came from the direction of the bathroom. Caine emerged wearing a T-shirt and sweat pants, his feet shoved sockless into his shoes. He wasn't wearing his usual sunglasses, giving his face a strange, bare aspect.

Costa, in the middle of panicking, stared at him.

"Where I was," Caine said, "was in the middle of dinner with Gilly. You're just lucky it wasn't an hour later, or you'd be dealing with an even less dressed version of me. You rang, boss?"

But despite his sardonic tone, the fact that he had showed up immediately rather than complaining or texting back for details suggested that he was well aware it was serious.

"Diana's house is on fire. It's on the news. I need to go there now."

Caine asked no questions, sliding instantly into all-business agent mode. "I can't easily take you to a place I haven't been. You know that."

"Damn it. What's the closest place you can get me to Bisbee?"

Caine looked at the window and frowned.

"It's dark, so that helps. I've been getting a lot better since Gilly and I have been practicing targeting. Give me a place to center on. Do you have any pictures on your phone? And a map would help too."

Costa floundered briefly at the realization that he didn't have a picture of Diana's house, or any pictures in her house either, that he could think of. "What about street view maps?"

“Uh,” Caine said as Costa pulled up the map app on his phone. “I’ve never tried that.”

“Well, if it works, you’ll have a fun new toy in your toolbox.” Costa navigated to Diana’s address, zoomed in, and switched to street view. “There. That’s her house.”

“And if it doesn’t, we’ll be lost in shadow forever. Zoom out, I need to see where it is relative to where we are.”

Costa did, then added the driving direction overlay. Caine stared at it for a moment, then glanced up at him.

“The baby’s here?” he asked.

“Yeah, in the bedroom, asleep. Leaving her for a few minutes won’t be a problem. She’s down for a while.” He couldn’t imagine what might happen to her in just a few minutes, and getting someone here from the SCB would take time he didn’t have. “Caine, come on, let’s go.”

Caine shrugged a little. “You’re the boss.” He touched Costa’s arm, giving him a little push. “Bathroom.”

Costa shut them inside, and they were plunged into darkness. Caine’s hand was still on his arm, fingers clamping tightly enough to hurt.

“Hold your breath,” Caine said. “I don’t know how long this’ll take. You don’t want to try to breathe where we’re going.”

Following that not exactly reassuring statement, Costa felt a prickling chill sweep over him as the stripe of light under the door disappeared. There was a sense of vast space around him, vague movement in the dark. He had just been drawing in a breath,

and he clamped down on it, but his lungs tickled as if he had inhaled smoke or ice-cold air. He fought it briefly, then lost control and was coughing violently when the world stabilized around them and the darkness became slightly less complete.

“I said hold your breath,” Caine said.

“I tried,” Costa wheezed. “Give a guy more than two seconds’ warning next time.” He coughed again, violently. Caine still had a hand on his shoulder, steadying him.

“Let’s hope no one’s around,” Caine said. “Because if so, we’re not precisely being stealthy.”

Costa wiped his watering eyes, which made little difference to whether he could see. It wasn’t fully dark; there was light filtering in from somewhere up ahead, but not enough to give him more than a vague sense of space. He couldn’t touch a wall in any direction, but his fingertips brushed a canvas cover over something large.

“Where are we?” Costa asked.

“Storeroom, I guess. It was a big, empty, dark space and that’s good enough for me.”

Caine swayed a little as he took a step, and it was Costa’s turn to steady him. “You okay?”

“Two long trips back to back.” Caine rubbed his forehead; Costa’s eyes had adjusted well enough to the dimness now that he could see the pale flash of Caine’s hand. “Let’s go find your girl.”

“She’s not my—shut it.”

“Yeah,” Caine said, moving through the darkness ahead of him as if he could see

where he was going; possibly he could. “Because you always drop what you’re doing and come running whenever anyone else’s house burns down.”

“Has your house burned down lately? No, so you don’t know what I’d do.”

“My house is a bunker,” Caine said.

“Shut up.”

Talking helped keep him from freaking out about Diana as they found the door and let themselves out. It turned out that the building where they had emerged was some sort of large garage or workshop behind a neighboring house on Diana’s street. It was a pleasant small-town neighborhood of widely spaced adobe houses on large lots. Flashing blue and red emergency lights strobed across the front yards and the neighbors standing around in small, confused clusters. The air reeked of smoke.

Costa pushed forward, heedless of Caine behind him. “Diana!”

He found her almost immediately, as if some part of him had homed in on her by sheer instinct. She was standing behind a fire truck, watching her house burn. She was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, her hair pulled back in a fat, sloppy braid. Costa called her name again, and she turned, and then she was falling against him and he pulled her into a tight hug before he could think about what he was doing.

She was warm and strong and wonderfully alive, clinging to him, her body pressed against him.

“I went out to the store,” she gasped against his shoulder. “I needed milk and coffee. And I came back and—and?—”

“It’s all right,” Costa said inanely against her hair, although it very much wasn’t true.

“You’re all right.” That was true, at least.

Diana drew a shuddering breath and slowly peeled herself off him, gazing up at him with eyes that were softer than he’d seen in a long, long time. “What are you doing here?”

“I came as soon as I heard.”

Her brows drew together in a frown. “No, I mean in Bisbee. Did something else happen?”

Costa’s preparations to pull together an explanation disintegrated in an instant, because he had, for the moment, completely forgotten that they weren’t in Tucson, they were a two-hour drive away.

Behind him, he heard Caine snort-laugh. Costa turned to give him a glare. Caine looked completely unrepentant despite his visible weariness.

“I’ll explain in a minute.” As soon as he figured out what the explanation was going to be. “Do you need to do anything else here? Where’s your car? Did you drive or walk to the store?”

“Drove. It’s down the street.” Diana swiped at her eyes, and then she visibly steeled herself. Costa, who still had a hand on her arm, was impressed all over again as the hurt and fear bled out of her, and steel visibly straightened her spine. “This isn’t an accident. I think it might be connected to—to the situation.”

Costa steered her further away from the emergency vehicles with his hand on her arm, although no one was paying much attention to them; he and Costa were indistinguishable from any of the other spectators. “The baby?”

“Yes.” She wiped her face with her hand again. “Luis told me someone was looking for me today at work. It’s a stretch, but this is just such insane timing otherwise. I won’t be surprised if they find out it’s arson.”

“Okay,” Costa said. He gazed into the middle distance for a few seconds, mulling over the problem. “I’ll put the SCB in touch with the local authorities. You might have to answer questions later, but there’s no need to deal with that tonight.” Turning his gaze back to Diana, he saw that she was watching his face with her usual sharp clarity. “Do you have anywhere to go?”

“I—I hadn’t thought about that.” The steel spine dissolved; now there was the scared woman again. “I guess I can get a hotel?—”

“Absolutely not. You can stay at my place. Where’s your car?”

“O—over here.”

As she led him toward it, Caine closed up on his heels almost near enough to trip on him, and murmured, “In case you’ve forgotten, you left the baby alone in Tucson.”

“Crap .” Leaving Emmeline for a few minutes was one thing; leaving her for hours was something else.

Diana turned an accusing glare on him. “You left her alone to drive here? Quinn, what on earth were you thinking?”

“I told you, I—” He shut his mouth, suddenly foreseeing the long drive in front of him. “I can call someone at the SCB to come sit with her.”

Diana still looked furious. “No matter what you were doing here, I can’t believe you ran off and left her for hours. I thought you knew something about babies! I don’t

know anything about babies, and even I know enough not to do that.”

Caine cleared his throat. “As entertaining as it would be to watch you talk your way out of this, I’ll take you both back.”

Costa turned to look at him. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Caine said. He quirked a sideways smile. “If she can keep a secret.”

“She can. Diana, get whatever you need out of your car. We’ll go with Caine.”

Diana scowled mutinously as she opened her car door to rescue a bag of groceries. “I don’t care how fast he drives, it’ll still take ages. You’d better call someone to come. I can’t believe you.” She slammed the car door and locked it. “All right, let’s go. Where’s he parked?”

Costa looked around. The emergency lights and people’s yard lights were washing out the nearby shadows. Caine was already headed down the street. “This way.”

“Seriously cannot believe this,” Diana was still muttering. “Aren’t you going to call the SCB? Do I have to call them? I don’t know how self-sufficient you think babies are—and you still haven’t told me what you’re doing in Bisbee in the middle of the night.”

Caine turned abruptly and ducked between two houses. It looked as if neither household was home; the lights were off, and shadows lay desert-night black between them.

“What’s he doing?” Diana asked. “Is this a shortcut?” As Costa touched her arm and steered her into the shadow behind the fence that separated the houses, she added, “You know we’re trespassing, right?”

Costa drew her in closer, sandwiching her between them. She went readily with a small sound of surprise. It was too dim to see anything clearly, but Costa felt Caine reach around Diana to grip his arm again, holding the three of them in an involuntary clinch.

“Hold your breath,” he said to Diana.

“What?”

“No need this time,” Caine said. “Your house is pretty easy to target. I’ve been there enough.”

“Wha—” Diana began again, but her voice died to nothing as darkness enveloped them.

It was the first time that Costa had realized it was impossible to hear anything in the void through which Caine traveled—nothing, that is, except a sort of faint rustling that was felt more than heard, as of the spreading of vast, unseen wings. There was a sharp chill that stung like a cold winter day.

Then he struck his hip on some hard object, probably his own sink. There was a rattle and a sudden clatter as of items being knocked over.

“What!” Diana half-screamed, and in a slightly more moderate tone, “Where are we?”

“My bathroom, probably.” Costa felt around in the dark, feeling unseen bodies moving against him, and opened the door. The light of the living room spilled in, and Diana plunged out past him as if she needed air.

Caine followed more slowly, one hand pressed to his forehead. Costa planted him on

the couch, and idly reached for the TV remote, as it was still playing silently (now on a commercial break). “You okay? Need a drink of water or something?”

“Just too many trips in close succession. Gimme a minute.” Caine bent over, pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead.

Diana was standing a few steps into the living room, staring around, with her hands clutched on the strap of the grocery bag. “I see why you thought Caine could take care of himself in the desert,” she said faintly. “What— was that?”

“Top secret,” Costa said. “Extremely confidential. Do not talk about it with anyone. Come here, let me put those away for you.”

He guided Diana into the kitchen, pausing along the way to glance in on Emmeline, who still seemed to be fast asleep on the floor of the bedroom.

“So you didn’t leave her alone for hours,” Diana said slowly as he found room for her groceries (a half gallon of milk, some yogurts, a carton of strawberries, a small bag of French roast) in his fridge. “You were only gone for a few minutes.”

“Right. I saw the news and called Caine and we were over there thirty seconds later.”

He had to watch, then, the slow crumpling of her face as recent events really hit her.

“My house,” Diana said, and she started to sit down on the kitchen floor, not a faint so much as apparently going for a chair that wasn’t there.

Costa hastily caught her and steered her to a stool at the kitchen island.

“My house,” Diana repeated blankly. “My house. My things. My birth certificate. My mom’s ashes.” She turned a dazed look on the fridge, which Costa had left open

when he caught her; he moved to shut it. “All I have in the world is the clothes I’m wearing and thirty bucks’ worth of groceries,” she added, and gave a high-pitched, slightly hysterical laugh.

Costa had rarely felt so helpless. He wanted to take her in his arms again. He still had the visceral sense-memory of her body against his, the way she felt when he held her.

“Do you want a drink?” he asked.

“No! I want my house!” And with that, Diana burst into tears.

CHAPTER 11

Diana had always found crying humiliating. It was so uncontrollable and involuntary. Also, she had never been a beautiful cryer, releasing a series of perfectly aesthetic tears. She was more of a loud, honking, red-nosed abject sobber.

But for the second time that night, she found herself unselfconsciously wrapped in Costa's warm, firm embrace. She made one feeble attempt to hold back and then collapsed against his shoulder and wept helplessly.

Her house! It had never really been home the way the ranch had been, but after her parents sold the ranch during her mother's final illness, everything she had kept with her from that time had come with her to Bisbee. The lumpy, misshapen vase she'd made for her mom in fourth-grade art class. The antique dresser that had belonged to her grandmother. The horseback riding trophy she had won in high school. Her mother's wedding dress, that she had hoped to wear herself someday.

Diana had never thought of herself as a person who cared all that much about material things, and she had never tended to collect stuff, in general. But she was unprepared for the blow of losing all her possessions in one instant.

She had seen the glow and the smoke in the distance, but she thought it was someone else's tragedy. It was only as she turned onto her street that shock and panic truly set in.

And it would have been much more of a tragedy if I'd been home.

Normally her car was parked in a carport behind the house. She wondered if someone might not have realized it was gone.

Was it a warning? An attempt on her life?

Or a terrible, terrible coincidence?

She cried herself out and straightened up with a final sniffle, reluctantly unwinding herself from Costa's arms. He looked at her with a helpless expression that would have made her laugh if she had felt less miserable, then soaked a clean dishcloth at the sink and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she hiccuped and tried to clean up her face a little. "I must look like a wreck."

"You look like a very strong, brave woman whose house burned down tonight."

There was a throat-clearing noise from the open doorway between the kitchen and living room. Caine was lounging against the doorframe, looking tired but amused. "I'm headed home. We'll see if the lovely Gilly saved the rest of supper for me." He paused and added awkwardly, "Do you need anything else before I leave?"

"No, get back to your supper and the lovely Gilly," Costa said with a slight smile and a dismissive handwave. "I really appreciate you coming so quickly. And—the rest of it."

This stirred Diana to put in, "Yes, thank you. I'll keep your secret, I promise."

Caine gave them both a terse nod and ducked out of sight. Diana suspected he was gone almost as soon as they could no longer see him.

“What is he?” she asked as Costa rummaged in a cabinet. “What did he do just now?”

“Sorry, that’s his story to tell. But now you know why he’s a huge asset to the bureau, at least when he’s not being a huge ass at the bureau.”

Diana giggled a little, as she was probably meant to. Costa set out a wine glass and poured her a glass of red wine, while he picked up an open beer from the countertop. Diana wasn’t that much of a wine drinker, but she accepted it, aware that she probably shouldn’t dip into anything stronger in her present state.

“Do you mind talking about it?” Costa asked, sliding onto the stool beside her.

“No, it’s fine.” She was very aware of his presence, the muscular arm almost touching her own—which had been wrapped around her mere moments ago. There was still a damp patch where she had cried on his T-shirt.

“We’ll stop if you need to, but why don’t you start by telling me about the guy who was looking for you today?”

Diana repeated everything Luis had told her, which wasn’t much. “Big, blond, wearing camo, and dangerous-looking. Luis said he didn’t use my name, he just asked about the lady helicopter pilot, but he could easily have found out who I was later.”

Costa started to say something, then abruptly fell silent and looked up. Diana tensed, but he was only listening to the sound of a slightly drunken couple laughing and arguing as they passed outside his house.

“Sorry,” Costa said. “You should be the one who’s paranoid, not me.”

“It’s enough to make anyone paranoid.” Diana took a gulp of her wine. “If someone

really is after me, there's no way they could know I'm here—thanks to Caine. And my car's still in Bisbee."

"True." Costa ran his fingers down the beer bottle. He had barely touched it. "And I'm wondering if we ought to take advantage of our head start. If someone is after you, it won't take them long to connect you to me. And the kid's mixed up in all of this too. She could have been with you tonight."

Diana shivered. "I've thought of that."

"I don't think you should stay here. I'm thinking about heading out before anyone has a chance to locate you and taking you to my family's ranch."

The ranch. She shivered for an entirely different reason. She hadn't been out to that dry valley that had once been her entire world since her parents sold their spread. "But if these people connect me to you, then they'll find out about the ranch," she pointed out.

"Yes, but there's no more defensible place I can think of. It's at the end of a single road in or out. No stranger is going to show up without everyone knowing about it. And they're all shifters out there, plus my female relatives will have some clothes and things you can borrow, as well as stuff for the kid."

"Sold," Diana said.

* * *

Costa took a few minutes to pack, while Diana bundled a drowsy Emmeline in a blanket. It was Costa's idea to make sure Diana didn't show herself outside; she went straight from the condo down a flight of steps to his car, parked in a narrow garage that barely had room to move around the sides. Diana found that a child's car seat had

been placed in the back, and struggled with the straps until Costa arrived with a military-surplus canvas rucksack over one shoulder, hauling a canvas shopping tote and a cooler, with a travel mug in the crook of his arm. He saw the difficulty she was having and moved in.

“Borrowed from one of Mavis’s relatives,” he explained. “I’ll get it. Here, trade you.” He handed her a warm travel mug. “Leftover coffee from earlier. I heated up what was left of the pot. We’ll probably need it for the drive.”

“Good thing you didn’t have much to drink,” Diana remarked. The wine was a warm glow in her stomach.

“Your groceries are in the cooler. Is there anything you want to stop for on the way? You might be at the ranch for a few days.”

Diana shook her head, unable to speak for a minute. Wordlessly she buckled herself in, and finally managed, “No. I’m good.”

Costa backed the car out. Diana resisted the urge to duck down in her seat. The alley behind his condo was dark and quiet.

“I’m going to circle around a little, have a look at the neighborhood and make sure we’re not followed before getting on the road.”

Diana nodded.

Costa circled the block, then made a wider circle and left his quiet suburban street behind. He merged into expressway traffic, took an immediate exit, and pulled into the parking lot of a chain restaurant, where they sat for a moment.

“What are we doing here?” Diana asked.

“Checking for a tail, but I think we’re good. I’m still going to head out of town the wrong way, then double back.” He snapped his fingers. “Oh, wait.”

While Diana waited curiously, Costa plugged a small attachment into his phone, hopped out of the car and did a quick check of its underside. When he got back in, her mouth was dry with nervous anxiety.

“What are you looking for?”

“Bugs. No sense in going to all the trouble to check for a tail and then leading them right to our safehouse. But it’s fine.” He slipped the device off the phone and dropped it into a pocket of his rucksack. “Do you think there’s any chance your phone or anything you have on you might have been tagged? They have these little RFID trackers that can be slipped into anything nowadays; even an Airtag can do it.”

Diana shook her head. “The advantage of having absolutely nothing on me,” she said with an attempted smile. “And my phone’s been with me the whole time.”

“Go ahead and turn it off so it can’t be tracked, just in case. That’s unlikely if they don’t have malware on the phone or law enforcement connections, but it’s best to be on the safe side.” After she had done so, Costa nodded. “Let’s roll.”

They merged once more into the flow of expressway traffic, and Diana found herself marveling at the idea of all these people, all these bright headlights and red-flashing taillights, headed somewhere in the night. After they had passed through the majority of Tucson, Costa took an exit, drove in a big loop on completely empty side streets, then merged back on going the other way.

“Paranoid? Maybe,” he remarked to Diana, taking the travel mug of coffee they had been passing back and forth. “But we have one opportunity to give you a really good chance of getting away from these assholes, whoever they are.”

“I don’t just plan to sit at the ranch while you investigate. That was my house, Quinn. My stuff. Everything I own.”

“I know,” Costa said. After a moment’s silence, he added, “But at least take a day or two to get yourself straightened out and recharge. And we want to make sure whoever it is doesn’t get their hands on the kid.”

Diana looked into the back, where Emmeline slept in the car seat with her head twisted to the side in the boneless way of young children. “Do you think she’s in danger?”

“I don’t know, but she’ll be safer at the ranch than anywhere else I can come up with.”

They drove on into the night, and after a while, he took an exit and they were in the endless black nothing of a lonely two-lane desert highway. Except now Diana had a true black void to compare it to, wherever they had been when Caine took them to Costa’s place. Here, there were the twin pools of the headlights to guide them, and a bright tapestry of stars overhead.

“Remember how we used to look up at the stars and learn the constellations?” She craned to see out the window. “We’d always try to find the Milky Way. The headlights are too bright, but I know it’s up there.”

“All of that was a long time ago,” Costa said, so low that even her shifter hearing had to strain to hear him over the car’s engine. Diana didn’t answer immediately, unsure if he had wanted her to hear.

Finally she asked, “Do you ever look at the stars nowadays, Quinn?”

“Not often,” Costa said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have anyone to look at them with.”

He stopped speaking then, as if he’d given away more than he meant to.

Diana searched for something to say. She needed to stop thinking about those long-ago nights looking at the stars, when stargazing wasn’t all they had done, or all they had dreamed of.

But it was Costa who finally broke the silence. “When was the last time you were back at your old place?”

“A long while,” Diana said shortly. She didn’t particularly want to talk about it, but as the road grew rougher and they got closer, it was hard not to think about it. “My parents sold our ranch—let’s see, let me do the math—twelve years ago, when Mom got sick and they needed to cover the medical bills. I haven’t been back since. Nothing to come out here for anymore.”

She had been to Costa’s family ranch a few times since then for family get-togethers, but it was usually a case of staying as little time as she could get away with. It was simply too painful.

But tonight, after a pause, she asked, “What are the new neighbors like?”

“The Halversons? They’re all right. They aren’t out there much. I think they were developing your folks’ old property as an Airbnb, but ended up running out of money for the renovations and now they only come out for a few weeks in the winter.”

“Oh,” Diana breathed. After a moment, she said, “It’s so strange to think of someone else living there. I don’t know if it’s better or worse that they’re not really doing

anything with the place. Having it wildly changed would be even harder than having it abandoned ... I guess.” She gripped the inside door handle as they hit a pothole. The road was generally at its worst in the spring, with washouts and other erosion.

She couldn’t quite bring herself to tell Costa how she had daydreamed of buying the old place back. It never was more than a daydream. Even if she could have afforded it, she couldn’t have lived out here, several hours’ drive from her job. But now, with even the ruts in the road feeling familiar, she ached with nostalgia.

“Here we are,” Costa murmured, braking. The headlights raked across a boulder beside the road with WILD BOAR RANCH painted on it. The road they had been following went on up the canyon, leading to other ranches and small homesteads in the backcountry—the place that had been the Reid spread, now the Halversons’, and other neighbors.

But they turned onto a road that was considerably rougher than the one they had been driving. It was only one lane, although since there wasn’t a lot of vegetation along the road, it would have been possible to pull the vehicle offroad in any relatively flat spot. And they would have to, Diana mused, if another driver came along the other way.

Not that she expected it. They were absolutely alone in the great darkness of the desert. The canyon, or more accurately the network of winding arroyos and wind-sculpted rocks along the sides of the canyon, blocked any view of the neighbors’ lights.

A final twist of the road, and suddenly there were lights twinkling ahead, illuminating the arch of wind- and water-carved driftwood that marked the entrance to the Costa ranch. Ancient, gnarled pieces of pine, rescued from the arroyo and put together into an arch big enough to accommodate a fuel or water tanker, and from the look of it, absolutely unchanged since Diana’s childhood. She peered up at it as they drove

through it into the middle of the cluster of buildings that marked the ranch proper.

In daylight, she could have looked across the dry arroyo to the house that her grandparents had built, but tonight it was completely dark over there—abandoned, now, with the new owners absent.

Home.

Or something that had been home, once.

She wondered how true it was that you couldn't go home again. Apparently, she was about to find out.

CHAPTER 12

Costa parked in front of the main ranch house. Turning, he saw that Diana had her phone out and was starting to power it up. She looked up sharply.

“Bad idea?” she asked. “I just wanted to text Luis and let him know I’m okay.”

“There’s still no cell service out here. The main house has a landline, and there’s a satellite dish, but other than that we’re pretty cut off.”

He was starting to wonder if it had really been a good idea to bring them here. For so long he had thought of the ranch as a place of safety and refuge. Now, with a tactician’s eye, he was far more aware that they were isolated with limited communications and only one road in or out.

But no one knows we’re here, and that’s the main thing.

“Oh. Huh. I remember how isolated it used to be, but I guess you get used to being in touch.” She hadn’t had a chance to power the phone on yet, and she put it away. “I hope none of my coworkers heard the scanner chatter and freaked out. I wish I’d thought of it sooner.”

“You can use the computer in the main house if anyone’s still up.”

No one appeared to be. The lights at the gate and a couple of porch lights were the only relief in a sea of darkness.

Costa got out of the car. The night air was cool and filled with the fragrant smells of the desert springtime. He got the baby out of her car seat. She nestled soft and snug in his arms.

Diana was looking around, rubbing her arms a little.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s just been a really strange night.”

A door slammed from one of the outbuildings behind the main house, and a moment later a figure in a housecoat appeared, hurrying toward him. Costa recognized his aunt Brill.

“I thought I heard someone out here. What are you doing here so late, love?” She reached out to hug him, then discovered what he had in his arms.

“Sorry about the late hour, Auntie. I needed somewhere to bring a couple of guests.”

“Oh, darling .” Brill took the baby in a rapture of maternal delight, then turned the full focus of her attention on Costa. “Cece ...”

Costa winced. The only people who still used his childhood nickname were his aunts. Diana smothered a grin.

“This isn’t my baby,” he said hastily. “We’re borrowing it. Her.”

Diana looked even more amused. Brill simply looked confused. Meanwhile the baby squinched her eyes shut, flailed a little, and then snuggled into Brill’s shoulder, evidently determined to sleep through this sudden and unexpected intrusion of strange adults.

“What do you mean, borrowing? Cece?—”

“She’s evidence in an ongoing investigation,” Costa said, exactly as he hadn’t planned to. Diana made a choking sound. Brill, protectively clutching the baby, narrowed her eyes at him. “We’re taking care of her for a little while. I’ll explain tomorrow, I swear. In the meantime, we need a place to stay for her and us.”

The “us” made Brill notice Diana. “Oh, hello, dear, we haven’t seen you in so long. This isn’t your baby?—?”

“No!” Diana almost yelped.

This finally got the baby awake and fussing. Costa took her back from a reluctant Brill, jiggling her to soothe her.

“I’ll explain everything in the morning,” he said. “Right now, Diana’s had a really long day and we both just need to crash for the night.”

Brill considered. “The saguaro cabin is empty right now, and we keep it made up for company. Actually, I believe there’s a crib in there already, because sometimes your cousins and their kids stay there. I can bring up some fresh linens from the house.”

“That sounds great,” Costa said. “I really appreciate it. We’ll tell you more tomorrow, I promise.”

Since he was holding the baby, Diana got his rucksack from the car along with the bag of the baby’s things and the cooler. “Saguaro cabin?” she asked. “I don’t remember that.”

“It might not have been called that when you were last here. It’s a house that I think was built by a great-uncle of mine a long while back for his wife, but these days it’s

mostly used as a guest house. Oh, Aunt Brill!”

His aunt had started back to the house; now she turned around. “Yes, dear?”

“Does Uncle Roddy have any new surprises on the path to the cabin?”

Brill considered. “Not that I know of, but look out for the flags. We’ve been making sure he marks them.”

She waved and vanished into the house.

“I hesitate to ask,” Diana began.

“My uncle has gone deeply paranoid in his old age,” Costa explained. “You know how he’s always bounced around between different interests. He had an artist phase, a car period, and so on.” They started walking on the gravel path behind the main house, with Costa remaining alert. “Well, his new thing is booby-trapping the ranch.”

“I ... what .”

“Look out for flags. Like the kind that you see marking utility lines and that sort of thing.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the point of booby traps?”

“Not if you have no idea it’s marking anything other than a gas main.”

Diana shook her head with a laugh. “Your family, I swear.”

They climbed the path winding up behind the cluster of houses. Costa smelled horses and cattle. His eyes had begun to adapt to the starlight, but it was still too dark to see

much. He heard Diana stumble.

“I should’ve brought a flashlight from the car, sorry. I could go back.”

“It’s all right; don’t worry about it. My eyes are adjusting.” He was aware of Diana looking around, and then she asked, “How many people live here right now?”

“About half a dozen. My great-uncle, three aunts, one cousin and his family part time, though I think they’re in Phoenix this spring ... and my brother’s widow and son.”

Even mentioning Jenny and Jay gave him a profound gut-wrench. Diana glanced at him and didn’t ask any more questions.

The saguaro cabin had a driveway, which Costa had forgotten about; he could have driven up and parked here. But it was a pleasant night and he didn’t mind the walk any more than Diana seemed to. As they approached the dark cabin, he could hear the sound of water running in the creek below them—a spring-only phenomenon, as it would be dry later in the year.

The cabin loomed ahead, eerie in the dim light. It had a covered porch with wooden steps that seemed rickety but were actually rock solid. They climbed to the porch, and Costa tested the door one-handed and found it unlocked. He turned the lights on.

Generally he stayed in his old room at the main house when he was back on the ranch, so he hadn’t been in the saguaro cabin in a long while. It was extremely clear that the aunts had been involved with the decorating. There were lace curtains, a pair of armchairs covered in floral fabric, and a door standing open to the bedroom with its four-post bed and hanging curtains. Everything was a little old-fashioned, including a pedestal sink in the bathroom and an ancient iron stove, as well as a slightly newer gas cookstove that looked like it dated to the sixties or seventies. A huge painting of a saguaro cactus took up most of one wall—painted by Uncle

Rodrigo during his artist phase—and made the origins of the cabin's nickname clear.

“Um,” Diana said, looking around. “One bedroom?”

“Uh, crap. Yes.” Because his family still thought they were together.

There was a loft under the peaked ceiling. Costa looked up the ladder, but as far as he could tell the loft was crammed with stuff, without any beds in evidence.

Diana gave a soft laugh. “Well, here's the crib.” She pulled it out from behind an armchair, where it had been pushed against the wall, and shook out the small mattress. “At least Em has a place to sleep.”

“You can take the bed. I'll sleep in an armchair.”

“Don't be ridiculous. It's been too long a day. We're both adults, and we can?—”

Footsteps on the porch silenced the negotiations. Aunt Brill came in with the promised bundle of supplies.

“I have bedding for the crib, and some hand-me-down baby things she can wear. Do you have all the necessary supplies otherwise?”

“I think so,” Costa said. He looked into the bedroom. The bed was queen-sized; they could probably both sleep there as long as they were careful about it. Diana in his bed. “Thanks a lot.”

Brill kissed his cheek. “What's family for? Get some rest. Breakfast will be in the main house at seven, but there are also some cooking supplies here, and I can send someone up with eggs.”

She left. Costa unloaded the handful of items from the cooler into the nearly empty fridge while Diana began making up the crib.

“I forgot,” Costa said, rucksack open and a T-shirt in his hands. “You don’t have anything to change into.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.” Diana laid the baby down carefully in the crib. “I’ll sleep in my underwear. I’m exhausted, Quinn. Your virtue is safe with me.”

It wasn’t too late to take an armchair. Costa’s virtue, or perhaps his chivalry, fought a losing battle with the allure of the soft-looking bed. “I’ll just shake out the sheets, make sure no spiders or scorpions got in while the cabin was shut up.”

“Yay,” Diana said wearily.

He shook out and remade the bed. A moment later, Diana came into the bedroom, visibly drooping with exhaustion. She was still dressed, but when she reached a hand up under her T-shirt to unfasten her bra, Costa came alive and sprang off the bed.

“I’ll just—use the bathroom,” he half-babbled, and went to do that.

The cabin was fully plumbed, although the water in the toilet bowl was rust-stained and the shower also showed signs of the region’s hard water deposits. Costa washed his face at the sink and changed into his sleeping clothes, a T-shirt and loose shorts. Then he cautiously opened the door of the bathroom. The lights were off in the bedroom, and there was a single lamp on in the kitchen. He decided to let that one burn, in case they needed to get up in the night and also as a signal to anyone on the property who hadn’t heard about the late-night arrivals that the cabin was occupied. As a final safety precaution, he locked the old iron doorknob—not that it would stop anyone prepared to enter with a swift kick, but at least it would slow them down and make noise.

Diana was a lump under the covers in the bedroom. Costa went to the other side of the bed and sat on the edge. He could sleep on top of the quilt, he thought. It wasn't that chilly right now, although it would cool down by morning.

"Quinn," Diana mumbled into the pillow. "Get in bed."

"I was just thinking I could?—"

"Bed. Now." She stirred and propped herself up on her elbow. "Unless you find me that awful to share a bed with."

"Not at all." Entirely the opposite problem, in fact, but he wasn't sure if it would improve the situation to say so.

"Great." She flopped down on the pillow. "Go to bed."

Costa climbed into his side of the bed. Long-unused springs creaked under him, and it quickly became evident that the mattress had a general tendency to bow in the middle and cause them to slide toward each other.

Would it really be so bad to wake up with Diana nestled in his arms? He could picture it all too clearly, especially after feeling her warm body pressed against him more than once already today.

"I can hear you thinking over there," Diana said into her pillow. "Go to sleep."

"Working on it."

But he lay awake for a long time, running over the day's events in his mind—and unable to shake his awareness of her lithe body next to him, her warmth penetrating the sheets, her small sounds as she moved in her sleep.

CHAPTER 13

The wailing of the baby woke Diana with a jerk from uneasy dreams. She was already sitting up when she became aware that Costa was out of bed. In the living room, the crying died down to murmurs.

“Need help?” she called blearily.

“We got it,” Costa answered from somewhere out of sight. “Don’t we, baby bubba?”

It was still early. Dim light came through the gauzy white curtains, suggesting predawn. Diana flopped on her pillow, but as it became clear that she was too awake to get back to sleep, she sat up again.

She pulled on her jeans and socks, and padded into the living room. Costa was making up a bottle in the kitchen, holding the baby in the crook of his arm. For a minute she just stood and watched him. Why it was so captivating to watch him with a baby, she had no idea. But it drew her, especially in her sleepy state, her body still warm from the bed she had shared with him.

Costa looked up and saw her. His smile was quick, soft, and involuntary, and she found the warmth of his regard even more compelling than the sight she had been enjoying a moment ago of the baby nestled in his muscular arm.

If this keeps up, she thought, I’m gonna be in major trouble.

I’m worried I already might be.

Costa's smile became more guarded, and Diana wrenched her gaze from his face. "Coffee?" she said. "I doubt we're going back to bed."

"Coffee sounds great."

Diana poked through the contents of the kitchen, navigating around Costa as he prepared the bottle. She found both an old-fashioned tin coffeepot and a small (if old) electric coffeemaker, and decided to go with the sure thing rather than making cowboy coffee. Only things in the fridge were a box of baking soda and the handful of grocery items that were somehow, bizarrely, the only things she currently owned.

My worldly assets: half a gallon of milk, a pound of French roast, and some yogurt. Amazing.

At least it meant they could have coffee. She set up the coffeepot, and while Costa sat in one of the armchairs feeding Emmeline, she wandered around the cabin inspecting the rest of the amenities. There wasn't much to see. Shelves held a few books and games. The closet turned out to be crowded with a variety of items including the sort of things she might expect in an Airbnb (an ironing board, cleaning supplies, a box fan) as well as personal effects that had probably belonged to family members staying over: jackets and shoes, toys, well-used sports equipment. She climbed the ladder to peek into the loft and found it absolutely crowded with boxes of books and toys, old furniture, and something in the shadows under the eaves that looked like it might be a spinning wheel.

Outside the windows, the gray dawn light had turned gold. Diana fixed herself a cup of coffee and took it out on the porch just as the sun rose.

It was a gorgeous sight. The cabin offered a sweeping view of the canyon, currently bathed in pale gold morning light with stark blue shadows. Diana could not quite see her family's former ranch spread from here; it was concealed at this angle by a curve

of the arroyo and bluff that separated the two properties.

The low angle of the morning light also picked out the spring-lush vegetation of the desert landscape. Patches of dusty green and gold vegetation, lit from behind; great sweeping expanses of yellow and pink wildflowers on the hills. The air was chilly enough to raise goosebumps on her bare arms, and filled with fragrant and subtle scents.

Costa emerged from the cabin door with Em bright-eyed and alert in his arms. “Ready to head down to breakfast?”

“And run the family gauntlet, you mean?” she asked. “Into the breach once more, and all of that.” After draining her cup, she left it in the kitchen sink, and they headed down the hill together.

By daylight, Diana saw numerous other signs of occupation that had escaped her notice in the dark. There was a motley array of dusty vehicles in the parking area in front of the main house, and another truck parked by the fence of what was clearly a pasture. Staggered lines of fencing ran across the sloping landscape behind the house, containing some cows, a calf, a few horses, and a couple of sheep.

Costa headed for the main house. They entered to be greeted by delicious cooking smells and a chatter of conversation, mostly female voices.

“I heard there’s a baby!” This was Auntie Lo, who swooped down on them, her long graying hair falling over her shoulders rather than tucked up into her usual bun. “Where’s the baby? Hi, sweethearts.” She kissed Costa’s cheek, and then Diana’s. “Oh, who’s a little darling, who is it? It’s you!”

Em, draped against Costa’s chest, looked around wide-eyed at the room full of strangers. After a little supportive cuddling from both Costa and Diana, she was

willing to allow herself to be swept off with the aunts.

“Now then, CeCe, whose baby is she?” Aunt Brill asked, ever practical.

Costa promptly launched into a story, mostly accurate but skipping past a few inconvenient facts. He explained that she was a possibly kidnapped shifter child who had been found at a crime scene, they were currently trying to locate her parents, and they didn’t have a foster home for her yet.

This brought on a full groundswell of “Poor little lost lamb!” from the aunts, and there was little chance of getting Em back now. Costa and Diana both watched with a vigilant attentiveness that Diana herself was surprised by, in both of them, until it was clear that Em was enjoying being the center of attention.

Aunt Lo declared that she should be on solid food, and an argument followed over what sort of solid food, which seemed to be settled in favor of fork-mashed banana. (About which Em expressed clear opinions, mostly by squishing fistfuls of it into her own hair.)

Meanwhile, Aunt Maura—the oldest of the aunts, Costa’s dad’s widowed sister—presided over the griddle and frying pan, churning out pancakes and omelets with thin, iron-hard arms that had been honed to a high degree of fitness by shearing sheep and setting fence posts. Uncle Rodrigo presided over all of it cheerfully from his favorite chair by the kitchen window.

Diana felt a little overwhelmed. At least Costa’s three or four cousins and their families weren’t here, and his brother’s family (what was the wife’s name? Jenny?) didn’t seem to be here either.

But they were completely friendly to her, almost effusively so. Diana dug into a stack of pancakes and eggs, and let the family chatter wash over her. After they ate, she

asked if she could use the phone or computer to contact her workplace and let them know what had happened. Costa took her to the computer and showed her how to set it up so she could use wifi for phone calling. Then he went to use the landline to check in with the SCB. Diana fielded a flurry of worried texts from Luis, her boss, and other friends, briefly glanced at her email, and was reading news stories about the fire when Costa hung up and came over to sit down next to her.

“How’s it looking?” he asked quietly.

The house was a total loss. Diana firmly closed the browser window. “Never mind that. What did the SCB say? Any news on Em?”

“No leads on her background, but there are a couple of people from the Seattle bureau flying in this morning,” Costa told her. “One’s a social worker—Nicole Yates. She’s going to help out with getting us a more permanent placement for the kid.”

“Oh,” Diana said. “Yes, of course.” Naturally Emmeline needed a proper foster home. Bouncing her around between working individuals who were unprepared to care for her was unfair.

But somehow, temporarily, she had forgotten. All she could think of was the softness and warmth of Emmeline in her arms, the smell of her crown of baby hair.

She wasn’t sure if Costa was having similar thoughts, but he went silent and pensive for a moment before continuing.

“Anyway, the other visitor is one of their agents who thinks he might know something about the card you and Caine found at the scene. Cat Delgado is picking them up at the airport and driving them out to the ranch.”

“We’re staying here today, then?” Diana asked.

“For now, anyway.” He paused, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. “I also asked for the latest on your house fire. No suspects yet, and the details haven’t been released to the media, but it’s definitely arson.”

Diana genuinely had no idea how to react; her mind was blank. “So I—I was a target.”

“It looks like it. I’m sending an agent over to talk to your paramedic friend and get a thorough description and maybe a sketch of the person who was asking about you.”

Anger—anger was what she was feeling, swelling over her blank shock. “What can I do? I’m not just going to sit here twiddling my thumbs, Quinn.”

“For now, I think the best thing is for both of us to do that,” Costa said. “Not thumb-twiddling exactly, but there’s nothing we can do out there that my people can’t do, and the more we come and go, the more we compromise the ranch as a safehouse. Right now, no one knows where we are—or where Emmeline is.”

The words hit Diana’s righteous indignation like a bucket of cold water. “Of course Em’s safety matters most.” She looked across the room at Costa’s aunts, playing with the baby. “But we can’t just stay here forever, Quinn.”

“I’m not planning on it.” Costa put his hand on her arm, and Diana went still, not wanting him to pull away. His hand was strong, sure—comforting. “Once we get up to speed with our new arrivals, we’ll make a plan, and I promise you it won’t involve sitting here for days. But right now, there’s nothing to be gained by all of us rushing back and forth to and from Tucson except to leave a trail back here.” He ran his thumb up and down her arm. Diana was pretty sure he didn’t know he was doing it. “Unless you want to go back to your house and, uh—see if anything can be salvaged. If you do, I’ll drive you.”

Diana shuddered, and at that movement Costa seemed to realize where his hand was and, to her regret, pulled it hastily away. She could still feel the warmth of his palm lingering on her skin.

“Not right now,” she said. “Later, I guess I’ll have to, but I don’t think I can bear to see it yet. I know that probably sounds weak or—or stupid?—”

“No,” Costa said firmly. His hand hovered near her arm once again, but his eyes were locked on hers, sincere and intense. “Not at all. Nobody would be holding up better than you. That being said,” he added thoughtfully, “I think I’ll have Caine stop by my place and check if there are any signs of forced entry or anyone hanging around. He can come and go without being seen.”

Diana nodded and carefully squashed her urge to ask more questions about Agent Caine. She was going to get the full story out of them, one of these days. “So what do we do now? I’m full of energy and have nothing to do with it. When did you say the Seattle agents are getting here?”

“Not for hours.” Costa got up. “But I have an idea for something to keep us busy while we wait. Let me call Caine, and then—how are you at horseback riding these days?”

Diana found herself smiling for what felt like the first time in ages. “It’s like riding a bike, I hope. You never forget.”

* * *

They went up to the pasture and barn that she had noticed on the way down. The horses greeted them with soft noses, nibbling their fingers and looking for treats, and followed them curiously along the fence as they headed for the barn. There was plenty of tack, saddles, and gear, and they picked up two saddles and went to get the

horses ready.

Diana was a little surprised to find how her fingers still knew all the moves from her ranch childhood. She occasionally needed to go on horseback for some of her work, but she wasn't the one handling the horses; they were provided for her with saddles already on.

So this was a pleasure she had nearly forgotten, the inquisitive nose of the horse nudging at her hands, the satisfaction of tightening straps and adjusting stirrup length. With her long legs, Diana needed to make little adjustment, even though the saddle was set for Costa's tall clan.

She swung up on the back of her horse, a pretty bay mare that Costa told her was called Rabbit. Costa was still making friends with his horse, a leggy roan gelding named Gold Rush, letting the animal nibble his collar and hair while he rubbed the curving neck and scratched the horses's forehead.

"We should invite Jessie out here," Diana said. "She turns into a horse, you know." Normally it was a bit rude to discuss shifters' animal types with someone who might not know, or at least it was considered uncouth. But she figured Costa already knew the shift types of everyone who worked for him.

Costa confirmed it with a quick laugh. "She'd probably love it; she shifts at the drop of a hat anyway. You know, I never thought about doing a rural company retreat. We have the company picnics, but ... I should invite some people out here one of these days, you're right." He looked thoughtful as he gave Gold Rush one more scratch and mounted up. "I've always kept my personal life so separate from work that it never occurred to me."

"Keeping work and personal lives separate is usually considered a good thing." Diana felt a twinge; she had separated her personal life so thoroughly that she wondered if

she still had one.

“I know,” Costa said, and then, seeming to read her mind in that uncanny way he had, “But I figure it’s possible to make it too much of a thing.” He clucked to his horse. “Let’s go. Do you want to take the lead?”

“Go ahead. You know the trails here better than I do.”

“Don’t forget to keep an eye out for utility flags, especially along the boundaries of the ranch.”

They rode away from the corral on a trail that wound its way across the Costa ranch. It was a glorious day, the sun not too hot or strong, the sky flecked with clouds and the rugged landscape covered in new growth and fragrant flowers. Small streams were trickling with water from the hillside, and birds skimmed the air. In a month, it would all be sere and brown, drought reclaiming what was now a beautiful and verdant landscape. For now it seemed as if spring would never end.

As Diana had learned during her desert childhood, the secret to enjoying this landscape of extremes was to appreciate fully everything it had to offer at all times. The all-too-short spring, the fall that brought relief from summer’s oven, the rare and gorgeous dustings of snow during the winter. Even the baking misery of summer had its own charms, blue evenings filled with shadows and the vivid desert stars brighter and clearer than anywhere else on earth.

So she tried to be present in the moment, enjoying the sun on the back of her neck beneath her floppy-brimmed sun hat, the breeze and the spicy-dusty smells of the desert, the birds that rose up to swirl in the wake of the horses and then settled back down again on flower-dotted meadows that would be withered and yellow a few months later.

But for all her efforts to be there in her body, what she kept being drawn to instead was Costa's straight back and smooth grace as he rode the horse on the trail in front of her. The flex of his shoulders, the rippling muscles of his back beneath a T-shirt already lightly dampened with sweat ... the firm curve of his ass seated squarely and competently in the saddle.

Diana wrenched her eyes away as a quail went up almost under her horse's feet. Rabbit skittered sideways, and controlling her required Diana's attention long enough to get her mind back on the business at hand, more or less.

They reached the edge of the flat-bottomed arroyo that separated the two sides of the valley, as well as separating the Costa and Reid ranches. For Diana's entire childhood, she had looked across the shallow canyon at the Costa cattle and horses, at the threads of blue smoke from the fireplace in the main ranch house. She and Quinn had waved at each other from opposite sides, had crossed the arroyo a thousand times in all weather and all seasons.

Right now, the bottomland was as lush as it ever got. A thread of water coursed a winding path down the center of its wide, shallow basin, and on either side there was a spread of yellow-flowered brittlebrush, poppies, native grasses and flowering cacti. Pools of water supported flocks of waterfowl.

Diana had been told that many years ago, when their families first moved to the valley, the arroyo ran with water nearly all year long. Now it was rare to see it, only at the right times of year, when spring rains and runoff made the desert bloom.

"Want to go over?" Costa asked.

Diana hadn't realized it was so obvious that she was gazing across the arroyo at the cluster of ranch houses and old fencing where she used to live. "Do you think it'll be a problem? We'd be trespassing, you know."

Costa shrugged and leaned one arm across his saddle horn, reins loosely looped in his big, capable hand. “Uncle Rod says they only come out for a few weeks a year, and they haven’t been around in months. No one’s going to know.”

“Amazing,” Diana muttered grimly. “Can’t even be bothered to appoint a caretaker. We’ll be lucky if the house my great-grandfather built isn’t all beer cans and graffiti by now.”

“My family keeps an eye on the place. I’m not saying it’s all right, but there haven’t been any teenagers throwing keggers over there.”

But the way Costa was looking at her was too sympathetic to bear. Spurred by that expression as much as anything else, Diana tugged on her horse’s reins, turning Rabbit’s head toward the descent into the ravine.

There were a number of paths going up and down the sides of the arroyo. Some had been used in the old days by the Costa family’s herd of cattle (now reduced to a couple of milk cows who kept company with the horses). These days, they were beaten down and kept in use by deer and other animals visiting the water holes at the bottom. The trails were scuffed with many small, precise hoof marks. Costa pointed out a flag beside one trail, so they took another one. Now that she was alert for it, Diana noticed several such flags scattered along the edge of the ravine.

“What is he worried about, exactly?”

“Who knows. Aunt Maura reassured me that it’s more along the lines of twine and sharpened sticks than land mines. He’s got a bunch of books on old Native American trap design and he’s having a great time. Every once in a while he traps a jackrabbit or a deer. I suppose there are worse things he could be doing with his retirement years.”

Perhaps catching their riders' uneasiness, the horses were balky and uncooperative on the trip down to the arroyo. But the horses as well as their riders relaxed on the flat land at the bottom, where there was lush grass and a crisscrossing web of wild animal trails, neat lines of tracks leading to and from the stream and surrounding ponds.

It felt almost like being in a different place entirely. With the side of the arroyo hiding their view of the ranch houses, the cloud-dotted blue sky overhead, it felt as if they were the only two people for miles.

They let the horses pick their own route and pace. Both their mounts stopped occasionally for a mouthful of grass, and paused to drink from the stream. By habit, Diana glanced at the water for any signs of alkali that might poison an unwary animal, even though she knew that it had always been clear and fresh; there were too many springs in the desert that were unsafe to drink from, due to natural poisons in the groundwater as well as old mining contaminants.

Although it had looked flat from above, the channel was rough, crisscrossed with the braided courses of dry waterways and tangles of jammed-up driftwood and sand pushed into minor dams by flash floods. Diana glanced upstream and was aware of Costa doing the same thing. So far, the sky was clear except for scattered puffs of clouds. But this was the time of year when flash floods might happen, sweeping down the canyon and pushing a wall of mud, rocks, and anything unlucky enough to be in their path.

On a pleasant, clear day like this, however, there was little to worry about. They navigated the gully and found a path up the other side. Diana surged ahead, possessed by a breathless excitement that seemed to come on her all at once. Her horse lurched up the last unsteady part of the climb, and then she was on her family's old property for the first time since she was in her twenties.

CHAPTER 14

Costa followed Diana, hanging back a little, and not just because he didn't want to risk getting Rabbit's hindquarters in the face if the horse's hooves slipped on the loose, sandy soil. Knowing Diana, he figured she was going to want a minute or two in order to get her emotions under control.

When his horse scrambled up to the level ground along the lip of the arroyo, he was confronted with a sight that took his breath away.

Diana was sitting still on her horse, looking toward the ranch house. Costa had no eyes for the ranch: only for her. Her hat had slid back, exposing her forehead, and wind had pulled her hair out of her braid and tangled it around her face. She was wearing a borrowed denim shirt from one of the aunts, with the sleeves rolled up, and she sat her horse's back with casual self-confidence. Her face was nearly expressionless, eyes squinted against the brilliant sunlight on the ranch houses and the scrub and yellow rocks in the pasture behind it.

She made a stunning picture. For the first time in his life, he desperately yearned to be an artist, because he wanted to paint her in the golden light that flooded her, warming her tanned skin and outlining every hair blown wind-wild around her face. It was all he could do not to break the moment by pulling out his phone and photographing her—or pulling her down, drawing her to the grass, feeling her body against his?—

Diana broke the silence.

“They repainted the barn!”

“What?” Costa said, jarred out of a very different train of thought.

“The barn!” Diana sounded outraged. “Look at that color! The least my parents could have done was sell it to someone with a single shred of aesthetic sense.”

She urged Rabbit into motion, and then to a gallop. Costa followed more moderately, looking around as he rode.

He tried to remember the way the place had looked before. He knew the Halversons had made a lot of modifications to the ranch, although it looked like the main house, where Diana grew up, had remained the same—a weathered, rambling farmhouse, the paint long since faded to gray in the desert sun. Costa remembered Diana’s bedroom window well, an opening window on the second floor with a half-dead pine tree just near enough that an enterprising youngster could leap from the window to the pine’s outstretched branch, or vice versa.

The window was still just the same, although the pine was a stump. He supposed the Halversons had considered it unsafe so close to the house. It looked like the start had been made of a rock garden around the stump, but with the property’s abandonment, it was now growing stray clumps of brush and scraggly grass.

He rode around the house and saw that Diana had dismounted at the barn, looping Rabbit’s reins over a fence rail. Once again the sense of familiarity combined with not-familiar dislocation hit him. He didn’t remember what color the barn had been before, but it had definitely been repainted in the last few years. From the look of things, it was supposed to be a classic New England barn red, but the paint hadn’t been chosen well to resist the desert sun, and it had faded to a purplish color.

Costa dismounted and tied his horse beside Rabbit. Meanwhile, Diana had wandered

over to the barn door. It was secured with a padlock and chain. Diana gave the chain a tug, but she removed her hand as Costa joined her.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to break in,” she said with a little sigh.

“My folks probably have a key, since they’ve been watching the place for the owners. I should’ve thought to ask before we came over here.”

Diana shook her head. She turned away, shoving her hands in her pockets, and surveyed the old fencing and the pasture that was slowly being reclaimed by scrubby brush.

“I don’t think it would make any difference. All our stuff’s gone, except the old equipment and anything else my parents sold with the property. There’s nothing of mine in the house.” She slowly took her hand from her pocket and put it over her face. “There’s nothing of mine anywhere.”

“Diana,” Costa said helplessly.

“I hate crying,” Diana said thickly. “Now it’s all I seem to do.”

“You have more reason to cry than anybody I know. Don’t apologize for it.” He reached out a cautious arm, and Diana didn’t resist, so Costa pulled her against him. It wasn’t quite the full hug of yesterday, though he was almost overwhelmed by the sensory memory of having her in his arms. This time, there was a prickly tension in her that he didn’t want to force his way past; part of holding on to Diana was knowing when to hold her loosely. So he let her lean against him until she took a deep breath, drew away, and felt in her pocket for a tissue.

“At this rate I need to start carrying around a whole box of Kleenex,” she said when she had dabbed at her reddened eyes. She shoved the damp tissue back into her

pocket and offered him a shaky smile. “If you don’t mind risking more waterworks, can we walk around a little?”

“I think that sounds like a great idea.”

They wandered through the back pasture, flushing a small group of deer. Most of the fence was still there, but enough of it was down that animals could freely come and go. Costa had to keep stopping himself from reaching for her hand; it felt so much like the walks they used to take here as teenagers.

He found himself thinking about something he had read a long time ago about some creation stories, how they told of the creation of the world as a journey taken by a divine being, and wherever it touched its feet or a magical stick or other item, physical parts of the landscape—mountains, rivers, islands—sprang into existence. The landscape was the map of a divine being’s journey. It seemed to him that the landscape of Diana’s family ranch was like that, but it was a map of his history with Diana.

There was the rock they used to lie on to stargaze, the sandy circle that was once a pen where together they had trained Diana’s 4H pony, the meadow where—he vividly remembered—they’d shared a cautious first kiss, and then were so embarrassed about it that they didn’t talk to each other for days.

Up there, behind those scrubby trees, the hollow where they used to take the blanket—the hollow where?—

“I can’t believe they’ve let the place go to seed like this,” Diana said. Her weary resignation was more alarming than any amount of anger. She stopped at a concrete water trough, now dry and crusted with old mineral deposits. “My family put so much work into it. This was their dream. Now it’s just turning into a—a ruin, just another Arizona ghost town.”

“It’s nowhere near that yet,” Costa pointed out.

“Yeah, but in another five years? Fifteen? If the problem is that they’ve run out of money and motivation, it’s not like that’s going to suddenly change. Maybe they’ll sell it to someone who will turn it into a McDonald’s or something.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Okay, this is ridiculous. Look at me turning into a maudlin, weepy idiot. Do you remember how we used to climb on the edge of this?”

In keeping with the swerve in the conversation, she planted a hand on the wide, flat lip of the water trough, then carefully climbed up and stood with her feet spread for balance.

“This seemed a lot wider when we were kids,” she remarked. “But you can see a lot from up here. Come on.”

“It was easier to climb up when we were kids, too,” Costa grumbled, but he scrambled after her. “You know, you always got me to do the craziest things. Walking fence rails. Climbing on the barn roof. Do you remember that time we decided to see if we could cross the whole pasture by hopping from boulder to boulder without touching the ground? As I recall, you cheated.”

Diana laughed. “As I recall, I asked if shifting was all right, and you said it was.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know roadrunners could fly!”

She was gorgeous, grinning in the sun, her eyes creased with the squint lines worn deep from her outdoor job and the sun backlighting the loose hair around her face. She wasn’t the same girl he had grown up next to; life had worn deep tracks in her, as it had in him.

But he loved her, he now realized, just as he had loved her then, a love that had worn

itself into both their souls in the same way that the sun had left lines on their faces.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to step closer. Abruptly their difference in height was more obvious than usual. Diana was a fairly tall woman, so she could look him in the eyes at a normal conversational distance, but this close she had to tip her head back a little.

He put a hand on the side of her face and drew her closer.

They had kissed for the first time in this pasture. They had done a lot of “firsts” in this pasture. Their families had both assumed they would marry, had been surprised when they went their separate ways after high school.

All these years later, his lips found hers again.

Her mouth opened to let him in. Her lips were soft, her return kiss tentative at first, then heated and eager.

And then she abruptly pulled back.

Just like she'd pulled away all those years ago. And maybe it was being here, where it was harder to put the past aside, but the pain he'd tried to tamp down for all those years hit him again with a crushing sense of rejection.

CHAPTER 15

What was she doing?

Diana wrenched herself back to her senses, out of the seductive vortex of Costa's lips, his hands in her hair, his body against hers.

By the time regret crashed in a few seconds later, as the parts of her he had been touching a moment ago felt cold even in the desert sun, he had already stepped back too. They regarded each other from a few feet and twenty years apart.

"Do you think ...?" Costa began. He wet his lips. He looked hurt, angry, and she honestly couldn't blame him.

"It's just being here," Diana said quickly. "All the memories."

"I know, I have them too. But Diana ..." He looked at her painfully, almost desperately. "Could it work? Between us, I mean."

It certainly worked physically. She didn't need the memory of their one, fumbling loss of virginity in the pasture to know that. It had been clumsy and exciting in the way teen sex was, both of them were still figuring out how all the parts worked, and it was over too fast and not fast enough. And she would give almost anything to have him on top of her again, the fully realized promise of the lean muscles and deft hands of his late-teenage self, grown into strength and sureness.

And she couldn't go through losing that again.

“We broke up for a good reason.” Her lips were dry in the arid breeze, and she kept touching her tongue to them. Or maybe it was that her mouth wanted to find his again. “Remember that, Quinn? You wanted to stay on the ranch. I mean, more than that.” The old betrayal swept over her, the sense of realizing all those years ago that he wasn’t the person she thought he was. That he didn’t love her like she thought he did. “You were determined to stay on the ranch. You wouldn’t accept any compromise.”

“I had to,” Costa shot back. “You were the one who didn’t understand.”

“No, you didn’t understand!” The feeling of being trapped slammed down on her again. Just like all those years ago, she could sense the future—Costa’s future—closing around her like the jaws of a bear trap: staying on the ranch, being miserable like her mother had been, having kids and raising kids, never doing all the things she’d dreamed of doing. “I had to get away. Go out, see the world, do things that weren’t this! Didn’t you ever want that too?”

“I did go out,” Costa shot back. “I did see things. Just because it’s not two thousand miles away doesn’t mean it’s not worth seeing. Or doing! I have a life here. I had a life here. And your—your life was somewhere else, and we both knew that.”

“I told you we could compromise!” she flared. “You could come with me to college, or?—”

“I couldn’t be gone that long, and we both know why!”

“—or,” she forged on, feeling the scarred-over wounds of those old arguments tear open and bleed, “I could go away for a couple of years and come back ?—”

“We both knew you wouldn’t!”

Diana recoiled as if slapped. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No!” Costa said sharply. He reached out a hand, then let it drop. “But you didn’t, did you? Not for fifteen years. I wasn’t going to do a long-distance relationship for fifteen years, Diana. It’s not in me.”

She stared at him across that great gulf between them, helpless with fury and grief. “I would have come back if I promised.”

“I know. And you would have been miserable. Just like I’d have been miserable if I went with you.”

She knew it was true—on both sides. She’d had to go live her life, see the world, explore all the things she had been able to explore. And yet somehow all of that had circled around in the end and she’d wound up standing here again.

“You always let your family take up too big a chunk of your life,” she said, and she saw Costa’s face close off, pushing the argument away just like he had all those years ago. “Maybe you would have—maybe if you got away a little, you would have learned you didn’t have to?”

“Take care of them?” Costa snapped. “Look after my aunts and my kid brother? Abdicate the family responsibility that’s been passed down to me from four generations of Costas on this land? Is that the future you’d have wanted for me, Diana?”

It was, actually. She wanted to see him live his life for himself, rather than constantly feeling tied to everything he had to do here. First it was the ranch, and the younger brother and cousins that he felt responsible for; then it was the SCB. Diana would have loved to throw a lasso around him like he was a recalcitrant yearling cow and drag him away so that he could feel the world open up around him the way it had

around her.

But—she would have broken something in him forever by doing that. Responsibility, taking care of people that was who Cesar Quinn Costa was. To force him away from that would be to shatter the core of him, just like staying here would have caused hers to dwindle and collapse.

Diana sighed and jumped down from the edge of the dry trough. “All these years and we’re still the same people underneath it all, aren’t we?”

Costa unexpectedly gave a short laugh. “Stubborn, determined, set in our ways? Yeah, probably.”

He leaped down, but rather than pulling away, he took her hand. Diana startled a bit, and she felt him begin to pull back, but she closed her fingers around his.

Costa turned to look up the pasture, toward the line of trees that she remembered so vividly. They were scrubby and gnarled, barely clinging to life in the dry pasture. But they sheltered a hollow where the two of them had explored all the wonders of being newly minted adults.

“Want to walk around a little more?” Costa asked quietly. His thumb rubbed over the back of her hand.

She was wildly tempted—and afraid of what she might do if she gave in to that temptation. “Actually, we should probably get back to your place before they send out a search party.”

Costa’s aunts would do no such thing; they were probably delighted for the (as they thought) couple to spend time alone together. But Costa nodded, and they walked back slowly toward the horses, his hand holding hers the entire way.

When they reached the horses, Costa's fingers slipped quietly out of hers. Diana mounted Rabbit and turned the horse's head away from the barn, toward home—Costa's home, that is.

As they retraced their previous course, Costa riding slightly behind her, he said abruptly, "You did come back, you know."

"Fifteen years later," Diana said dryly. "To Bisbee." A shudder went through her at the thought of everything she had so recently lost there. She had been more-or-less successfully not thinking about it.

"Yes, but of all the places in the world you could have landed, you settled down less than a two-hour drive from where you grew up," Costa said.

"I don't want to talk about it right now."

She could tell when he remembered why she didn't want to talk about it, because a sudden silence hit. Then Costa said, "I'll check in with the SCB when we get back, see if they've found anything."

"Okay," Diana said.

They rode back in a silence that was somehow at the same time more and less uneasy than the ride over. She felt as if they had settled into some kind of new equilibrium, and she could still feel his lips on hers. The kiss on the water tank was going to live on in her head forever, framed by the blue sky and the dusty hills.

But she could feel jagged-edged emotions shifting around inside her every time she allowed her thoughts to slip sideways, away from the "now."

Could it work? Between us?

We would have to be different people, Diana thought. If only.

* * *

As they rode up to the Costa ranch, a kid's voice hailed them. "Hey! Uncle Quinn! Look at me!"

There was a boy in the corral where they had saddled their horses, riding bareback on a painted pinto pony. Diana hadn't seen Costa's nephew Jay in a long while, but this boy must be him—bare feet pressed to the horse's sides, a kid-sized riding helmet covering his sun-bleached brown hair.

Costa grinned, waved, and rode over to the corral. He and Diana dismounted and began unsaddling their horses. Meanwhile, Jay rode up to the other side of the pole fence. His real name was longer, Diana had gathered—Jason, maybe? No one had ever called him anything other than Jay in her hearing.

She had missed the wedding of Costa's younger brother and his wife. All of that had happened while she was elsewhere, around the time she got out of the Army or while she was still skipping across the world, exploring her options, flying helicopters for development companies on foreign sites. She had returned to Arizona to see her mother through her final illness, and with the life insurance settlement, she had decided to buy a house. Fifteen years of globetrotting was enough, as it turned out; it was time to explore life as a homeowner with a regular job.

But it meant she had missed everything about Marco's marriage and the baby, and by the time she came back into Costa's life, things had settled into their current status quo. Marco was gone, and his widow and young son lived on the ranch.

"Oh, Quinn, there you are!" Jay's mother Jenny came out of the barn with a bucket in one hand and a basket of eggs held awkwardly against her side. "Hi, Diana. I heard

you two got in late last night.”

“Hi, nice to see you again,” Diana said. She liked Jenny, but never felt like she had much to say to her. Costa’s sister-in-law was a born-and-bred rural girl just like Diana. But unlike Diana, Jenny had embraced the rural housewife lifestyle. Today she was wearing a long skirt and sandals, her hair back in a simple braid that reached almost to her waist.

Jenny set down the bucket, and Costa greeted her with a brief embrace and kissed her cheek. “Need any help?”

“No, just taking some things up to our place.” Jenny and Jay lived on the back of the ranch, apart from the main grouping of farm houses where the aunts were. “Someone’s been absolutely wild to have you watch him put his trick pony through his paces, though.”

“Let’s get the horses taken care of, and then he can show me as much as he wants.”

After they had the horses unsaddled, rubbed down, and turned out into the pasture, Costa and Diana leaned on the fence and watched Jay ride around the corral bareback and do tricks. He got the horse to dance lightly around some pole obstacles, stood up on the animal’s back and then, for the finale, leaped to the top of a fence rail.

After Diana stopped having a heart attack about the kid falling off—which didn’t seem likely; it was clear Jay had been riding since he was big enough to sit on a horse—she found herself mostly watching Costa. His face was soft and fascinated, and he called out encouragement or praise as the boy put the pony through its paces, and occasionally advice as well. Not like an adult humoring a child’s fancies. He was really interested.

It made her think of Costa holding Emmeline, the way his face went so soft and his

entire body language radiated protectiveness.

He would have made a good dad, she thought. Then she wanted to metaphorically smack herself for thinking in the past tense. It wasn't too late. Lots of people had kids later in life.

But—with whom? The very thought of Costa having kids with someone else made her bristle with what she knew was completely irrational jealousy. Still, the whole reason why they had the fake relationship arrangement was because neither of their careers really allowed for family and kids.

.... you settled down less than a two-hour drive from where you grew up.

Costa's hand brushed her shoulder briefly, and she turned as if drawn by a wire. "Looks like visitors," he said, nodding down the hill. On the far side of the ranch houses, there was a dust cloud and an approaching vehicle. "It's probably Delgado. Hey, Jay, nice job! We gotta go, but I'll come up and visit with you and your mom when I get a chance."

The kid waved and slid off the fence rail onto the pony's back again.

Diana and Costa had just arrived in the main ranch yard when a silver SUV, covered in dust, pulled in. The car door opened and Cat Delgado stepped out.

"Heya, boss," she called. "You said the road was bad, but hoo-ee. I don't think my suspension will ever be the same. Those are some washboards that my grandma could've used to scrub the entire family laundry." She turned back as her passengers got out.

The first person out of the car was a cheerful woman with a pretty round face framed in waves of chestnut hair. Costa shook hands with her and introduced her to Diana as

Nicole Yates, the SCB's social worker from Seattle.

The tall, dark-haired man who had just followed her was presumably the other field agent, a handsome man in his thirties with short dark hair, tattoos visible on his biceps beneath the sleeves of a tight black T, and a stud earring in his left ear. He was helping unbuckle the seat belt of an adorable little girl with large dark eyes and brown braids.

Straightening, he held out a hand. "Chief Costa."

"Agent Mendoza. Vic, this is Diana Reid, a search and rescue pilot helping out with this operation. Diana, Agent Vic Mendoza."

Diana nodded, feeling both pleased and embarrassed to be introduced as part of the operation. Mendoza had a ready smile and a firm grip, and she liked him immediately.

"Agent Mendoza. It's a pleasure."

"Likewise. Call me Vic."

When Mendoza released Diana's hand, he put it down and the little girl promptly slipped her hand into it, standing close to his side.

Costa said, "And this is?"

"My daughter Molly," said Mendoza. "This is Miss Reid and Mr. Costa. Say hi, Molly."

"Hi," said the girl, with a shy grin displaying a missing tooth.

“You can call me Diana,” Diana said. “How old is she?”

“Eight,” Molly said promptly. “And a half.”

“Half birthdays are important,” Costa said solemnly, and Molly gave him a look that suggested she was well aware the adults were putting her on. “Well, I’m forty and a half, and I was out for a horseback ride with my friend Diana just now.” He mimed fanning his face, and the little girl giggled. “Let’s go up to the ranch house and hydrate.”

As they started walking up to the ranch house, Molly detached from her dad’s hand and ran to look at various things, the cactus flowers having particular fascination for her.

“She seems sweet, but are you entirely aware that I didn’t requisition a child?” Costa asked.

“I know. I had to bring her; I don’t have anyone to leave her with at home, at least for longer than overnight. And,” Vic said quietly, stepping closer, “right now she’s just started shifting, so it’s a bit hard for her to control. Agent Delgado said everyone here is a shifter or knows about them; is that right?”

“Yeah,” Costa said. “It’ll be fine. My clan has seen plenty of kids through their early shifting. Just so that I know whether we should be looking in the treetops or in holes in the backyard, what does she?—”

Vvvvviiiiip!

“—turn into,” Costa finished unnecessarily, as Vic, without even breaking stride, lunged to the side and caught a hummingbird an instant before she plunged headfirst into a cactus.

“We’re still working on steering,” Vic said. “You okay, honey?”

Diana glanced from the pile of little-girl clothes deposited limply on the path, as if the girl inside of them had melted, then to Vic, who was carefully putting the hummingbird into his shirt’s breast pocket. Nicole, barely pausing, bent to scoop up the discarded clothing, evidently very familiar with handling shifter children.

“Anyway,” Vic went on as if there had been no interruption, “it makes finding a caretaker difficult, as you might imagine. I’m a single dad, and we don’t have any close relatives in Seattle. There’s a babysitter I trust, but I wasn’t sure how long I’d be gone.”

“You know this could be dangerous,” Costa said levelly.

“No more than back home,” Vic returned evenly. “Molly knows Daddy’s job can sometimes be scary—don’t you, honey?—but we have bad guys up in Seattle, too.”

The hummingbird’s head poked out of his pocket, looking around with bright eyes.

In the ranch house, Molly was handed off (literally) to the aunts, along with her bundle of clothing. As they went off to ply her with orange juice and cookies, Costa passed around bottles of water and cups of coffee to the adults. Diana tried to keep her traitorous fingers from lingering on his as he gave her a cup of coffee, made exactly as she liked it.

“Can I see the baby?” Nicole asked. “It sounds like there’s a possibility this is connected to the shifter lab we broke up in Washington a while back. I thought it was a one-off, but they might have had other branches.”

“Wait, wait,” Diana interrupted. “Quinn clearly knows this, but I don’t. What happened?”

Delgado also looked curious. Nicole gestured them to a collection of overstuffed chairs in front of the picture windows, looking out on the sweep of the desert and the empty road approaching the ranch.

“So this was about two years ago,” she said. “The Seattle SCB broke up an illegal lab that had been trying to find a way to infuse shifters’ special traits—our healing ability in particular—into human test subjects. The experiments didn’t really work, and the results could be ... monstrous. Though not always. We rescued four healthy, beautiful wolf shifter kids, and I’m currently raising them with my husband Avery.”

Her face grew incredibly soft as she spoke. Coming back to herself, she added, “You’ll notice I’m holding myself back from pulling out my phone and showing you a million pictures.”

Costa met Diana’s eyes. Diana grinned. Costa held up one finger. Diana said, “How about just one picture?”

Nicole’s entire body language radiated relief and delight. She took out her phone. “Oh, no reception here?”

“No,” Costa said. “No cell service on the whole ranch, unless you get pretty high up in the hills, where you can sometimes get a signal.”

“Well, that’s okay. I’ve got my whole camera roll.”

The group of them dutifully cooed over a few pictures of Nicole’s husband, a handsome thirty-something man with floppy dark hair, playing with what looked like four adorable, fluffy husky puppies.

“I always wondered what made my sister go from not really caring about anyone’s baby pictures to spamming us in the family chat,” Nicole said. “And then these four

came along, and all of a sudden I understood.”

“You’re really raising quadruplets?” Delgado asked. “How do you ever find time for ... anything?”

“It’s certainly been a challenge, especially since Avery and I both work.” Nicole put her phone away. “But I wouldn’t trade them for anything in the world. I think when you know, you just know, and I think Avery and I both knew right away that the kids were meant for us, and we were for them—perhaps even before we realized we were meant for each other.” She got up. “Now I’m going to go have a gander at the kiddo, and I’ll start working out a placement plan for her.”

When you know, you just know. Diana firmly told herself that the unhappy clutch in her chest at the mention of Emmeline finding a foster placement was just natural fondness for a small, helpless thing. She would have felt the same at letting go if she’d been helping take care of a lost kitten, she was sure.

Still, she didn’t quite dare meet Costa’s eyes. She didn’t want to see what was written there. Diana looked down at her cup of coffee, then up at Delgado, who smiled at her. Meanwhile, Costa turned his attention to Vic.

“So that’s Nicole’s part in this,” Costa said. “I know you came down because you thought you might have a lead on that card we found at the site.”

“Yeah, and I took the time to pick up something before I left.” Vic opened his wallet and slipped out a card. “Look familiar?”

He handed it to Costa. Diana leaned over to look. It was a white rectangle, business card shaped and sized, slightly discolored and foxed around the edges as if it had been carried around in a pocket or wallet. On the front, there was a stylized blue shape that Diana took to be an alligator or crocodile, jaws open and head curled

around so it was looking back with its tail sprawling toward the edge of the card.

Costa flipped it over. In pencil scrawl, on the back of it there was a phone number (very smudged, as if it had been rubbed out and rewritten) and an even more badly smudged set of numbers in the bottom right corner reading, almost illegibly, 36/4.

“It does look like the same kind of thing,” Costa said. He handed it to Diana, who nodded. “Where did it come from?”

“It’s mine,” Vic said. He smiled lopsidedly. “Have you heard of the shifter underground fighting rings?”

CHAPTER 16

The problem with having kissed Costa earlier—well, one of the problems—was that Diana kept finding herself distracted with his mouth (the soft flex of his lips, the light dusting of red-gold stubble around them), or the grace of his hands as he passed the card to her.

“Shifter fighting rings?” she asked, looking up from studying the card and trying very hard to convince herself that the warmth lingering on it was because it had been in Vic’s pocket and not a slight vestige of Costa’s touch.

“Yeah, I know about them, but I didn’t realize they operated in my jurisdiction,” Costa said. His hazel-gold eyes were fixed on Vic, laser intent. “What do you mean, it’s your card?”

“Just what I said,” Vic said. “I was in that world for a while.”

Diana had passed the card to Cat Delgado, and now Vic reached out and took it back, holding it between two long, capable fingers. If Diana hadn’t already been gone for Costa’s hands, she might have been captivated by Vic’s; he had slim, graceful fingers and hands that she would have associated with a pianist or artist. But now that she thought about it, there were also scars, so faint that they barely caught the light against his tan skin.

“This is how fighters are identified,” Vic explained. He held up the card to show them the front with the blue outline again. “My shift form is a crocodile, so that’s how I’m identified in the underground. We didn’t use names.”

“Oh, that’s a crocodile,” Costa said. “I thought it was an alligator.”

“I thought it was a dinosaur,” Delgado said.

Vic rolled his eyes and grinned. He flipped the card over. “Contact info. Mine was a burner phone. Some people use email or various messaging apps. But it’s always anonymous and easy to ditch and get a new one in case law enforcement comes knocking—or if you want to get out.”

“What about those?” Diana said, pointing to the number at the corner.

“Win-loss record. It determines what kind of odds you get and how much money you make.” Another lopsided grin. “As you can see, I was pretty good.”

No kidding, if that was 36 wins to four losses. Costa clearly thought so too. “You won thirty-six fights? How often did you fight?”

Vic lifted a shoulder in a brief shrug. “Variable. At the bottom end of things, it’s loosely organized. A lot like bare-knuckle boxing rings or underground martial arts. Lots of guys, and more than a few women, who’ve slipped through the cracks in various ways, got out of prison or gangs, or just tough fighter types looking to pick up some extra cash.”

“So it’s not lethal?” Costa asked. “I’ve heard a few different things.”

“I’ve never heard of it at all,” Delgado said quietly.

Vic flipped the card around, palmed it, and laid it down on the coffee table. “Generally, no. Not lethal. Not on that level. But things change as you get deeper in.”

“Ah,” Costa said under his breath.

“If that’s all it was,” Vic said seriously, meeting each of their eyes in turn, “it’d be fine. Just some guys picking up beer money on the weekends. I wouldn’t have had the issues with it that I eventually ended up having.” He glanced swiftly toward the doorway to the kitchen, where Molly’s high-pitched voice could be heard cheerfully chatting with Costa’s aunts. “I hope that eventually I would have got out for her . But there was something else, something specific. What made me leave the rings was finding out that not everyone is there voluntarily.”

“ Ah .” Costa’s tone was different. Darker.

“You don’t really get exposed to this until you get deeper in,” Vic explained. “But once you start getting past the minor leagues, you get into the high-roller levels. There’s a lot of money floating around. Plenty of it trickles down to the players; once you start making your way to the big-league fights, you can earn a lot. But that’s also when you get into the level where rich assholes, often human ones, get their kicks making shifters fight for them and betting on it. And at that level, rare shifters start to be in great demand.”

“Like crocodiles?” Costa said.

“It’s a living. Or at least it was for a while.” Vic shrugged and flashed Costa a quick grin. “You’re a boar shifter, right? Honestly, you’d be perfect for it. Unusual shift type, formidable and tough, but easy to underestimate until they see you in action. You could’ve gone far.”

“Let’s get back to how some people aren’t there by choice.”

Vic lost his grin. “Yeah. That. I’d heard of it. People drugged, kidnapped. But I don’t think I really believed it until the first time I came up against a fighter in the ring who was being forced. Huge guy, turned into a grizzly bear. I figured I’d have a real fight on my hands. But he was desperate, making stupid mistakes.” His voice lowered, and

he looked down at his hands, the card held between two fingers. One of those scars on the back of his hand, Diana realized, was a white crescent, a half moon of human teeth in a bite mark.

Taking a breath, Vic went on. “I could tell he was scared, and by that point I’d been in enough fights to have a good read on when people are willing to give up. One of the reasons I got as far as I did was because I always gave them an out, and lots of people will take it. But he wouldn’t. And wouldn’t. I started to realize I was going to have to really hurt him to get him to stop coming. And I ended up throwing the fight because of that, because I couldn’t figure out what was going on and I was starting to get scared that this was going to be the one everyone talked about, the one where you killed or really hurt someone. So I lost, and took a big hit in the game rankings because of it. A lot of people had bet on me heavily and weren’t happy. I think there’s a distinct chance some of them are still looking for me.”

“What did turn out to be going on with him?” Diana asked gently. “Did you ever find out?” Costa said nothing, but his body language was tense. Waiting. Delgado looked much the same.

“Blackmail.” Vic’s gaze was still on his hands. “They had his wife. I—I didn’t help. I never actually found out what happened to him, or her, and that still keeps me up some nights. I just got out.”

Costa said, “You gotta put on your own oxygen mask first. Sometimes that’s all you can do.”

“Yeah, well, I turned my back on it and never looked back. I think part of why I joined the SCB later was so I could do some good to make up for what I didn’t do then.”

“I think you did what you could at the time,” Diana said. “You gave him a win that it

sounds like he needed.”

Vic looked seriously at each of them in turn. “Look, I didn’t tell you guys that story for back-pats. I told you so you know what you might be up against. That red lion card is almost certainly a ring fighter’s card, maybe even one of the managers. There wasn’t anything written on it?”

Costa shook his head. “Blank.”

“Probably hadn’t been used. We all had an envelope full of them at all times. Keeping it on the plausibly deniable down low meant you could go into any copy shop and get a bunch run off without awkward questions.”

“I get that the animal is the shift type, but do the colors mean anything?” Diana asked.

“Yes, but it’s not universal. There isn’t one overall organization that controls everything; it’s on the level of local clubs that meet up in groups. In general, though, red and black were the high-level players, either top ranked fighters, or managers or big bettors. Mine being blue signals that I’m mid tier. Most clubs use green for new fighters.”

Costa’s mouth opened slightly. He looked at Diana, and she saw that his face was alight with the suppressed energy that meant his brain was racing behind the scenes.

In spite of her effort to resist, she was drawn to it. Costa was smart , and she had always loved that about him, especially since he worked hard to hide it behind his jock facade.

“Okay, so we got shifter fighting rings, and rare shifters are pure money-making gold on the fighting circuit. And we’ve got a little girl in there who is a shift type we’ve

never seen before.”

Diana’s stomach lurched. “You think they found her and—and sold her?”

“No,” Costa said. “I think they made her.”

“What ?” Delgado said.

“Nicole said there was a lab up in Seattle experimenting on shifters, right? What if someone’s trying to dream up custom blends, somehow combine different shift types into—I don’t know, shifter chimeras?”

“That’s insane,” Diana said flatly. “She’s a few months old. Someone’s got to be playing a heck of a long game to commission a custom gladiator who won’t even be able to fight for fifteen or twenty years.”

“Some people do play the long game,” Costa batted back. “And maybe she’s a test run, anyway. Maybe they’re working on being able to get it to work on adult shifters. Get you a bear who can fly and also breathe underwater.”

“That is evil ,” Diana said.

“Not if it’s voluntary,” Costa pointed out. “ I wouldn’t want it, but if somebody wants to get themselves a pair of wings or gills, whose cares? It’s sneaky and underhanded, maybe, if they’re springing it on someone in a fight, but it’s not evil. Doing it to people who didn’t consent, doing it to kids— that’s evil.”

“We don’t know for sure that’s what’s going on.”

“No,” Costa said. He turned to look at Vic. “But what do you think? You know the people at the top, at least by reputation, these high rollers you were talking about.

Does this sound like something they'd do?"

"Yeah," Vic said. He met each of their eyes in turn. "Yes, it does."

* * *

None of the new arrivals had eaten, so Costa's aunts brought out a generous lunch spread consisting of leftover tamales from the previous night (there was always way more food than anyone could eat in one sitting; it had been true of the family ever since Costa could remember), a huge bowl of salad, fresh bread, and farm-churned butter. The baby was passed around between many willing arms, including Molly's.

Jenny and Jay turned up, and the two kids, who were similar in age, seemed to hit it off, at least if Jay offering to let Molly ride his pony was any indication. Molly seemed curious but fascinated.

The conversation remained light throughout lunch. Afterward, Molly was installed to do some online homework on the computer. The aunts waved off any offers of help cleaning up, while the agents went off together. Diana followed along, with a slight sense of exclusion that she knew was irrational but couldn't help feeling anyway.

"Do you still have contacts in the fighting underground?" Costa was asking Vic.

"Not really, and I wouldn't want to get in touch with them if I did. I didn't exactly leave on great terms. That being said," he added, "the way to get into the fighting rings in any major city is to start sending out feelers in the way you'd find any other illegal underground operation. Hang out in places that type of person hangs out, in this case gyms and boxing clubs, and the bars where the regulars go to socialize afterwards. You specifically want places that shifters go. I figure you know the shifter gyms in town, and Tucson seems big enough to have at least one."

“Yeah,” Costa said. “I can’t ask you to, especially with the kid, but?—”

“I don’t want to stick my toe into that scene back in Seattle. Too close to where I fought before, and I’ve got too much to lose with Molly now. But here, this far from home, it ought to be safe for me to ask around a little. No one’s gonna know me.”

“That’d be great.” Costa grinned. “I’m simply too well known. I don’t think anyone’s going to believe that the chief of the local SCB division wants to start bare-knuckle brawling for petty cash.”

“What about her?” Vic asked, jerking a thumb at Diana.

“Her?” Costa asked, visibly alarmed.

“Yeah, her. Women do this too, you know.” He turned to Diana, addressing her directly. “You look like the type who’d be a natural. Capable and physical?—”

“No,” Costa said.

Diana had been gearing up for a no herself, but that brought her head around in a hurry. “What do you mean no, Quinn?”

“I mean no. Absolutely not.”

“Cesar Quinn Costa, can I talk to you in private?”

She hustled him off to the porch.

“I didn’t realize we were having a negotiation,” Costa said.

“You can’t shut me out of this investigation. I know I’m not one of your agents, but

that also means you can't tell me what to do."

"You really want to go poke around in the shifter fighting underground by yourself?"

"No," Diana said sharply, "but I'm not going to sit here on the ranch, feeding chickens and riding horses while you and your agents investigate without me. They burned my house down, Quinn!"

"I know." Costa put a hand on her arm. "How does this sound? We'll let Vic ask questions, and you and I will drive out to the aviation charter company that owns the plane and see what they know. We can do it this afternoon. What do you think?"

Diana turned it over in her head, trying to feel out if it was a sop or a bribe, but it didn't seem to be. It felt like a genuine peace offering. "All right," she said. "Let's do that."

CHAPTER 17

After the serene peace of the ranch, Costa found himself unexpectedly bothered by the hustle, noise, and urgency of Tucson traffic.

Diana was once again in his passenger seat, quiet and pensive, though he didn't think she was actually still mad at him. Vic and Delgado had headed out at about the same time, leaving Molly in the care of Costa's relatives along with Emmeline. Vic would start nosing about in search of the local branch of the shifter fighting underground, while Delgado planned to head back to work and touch base with Agent Caine.

"So the place is called Desert Tours Aviation," Costa said, glancing at his GPS. They navigated around the outskirts of Tucson and went on heading west, away from the city. "According to Caine, they do flightseeing tours, carry cargo and passengers, just general all-around small aviation stuff. They work with resource development companies doing site surveys or ferrying cargo to mines and facilities in remote locations, do custom passenger charters, that kind of thing."

Diana nodded, and he realized belatedly that she probably knew most of this already from her earlier search and rescue. "Have they ever been involved with anything criminal?"

"Not that we know of."

The company was based out of a small airport, little more than a cluster of buildings and hangars, a windsock, and a fence around a single small runway. Following his GPS, Costa pulled in behind a white and red painted building adjacent to a pair of

hangars. There was a narrow parking area next to a large fuel tank labeled AVIATION FUEL ONLY. A small, bright yellow plane was pulled in next to it, and there was a man in coveralls standing with one foot in the door and leaning over the wing, fiddling with the fuel cap on top.

“Help you folks?” he called.

“Are you with Desert Tours?” Costa asked. “We’re investigators here to talk to the owners about the crash.” He briefly flipped open his ID, giving an impression of what was inside without really showing the contents.

“Another crash investigator? Well, sure, come this way.”

They walked towards the buildings. The coverall-clad man wiped his hands on a rag and shook hands with them, introducing himself as Benny. Costa simply introduced the two of them as Costa and Reid, leaving their actual titles vague.

“Really a hell of a thing about poor Morty, huh?” Benny said. “I mean, you always know it’s a possibility, but having it happen to someone you know—whoof, it really gets you in the gut.”

“Did you know the deceased—er, Morty very well?” Diana asked.

Costa wondered if it was just his imagination that Benny seemed to look a little evasive at this. “I mean, everyone knows everybody around here. We weren’t really buddies, if that’s what you mean. I’m ground crew, refueling and cargo handling, so I don’t really know the pilots all that well. The guy who died, he was one of—” He paused.

“One of what?” Diana asked.

“Oh, there’s a couple of pilots who get choice jobs, you know? The boss asks for them personally. I know there’s some resentment among the other pilots about it.”

“How much resentment?” Costa asked. “Enough to hurt someone over it?”

Benny looked shocked—genuinely, as far as Costa could tell. “Oh, wow, no. Not in the slightest. Forget I said anything. Anyway, here’s Thornburg’s office—he’s the guy in charge that you’ll want to talk to.”

He left them at the door to the office of Desert Tours, a small room with a couple of couches and some desks jammed together. A radio in the corner was producing bursts of static along with air traffic control chatter. The walls were covered with maps and charts, the desks cluttered with binders and more maps. A heavysset man with short gray hair was just getting up from the desk, presumably Thornburg.

“Hi there,” Costa said, shaking hands. “Quinn Costa with the SCB. This is my associate Diana Reid.” He flashed his badge again, briefly. “We just need to ask you some quick questions about the accident.”

“We’ve already had the sheriff, the NTSB, the FAA, the DEA, and a whole bowl of other alphabet soup in here asking questions,” Thornburg grumbled. “What’s one more, I guess. SCB—what’s that?”

“Special Crimes Bureau,” Costa said smoothly, and watched the man’s spine straighten, his eyes flash.

“Crimes? There hasn’t been any crime. My pilot made an error and it caused a tragedy. The FAA agrees, and the DEA said they didn’t see any signs of drug activity.”

“I’m sure we’ll agree too,” Costa said. “We’re just here to check out anything that’s

not under the DEA's mandate. I know you've already been over this, but could you show us the original flight plan?"

Thornburg sighed. "I wish you guys would talk to each other. At least I already have the papers handy. Here you go." He pulled out a few sheets of paper and gave them to Costa, who glanced at it to confirm what he already knew and then passed them to Diana. "It was a charter flight to Alamogordo, New Mexico. He was picking up cargo. Left at first light, everything went fine, went off signal shortly after leaving Alamogordo. We reported in once it was clear that he wasn't responding to radio signals."

"What was the cargo?" Costa asked, although he already knew.

Thornburg pulled out another paper off the bottom stack. "Looks like he was carrying live cargo. Transporting some crates of chickens from a farm near Alamogordo."

"People pay to transport chickens on a private charter?"

Thornburg shrugged. "People will pay for all sorts of things. I've had folks charter an entire plane just to carry a couple cases of beer to someone's private mountain cabin."

Diana cleared her throat. "We were at the crash site. I didn't see any chickens."

"Flew the coop?" Costa suggested.

"There are a lot of things that could've happened. The pilot might have jettisoned the cargo if there was engine trouble, or possibly a cargo door came open in mid-flight. The crates might break open on landing, letting them escape."

"Leaving not even a feather behind?" Diana asked skeptically.

“Not my area, lady. Look, I have all the paperwork here if you need to see it.”

Costa flipped through the papers. “Big Clucking Deal Chicken Farms, Inc.” He snorted. “Did they get their feathers ruffled over the missing chickens?”

“Insurance paid out,” Thornburg said. “Look, I’d love to help, but I’ve got a business to run. The death of our pilot is tragic, of course, but there’s nothing mysterious about it.”

“No?” Diana said. “He just spontaneously fell out of a clear blue sky?”

“Ma’am, with all due respect, I’m sure some obvious cause will turn up eventually, a sudden updraft or an engine problem. I know that flying seems like a mysterious, magical art to laypeople, but it’s actually very straightforward?—”

“I am a pilot,” Diana snapped. “I know how straightforward it is. Nothing that’s turned up so far explains why an experienced pilot would crash on a clear day.”

Thornburg’s face set in angry lines. “I already told you everything I know. How long are you two going to waste my time? The case is closed as far as I’m concerned.”

“Unfortunately for you, the people who will be closing the case are us, and we’re not there yet.”

Diana studied the papers Costa had given her for a moment longer, her brow furrowed. He couldn’t help tracing the lines of her face with his eyes, wishing it could be his fingers instead.

Abruptly she looked up. “Can we charter a flight to retrace this flight path? Fly the exact same route?”

Thornburg threw his hands up in the air. “There’s no point!”

But Costa was looking at her curiously. “Why?”

“Due diligence. Would the SCB pay for it?”

“I don’t see why not.” In fact, as the person who had the final say on what his division paid for (well, except the budgetary higher-ups who controlled the master purse strings) he could guarantee it. “Could you take us out this afternoon?” he asked Thornburg. “Do you have anything available?”

Thornburg glowered sullenly, but it was clear he couldn’t come up with a plausible objection. With surprising suddenness, his resistance disappeared. “We do actually have a pilot and a plane. It’s a different type, a bigger one.”

“But it can still fly the same route? Would that make a difference?”

“I mean, sure. You’d see the same scenery.”

“Then let’s do it,” Costa said.

As they left the office following Thornburg, Diana said quietly, “Thanks for backing me up.”

“I’ll always back your play,” Costa said. “Although it’d be nice if I knew what it was.”

Diana leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Well, for one thing, when they reported the flight missing, they claimed it was flying to Alamagordo, not coming back after picking something up. That would’ve changed where we were searching. It means there’s a whole missing couple of hours.”

“What?” Costa gave her a sharp look. “Why didn’t that come up before?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible they reported it to the NTSB investigators as a mistake. It’s even possible that it was an honest mistake. Things can get scrambled in the first hours following an accident, and it might have been reported incorrectly to us. But I’d like to see what the flight is actually like and how long it takes. I get it if you don’t feel like flying all the way out to Alamagordo this afternoon.”

He didn’t really, but now he was as intrigued as she was, and it wasn’t like they were doing anything other than spinning their wheels here.

“I’m with you,” he said, and was rewarded by her eyes lighting up.

Thornburg had gone ahead of them and was talking to Benny and another man in the shade of a plane. He waved them over. “All right, this is what we’ve got available. You good to ferry these guys out to Alamagordo, Farley?”

“My pleasure,” said Farley. He was a big guy with a dark crew cut and aviator shades. When he clasped Costa’s hand, the tingle of shifter recognition hit hard. They both sized each other up; then Farley turned to shake hands with Diana. “Farley Dalton. I think we’ve got a copilot on this flight, isn’t that what you said, boss?”

“That’s right,” Thornburg said. “Since you’re flying out to Alamagordo anyway, I’m sending someone along with you. He’s a new pilot who needs more flight hours. I’m going back to file the flight plan now.”

Once he was gone, Benny went to fuel the plane, and Farley grinned at both of them. “Hey, nice to meet you. What are you folks flying out to Alamagordo for?”

“Private business,” Costa said before Diana could speak. “I heard you guys had a crash earlier this week. We’ll be safe in this, right?”

“Oh, safe as houses.” Farley slapped the side of the plane. “Come on in and check out your ride.”

They climbed up. Unlike the crashed plane, which had been tiny, more like the cab of an SUV, this one was like a scaled-down jet. It seated eight passengers in four rows of seats, one on either side of a narrow aisle. There was a pilot’s cockpit that had a lightweight folding door to seal it off from the cabin.

“It’s really not that different from flying in a 747, just smaller,” Farley explained. “If you’ve heard one preflight checklist, you’ve heard ‘em all. Emergency door is here. To open it, pull on the handle like this.”

He went on with the instructions. Costa glanced at Diana, expecting to see her eyes glazing over, but instead she was looking around the inside of the plane with a sharp interest.

When Farley wound down, Diana asked, “What’s it like flying one of these? How does it handle?”

“It should be a pretty smooth ride, don’t worry about it.”

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “I was asking from a technical standpoint. I’m a pilot.”

“No kidding?” Rather than warming up, Farley seemed suddenly, strangely distant. “What are you certified on?”

“Helicopters. I fly for the Park Service and do some S&R.”

Farley seemed to relax a little. “Fixed-wing aircraft aren’t that different. I’d offer you a ridealong in the cockpit, but I’ve got a copilot on this flight—oh, here he is now.”

“Howdy.” The second pilot had an indoor look to him, barely tanned, also large and heavyset—and distinctly tingling in Costa’s shifter sense. He had a square, freckled face and a baseball cap. Farley introduced him as Jim, and they shook hands all around.

“Well,” Farley said, clapping his hands together, “let’s get rolling. You folks just pick your seats back here, and we’ll have you in Alamagordo in no time.”

Diana picked a seat absently. She was frowning, looking after the pilots as they went up to the cockpit.

Costa texted the office to let them know about the side trip, then put his phone away. The plane’s engines fired up, and he turned to grin across the aisle at Diana. But she was still looking up the aisle through the opening into the cockpit, as if something was bothering her.

CHAPTER 18

Diana wasn't sure why she was so on edge. If the original information about the wrecked plane's flight path was an error, either in the initial report or the version of it that the dispatchers had relayed to the search team, she had seen worse ones in her time working S he should have corrected me."

"Right. I'm checking in." Costa took out his phone. Then he hit some buttons and frowned at the screen.

"What's wrong?"

"No signal. That isn't right. Up here we ought to be getting a signal from any cell tower in the area. Even the emergency call option isn't working. Check yours."

Diana pulled out her phone and frowned at it. "No signal on mine either."

"We're being jammed."

Alarm tingled along Diana's nerves. "That would affect the airplane's instruments as well."

"I wasn't sure about that, but I figured."

She glanced towards the cockpit. The collapsible door—more for privacy than defense in a machine this small—had been drawn halfway across, but what she could see of the activity in the cockpit simply looked normal: the pilot and copilot in their

seat, headsets on and heads bent slightly towards each other.

“They don’t look alarmed,” she said.

“No, they don’t, do they?” Costa unbuckled his seatbelt, but didn’t immediately move.

Diana swallowed. “What do you think is happening? Is there something, some broadcast or other signal, affecting aviation in this area?”

And maybe the pilots as well, she thought in an instant of wild panic. What if some signal was doing something to their brains? What if it did something to her brain?

“I would guess it’s affecting this plane only, and the reason why they’re not alarmed is because they’re doing it,” Costa said. His voice was level, calm, and controlled, and under its influence Diana’s panic collapsed like a pricked balloon. She was still scared, but he was right: there wasn’t some psychic wavelength or mind-control ray affecting them. It was a perfectly normal, run of the mill ... kidnapping?

“Are we being kidnapped?” she asked quietly.

“I would guess either that, or they’ve decided to conveniently lose a couple of pesky federal agents.”

“I’m not—!” Her voice rose in alarm; she forced it down, keeping it low enough to be covered by the white noise of the engines. “I’m not an agent.”

“I know.” Costa met her eyes with his level gaze. “I thought letting them believe you were one of us would work best for getting information. I’m sorry I got you into this, Di.”

“ You got me into this?” she asked, annoyance with Costa briefly washing the panic out of her system. “Do you remember who brought you the baby in the first place? Do you remember whose house burned down? I’m in this up to my eyeballs already. If you hadn’t been willing to treat me as an equal in the investigation, I’d have just gone off and done it on my own.”

The corner of his mouth twitched up briefly. “Point taken. Well, now you see the downside of investigating things.”

Diana looked over her shoulder at the cockpit again, just in time to catch probably-not-a-pilot Jim looking back at them and then away. She kept one eye halfway on him as she asked Costa, “Do you have a weapon?”

“No,” Costa said grimly. “No reason to bring it. I wasn’t expecting trouble, at least not this kind. I have my service weapon in my car, not that it helps us right now.”

“I have a multitool on my key ring.”

His lips twitched. “Let’s save that as a last resort.” Movement from the cockpit made him glance forward, and Diana looked as well, but it was only Jim looking back at them again. Seeing them looking at him, he gave them a brief thumbs-up.

“Reassuring,” Diana said between her teeth. For the sake of appearances, she gave him a perfunctory thumbs-up back.

Costa looked thoughtful. “Can you fly this type of plane?”

Her stomach lurched at all he was implying. “Not legally,” she said. “I’m certified on single-engine small aircraft and helicopters, not something this big. But well enough to land it in an emergency, yes, I think so.”

“And how long can a pilot changeover take? I mean, it’s not going to fall out of the sky the minute their hands are off the controls, right?”

“Oh no, not at all. If the autopilot’s set, it can keep going until it encounters extremely rough conditions or runs out of fuel.” She decided not to mention cases she’d heard of an airplane flying for hours with no one at the controls at all. Hopefully they wouldn’t have to test its. “Even if it’s not on autopilot, it should be fine for a few minutes, kind of like how you can take your hands off a car’s steering wheel if it’s in alignment and the road is straight.”

“Right,” Costa said. “So I guess we have a plan, sort of. I’ll take the guys, you take the plane—crap, he’s getting up.”

Diana flicked a quick glance over her shoulder and saw Jim rising from his seat.

Sudden warmth on her wrist startled her. She looked down and saw that Costa had put his hand lightly on her arm.

“Diana, I promise I’m going to make sure you get out of this,” Costa said. His gaze on her was warm and watchful.

“We’re going to get ourselves out of it,” she corrected him. She gave his hand a squeeze and then let it drop, watching Jim approach them with an awkward side-to-side roll as he navigated the aisle.

As Jim got closer, Costa stood up, although he couldn’t quite stand straight in the low cabin.

“No need to get up,” Jim said. “I just wanted to chat with you folks a bit.”

“We were wondering if you had a restroom on board,” Costa said.

“Yes, I could really use one,” Diana chimed in. “I had a lot of coffee on the drive over.”

Jim looked slightly nonplused. “Uh ...” He looked toward the rear of the plane. If Diana had any doubt about his qualifications, they were washed away; he literally didn’t even know where the bathroom was. “There’s one back there,” he said, having spied what Diana had already noticed when they were boarding.

“Why, thank you.” Diana got up. She had to maneuver around Jim in the narrow confines of the aisle, and as she did so, she put her hands on the jacket that he was wearing despite the desert warmth on the ground. There was a definite hard shape under it at about rib level, and she glanced at Costa as she finally got oriented on the other side, trying to signal with her eyes He’s got a gun.

“Watch it, lady,” Jim said sharply, pulling away. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes weren’t, and she wondered now if that was part of what had set her alarm bells ringing. Costa might not have noticed in the same way, but women had an acutely honed danger sense for men who seemed friendly but weren’t.

“No problem, there’s not much room in here.” Diana laughed a short laugh that hopefully didn’t sound as tense to him as it did to her.

She wasn’t sure how to proceed from here, because she didn’t need the restroom in the slightest and she hoped she wasn’t messing up something Costa was planning. But Costa gave her a little nod, so she started down the aisle, going slow and pretending to be having a little trouble keeping her footing.

“You can sit back down,” Jim said. “I just wanted to chat a bit.”

“Funny,” Costa said tightly. “Me too.” He remained on his feet.

Having delayed as long as she could, Diana reached the back. She opened the door to the tiny head and slipped inside, but left the door slightly cracked open so she could still see and hear. Without really meaning to, she realized, she had given Costa an opening to act without having to worry about her—and she was starting to be concerned about what he was planning.

“Look, man, we’re detouring around turbulence, so I’d sit down,” Jim said.

“Really?” Costa shot back. “Because it seems to me that it’s smooth as a baby’s butt up here. We’re flying south, and we’ve been flying south for a little while. Where are we really going?”

“Sit down.”

“Nope. I think I’ve gone about as far as I’m willing to go. This was a decent idea, but if we are really heading into turbulence, we don’t need to go to Alamagordo today. I’d like to turn around and go back.”

Oh, that’s smart, Diana thought, watching through the crack in the door. If the customer is calling the shots, they have no reason to say no.

“It’s not that severe,” Jim said. “We’ll be around it soon.”

“And meanwhile we’re flying toward Mexican air space. How about we stop doing that right now, turn around and go back to the airport.” When Jim didn’t move, Costa gave a little nod and started to push past him. “Yeah, I’m gonna go talk to the pilot.”

“Stop,” Jim snapped. He gripped Costa’s arm, and Diana sucked in a breath when she realized he’d drawn the gun. “Get back in your seat right now.”

Costa didn’t speak or react in any visible way for a second or two. Then he snapped

into motion so fast that Diana flinched. Before Jim could do anything, Costa had him in an armlock, trapping the gun against the seats while hooking a foot behind Jim's legs.

It was a display of swift, competent force, every movement purposeful, no motion wasted.

It was astonishingly hot.

But Jim was a trained fighter too, and he grappled back. Locked together, the two men stumbled against the seats as they wrestled each other. The gun, which Costa had clearly been trying to capture, instead flew from Jim's hand and went tumbling beneath the seats.

Jim managed to fling Costa off him. Struggling over to the side, he threw the lever that operated the emergency door.

Diana had started to lunge out of the bathroom in an attempt to stop him, although she was too far away. Now she flung herself backward and grabbed a seat as the door slammed open and a tearing wind roared through the cabin. Every loose item inside the plane went tumbling toward the open door.

Clinging to a seat back for dear life, Diana looked around and saw, with huge relief, that Costa was also safely tucked between two seats.

She was abruptly glad that she had a flying shift form. Roadrunners weren't strong flyers, so she wasn't entirely sure what would happen if she tumbled out into a jet slipstream at 10,000 feet, but it was better than falling.

Like Costa would do.

Costa couldn't fly, and there was no possible form in which she could carry him or do anything whatsoever to slow his fall. The relief she had felt an instant earlier evaporated in a flood of concerned panic.

The plane rocked as wind tore through it, and Farley yelled from the cockpit in alarm, "What the heck are you doing back there?"

"Getting rid of our problem!" Jim yelled back.

Diana was nearer to him now than Costa, so he reached for her. Realizing what he meant to do, she yelled and rolled back onto the seat behind her, kicking out at him.

Then Costa slammed into him, snarling in fury.

She had never seen Costa like that before, half incoherent with rage. The two men rolled around on the floor of the plane, knocking into the seats, hitting and clawing at each other.

All she wanted to do was help Costa, but she was afraid that any help she could offer would be more of a hindrance. And with Jim occupied, this might be her one chance to get control of the plane.

Diana tried to get past Costa and Jim to get to the cockpit, but the small aisle seemed to be filled with furious, wrestling men. She was afraid to accidentally throw off Costa's resistance if she interfered, with lethal results. There was only one other way she could think of to get to the cockpit.

Diana shifted.

The world got suddenly dark as she found herself tangled up in her shirt. She wrestled her way out of her clothes and dashed up the floor of the plane, weaving in and out of

the seats as if they were cactus on a desert plain. The wind tugged at her, and she realized she hadn't anticipated how much more she would be affected by the screaming air currents at roadrunner size. As long as she kept moving, however, she was reasonably confident she could avoid being sucked out the open door.

She arrived in the cockpit, leaped up on the copilot seat, and shifted in mid-jump. She landed on the seat crouching and backwards as a naked woman.

Farley gave a startled yelp. Already struggling to control the plane, he accidentally wrenched the controls and it tilted over on one wing—fortunately away from the open door.

There were yells and thumps from the back, and a sudden crash as the door slammed shut. The screaming wind abruptly ceased, and then, as the plane rolled back the other way, started up again as the door slammed open with another crash. Diana winced; that impact might have sheared the latch right off. She wasn't sure they could shut it again.

“What's your plan for us?” Diana demanded.

The pilot was too rattled to lie. “Question you and throw you out if we had to.”

The words hit her and bounced off; they were too shocking. They really do plan to kill us.

Taking one hand off the controls, Farley reached under his jacket. He clearly didn't consider a naked woman in his copilot seat too much of a threat. Well, he's about to find out different, Diana thought grimly as the gleam of a gun emerged from beneath the jacket.

She shifted, leaped into his lap with wings spread, and shifted human again. Suddenly

he had a naked woman not in his copilot seat, but materializing on top of him, her ass on the control yoke of the plane, grimly slamming both her elbows into his face.

Elbows, she had found, were extremely effective in discouraging unwanted attention from drunks in bars, and it turned out that they were just as useful at making a would-be killer decide that pointing a gun at her was a bad idea. She heard a clatter as he dropped the gun with a yell of pain, blood spurting from his nose. Flailing, he shoved her away, and her bare butt pushed the yoke all the way forward.

Suddenly the plane was tilted steeply forward, diving toward the ground.

Now that's the opposite of positive pitch , she thought half-hysterically.

There were more yells from the back as Costa and Jim tumbled in a new direction.

"Get out of the seat!" Diana screamed, thrashing as she tried to turn around.

"Get out of my lap, you crazy broad!"

She heard a man's panicked yell from the back, fading rapidly. Someone had fallen out, and she didn't know who. Fury gave her new strength, and she threw herself off the edge of the seat, attempting to drag Farley out of his seat as the plane nosedived.

Suddenly she had help. Costa was there, reaching around to unfasten Farley's seat belt while he flailed at them; Diana had completely forgotten he would be belted in. Costa dragged him out of his sea, flinging him bodily on the floor.

"Get us back in the air," he yelled at Diana over the screaming wind tearing through the plane.

During their struggles, Farley had gotten the plane more or less straightened out, but

when Diana dropped into the pilot's seat, she discovered that they were still wobbling wildly out of control. She glimpsed a wall of rock through the windshield. They were in the mountains, and they were much too low!

Diana grabbed for the controls, and managed to tilt the wings before they slammed into a wall of solid rock. But she felt the entire plane, tilted to the side, jolt with a grinding, shuddering impact as some part of the machine—the undercarriage, she was fairly sure—ripped across the exposed boulders.

They were still going much, much too fast. As they tore down rocky valleys, Diana gave up on looking for a place to land. She didn't think the landing gear would drop anyway after that last impact, and there was nothing even remotely long or flat enough for a runway.

Instead she decided to try to belly-flop the plane on something, anything that wasn't rocks. Grass, sand, trees if there was nothing else.

Unfortunately there was little of the kind in this remote, rocky country. She found her chance as they sped across a sandy expanse that might have been an old dried-up lake bottom.

"Brace for impact!" she shouted at Costa.

The plane smacked the ground, leaped, and smacked again like a rock skipping on water. Control was impossible. Diana clung to the yoke desperately, but she felt it wrench in her hands as the plane slewed around. They hit something buried in the sand with a tremendous bang, which flung them wildly to the side, and out of the cockpit window she saw half the wing ripped off by a collision with another boulder buried in sand. She had the flaps fully deployed to try to slow them down, but they were still going too fast. Her greatest fear was that they'd flip and douse the entire structure in aviation fuel.

The end of the sandy area was speeding toward them in the form of a jumbled field of boulders and cactus. Flight was impossible; they didn't have enough of their wings left to fly with. The brakes only worked on the wheels and, as she'd feared, the landing gear was stuck in the up position. They had no way to stop.

Diana did the only thing she could think of and intentionally whipped the plane around so they would hit tail-first instead of nose-first—or at least she tried. The flaps no longer responded properly either, and all she managed to do was dig a wing into the sand again and pivot them wildly in a big arc.

The nose hit first, but glancingly. The cockpit canopy exploded in a galaxy of cracks but didn't fully burst inward. Then the side hit, there was a great rending of tearing metal, and finally, joltingly, the plane ground to a halt.

Diana threw the switches to turn everything off, although the wrecked engines were sputtering out on their own by this point. She collapsed forward on the control yoke and sprawled there for a short, quiet time as it gradually sank in that they were no longer moving and she was alive.

Then she sat up swiftly.

“Quinn? Quinn!”

CHAPTER 19

Costa picked himself up from the position he had ended up in, flung behind the copilot's seat and curled up in a ball against the bulkhead. It wasn't what he had been trying to do, but as it turned out it hadn't been a bad way to go through a crash.

"Di—" he began frantically, and then he had a double armful of naked, clinging Diana.

"You're okay," she gasped, holding on to him. "You're okay. Are you okay?" Half detaching herself, she began patting his face frantically. Costa winced as she found a bruise he hadn't even noticed.

"It's okay. I'm okay." Now it was his turn to start patting her down, running his hands across her bare shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," she gasped.

Her pupils were dilated. She looked half frantic, hair wildly tangled in a mess hanging in her face. She was gorgeous and vividly, wonderfully alive.

The kiss happened with no warning and perfect coordination. They both moved at the same time, she flung her arms around his neck and he once more had a warm, wriggling armful of naked Diana, now kissing him frantically.

They kissed for a few moments with the abandon that only a shared "We're alive!" experience could bring.

This was interrupted by a throat-clearing noise from further back in the plane.

Costa reluctantly broke free of the kiss and turned, rotating his body so that he placed himself in front of Diana.

Farley was sitting awkwardly on the floor in the cabin, face bruised, cradling what looked like a broken arm.

“We’re alive,” he said dazedly.

“No thanks to you!” Diana snapped. Then she looked down at herself and rolled hastily off Costa, to his regret. “Where are my clothes?”

“I think they probably flew out of the plane while we were in midair,” Costa said.

He took off his shirt and draped it around her shoulders. Diana gave a nod of thanks.

“We’re alive,” Farley said again.

“You’re under arrest,” Costa told him.

“He had a gun,” Diana said.

“I’ll look for it and keep an eye on him if you want to go back and see if you can find any of your clothes.”

Diana nodded, started to step forward and then jerked her foot back. “Where’s the other one—Jim? Did he fall?”

“Yeah. Fell out the side,” Costa said succinctly.

Jim had been trying to kill them, so it was hard to feel too sorry for him. But the man's whipped-away scream as he vanished out of the open cargo door would still stick with Costa for a while.

As would the sight of naked Diana flying the plane, her concentration riveted and her hands locked on the controls. She had been glorious.

While Costa groped around for Farley's gun, Diana made her way past the men and then abruptly stopped. Costa turned to look and saw that late afternoon desert sunlight was spilling into the interior of the cabin. The side was torn completely open. The floor was tilted slightly and half buried in sand on the open side.

"I can't believe we're alive," Diana murmured, picking her way back along the row of seats.

"That's what I keep saying," Farley mumbled.

"Why don't you stop saying it and shut up." Costa finally found the gun wedged under the copilot seat. He turned around to cover Farley with it.

Farley looked back at him with a dazed expression. He'd gotten banged up badly in the crash, more than either of them, from what Costa could tell. He had been tumbling around loose in the back, probably just trying not to fall out the open door. He was lucky to be alive.

Given that he had tried to kill them, Costa wasn't entirely sure they were lucky he was alive.

Diana came scrambling back in a hurry, a pair of jeans slung over her arm and very distractingly naked apart from Costa's shirt. "Found my pants," she said, "and we need to get out of here now. There's dripping aviation fuel back there, and I can hear

something electrical fizzling. This machine might be a fireball at any time.”

Costa cursed and grabbed Farley by his unhurt arm. “Get out!” he snapped at Diana, but she got hold of Farley on the other side, and together they manhandled him through the open side of the plane, trying to avoid ragged ends of metal.

Together, in an awkward and unwanted three-legged race, they stumbled away from the machine. They had barely put some distance between them and it when there was a terrific Whoomph! and a fireball rolled skyward, along with a wave of heat that sent all three of them sprawling.

Diana rolled over and sat up, plastered in sand. She looked back at the burning plane. “Well,” she said, “heck.”

“Eloquently put.”

Diana shook out her jeans. “I’m just gonna brush some sand off and put these on. Don’t mind me. No peeking,” she snapped at Farley.

“I think he’s in shock,” Costa said, helping their prisoner sit up. Farley’s eyes were wide and glassy; he’d jarred his broken arm in the fall.

“Too bad for him,” Diana declared. She was bent over, brushing sand off the naked curve of her ass. Costa managed, barely, to suppress an offer to help out. “You know, he was under orders to throw us out of the plane if they didn’t like the answers to our questions.”

“I figured it was something like that.” Costa looked at Farley and stifled a sigh. “Dangerous as he is, he’s also pretty badly hurt. I’m going to get him into the shade.”

He put an arm around Farley’s bulk and helped him sit down behind some boulders,

out of the direct sunlight. Diana joined him a minute later, barefoot in jeans with Costa's shirt draped loosely and beautifully around her naked torso.

"I lost everything else, but I do still have my keys and multitool," she said, extracting it from her pocket to show Costa. It was a tiny one, little more than a cheap toy, but the blade looked functional. "What have you got?"

"Wallet, phone, keys. Oh, that reminds me." He took out his phone, checked for a signal, held it up, and shook his head. "No dice. We're too remote."

Diana looked down at Farley. "He might have some idea where we are."

"More or less. Now we just need to get him in shape to talk."

Diana glanced up at the sky, already pinking with the earliest tinges of sunset. The plane was still burning, smudging the clear sky with smoke. "Before it gets any later, I think I'm going to shift and look around a little, see if I can spot any nearby roads or towns. I can't fly for long distances, but I can do short hops and see more than we can from the ground. Sound good?"

"Yeah, it does. Go for it. See if you can find any water while you're at it, because that's going to be our biggest problem shortly."

Diana shed her clothes in a neat pile, giving Costa another pleasant glimpse of her lean, strong body, and then collapsed into her roadrunner shape. She looked up at him with her head tilted to the side to view him without her long beak in the way, then spread her wings and took a few running hops to a short, gliding flight.

Costa crouched beside Farley. "Come on, man, let's take a look at you."

Farley was badly banged around, but he seemed more shocked than seriously hurt.

There was a long stripe of bruised swelling on his temple that suggested a concussion, a number of bruises and abrasions, and the broken arm, which was the worst injury Costa could see.

As Costa probed him lightly, Farley seemed to rally a bit. Now and then, Costa looked up at a flicker of wings and caught a glimpse of Diana, or at least, the bird he presumed to be Diana. There were a number of other birds around, small songbirds and game birds drifting back after the plane crash scared them off. He decided to take this as a good sign that there was both water and game habitat around, which boded well for their odds of survival.

“What do you shift into?” he asked Farley as he checked over the man’s broken arm. It was a slight breach of shifter etiquette to ask directly if you didn’t know someone well, but he figured they were considerably past the point where it mattered now.

After a moment, Farley answered sullenly. “Wolverine.”

“What do wolverines eat? Predator, right?”

“Scavenger, mostly,” Farley said after another pause, as if contemplating how the information might be used against him. “We’re somewhat omnivorous as well. Why are you asking?”

“Because I figure the best way we can get through the night is in our shifted forms. We’ll be insulated against the cold and capable of feeding ourselves.” Costa hesitated too, but it wasn’t as if Farley wouldn’t know both of their shift forms shortly anyway. He’d already seen Diana shift. “I’m a boar, so I can eat just about anything. I figure if no one comes looking for us, we’ll make it through the night while shifted, and then work out what next.”

Farley made a slight gesture with his injured arm and winced. “I’m not going to be

able to walk like this.”

“You don’t have to. At least you’re not a horse or something that’d really be in trouble with a broken leg. We can probably bring you something to eat.” Costa wondered how much effort they really wanted to go to in keeping the guy alive, under the circumstances, but just leaving him to die in the desert was certainly not a thing he was prepared to do. “While we’re waiting for Diana to come back, how about you answer a few questions?”

“What sort of questions?” Farley asked warily.

“Who you’re working for, what your plans for us were, that sort of thing.”

“Do I have to?”

“Obviously I can’t force you. But let me remind you that at the moment you’re dependent on us for survival, and also, the more you cooperate now, the more lenient the SCB is going to be later.”

Farley glowered and rubbed his forehead with his uninjured hand. “SCB—that’s basically the shifter FBI, right?”

“More or less. And you’re not who we’re after. You’re a small fish. You roll over on the big fish and we’ll give you immunity as long as you’re willing to work with us.”

“I’m not sure that metaphor makes sense,” Farley said, regarding him from narrowed eyes.

Costa put the gun carefully out of Farley’s reach and sat down beside him. “You’re definitely smarter than the average thug.”

“I’m not a thug, I’m a pilot,” Farley said shortly. “Thornburg pays me well for doing discreet work. That’s all.”

“Oh really? Discreet work like tossing people out of planes?”

Farley opened his mouth to respond, then shut it as Diana landed in a flurry of feathers. She shifted human and reached for Costa’s shirt, while Costa turned a vicious glare on Farley.

“Look and die,” Diana said before Costa could say anything, picking up her jeans.

“I’m not looking,” Farley said hastily, gazing at the sky.

“Our friend here was just telling me what he does for Thornburg,” Costa said. “But first, what’d you find?”

Diana shook her head, buttoning up the shirt over her breasts. “There’s nothing man-made at all, except some very old, falling down structures on the other side of the sand pit that I guess used to be part of a mine, and an old dirt road. I guess we can walk out on it if we don’t get a better option, since it must go somewhere, but we must be days from anywhere on foot. I did find the spring that the animals use, so we can head over there when we need to. It might be a bit of a walk.”

Shadows were climbing the sides of the valley around them, and the sky was flushing pink. Costa guessed they were about an hour out from darkness, if not less. Dusk didn’t last long in the clear desert conditions.

“I was thinking we’d shift tonight anyway,” he told her. “We’ll get through the night okay, and we can find things to eat. I told Farley we’d keep him supplied with scavenging rations if he cooperates.”

“What is he? Let me guess, a skunk,” Diana said, scowling at him. She sat down crosslegged, graceful as always, tucking her bare, sandy feet under her legs.

“Wolverine,” Farley said reluctantly.

“Now that we’re all on the same page, let’s get back to your tale of woe,” Costa said. “And then we can get settled for the night. Or head out to find dinner, in the case of those of us who are crepuscular foragers.”

“That sounds absolutely disgusting,” Farley said.

“Crepuscular means active at dawn and dusk,” Diana supplied. Costa gave her an impressed look. She leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Okay, so what do you do for Thornburg, anyway?”

“I’m a pilot,” Farley said.

“Who occasionally pushes people out of planes,” Diana said.

“Could you stop mentioning that?”

“As the guests of honor at the freefall party, do you blame us?” Costa snapped. “Also, this is not exactly what I would call cooperating.”

“I’m trying!” Farley retorted. “Look, okay, so there were a few of us who did ‘special’ jobs for Thornburg.” The air quotes were audible. “Mostly me and Morty—the pilot you were investigating, the one who died in the Chiricahua crash.”

“How do you mean, special? All expense paid trips to the desert floor without a parachute?”

“No!” Farley said sharply. “It was just off-books transport of people and cargo. Mostly people. But the whole point was to get to the other end in one piece.”

“For the shifter fighting rings?” Diana asked.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you know about that. Yeah, I transported fighters, and also cargo and supplies. Thornburg basically is, or maybe I should say was, running two separate businesses. There’s the legitimate charter business, handling flightseeing, cargo runs and whatnot. Then there’s the off-books shipping business that was mostly me and Morty.”

“I got the impression when we were talking to the ground crew that the other pilots know some people working for Thornburg get choice jobs and others don’t,” Costa said.

“Yeah, well, he pays us good because we’re risking our licenses by doing an end run around the rules.”

“And what about our late, great friend Jim?” Costa wanted to know. “How does he fit into all of this? He’s not a pilot.”

“Thornburg has a few other guys who would go along on some jobs. Private security. He’s one of those.”

“Ah,” Costa said. “Security. Are we talking to keep people off the plane—or to keep them on?”

Farley didn’t quite look at them. “Little of both.”

“You mean kidnapping?” Diana asked, leaning forward. “Like V—like your friend told us about, Costa?”

“Sounds like it,” Costa said grimly. “You know, Farley, that immunity offer may not remain on the table, depending on how actively you’ve been aiding and abetting a series of felonies.”

Farley straightened up, holding his injured arm awkwardly against his chest. “Look, have you ever been involved in something like this? It’s a slippery slope. First you take a few shifter-related jobs for a surcharge. The boss isn’t a shifter, but he knows about us, so Morty and me, we handled the shifter-type work, dealing with shifter clients who were more comfortable with a shifter pilot. And we got paid a little extra. Then Thornburg goes hey, I got a more sensitive job for you, and I know you can handle sensitive jobs. So we do that one, and the money’s really good, and soon you start feeling like it’s all okay, you know?”

“Yeah, until planes start falling out of the sky, and passengers start falling out of them,” Costa said. “Do you have any idea what happened to your buddy Morty? That wasn’t just a regular crash, was it? Know anything about it?”

Farley sighed.

“Knowing Morty, he probably grew a conscience. See, that’s the other thing, the deeper in you get, the more the boss reminds you that as long as we all work together, nothing bad happens to anybody. But he does have connections. People like Jim come from his connections. So no, I don’t know what happened to Morty, because I kept my head down and didn’t go out of my way to find out what happened to Morty—understand?”

“Coward,” Diana accused him.

Farley’s face twisted in anger, but then he leaned back against the boulder and just looked tired. “Yeah, probably. Maybe I should’ve walked a while back. But it’s a good job, good benefits, and the extra money can send both of my kids to good colleges

and fund my mom's retirement. We never had much, and now we have a better life. I guess that's the other thing Thornburg counts on. My wife is disabled and can't work, so without me, they wouldn't have anything."

"You have kids?" Costa said quietly. "How old?"

"Ten and thirteen."

"Tough ages," Costa said. He looked at Diana, then up at the rapidly purpling sky. The sun had slipped away while they were talking, and the night's chill was rising. The burning plane had died down to a flicker, the smoke smudge vanishing in the darkening sky. "Well, Farley, I can't say I approve of your life choices, but I promise you I'm going to do my best to make sure your kids get their dad back."

"We will," Diana said. "But you're going to help with our investigation once you do." She paused. "Just one thing. You didn't help burn down anyone's house lately, did you?"

"No!" Farley said.

"I didn't think so, but I had to make sure."

"Whose house burned down?" he asked, looking at her.

"Mine. Because people who I guess are Thornburg's 'connections' are after me."

"There's a chance they'll be after you and your family too, so we'll make sure we arrange protective custody for your wife and kids once we're back to civilization," Costa said. "And in the interests of getting back safe and sound, or in your case safe and sound-ish, I think we should all shift now. Here's what we'll do—you stay here, as a wolverine, since you'll have trouble walking on three legs. We'll go out foraging

and bring you back something to eat. Also water if we can, though you might have to get there on your own in the morning. We don't have anything to carry it in."

Farley nodded earnestly. "I just appreciate you guys helping me. I'm sorry about all of the—you know."

"I'm glad the you know didn't go any farther than it did," Costa said grimly. "Because I can guarantee you wouldn't be getting our help if anything had happened to either of us." He stood up and picked up the gun, sticking it into the waistband of his jeans. "Okay, we'll be back in a little while with whatever we can find. Need anything in the meantime?"

Farley shook his head. "I'll be pretty comfortable here as a wolverine, I guess. There's some dry grasses. It's not bad."

He squirmed a bit, trying to get some of his clothes off, then shifted abruptly into a large hump of dark brown and paler fur that snorted and shuffled around on three legs. Eventually, he curled up awkwardly in a nest made of his discarded clothes.

Diana and Costa walked up the hill. She picked her way carefully, wincing now and then.

"The barefoot thing is gonna be a problem if we have to walk for any length of time," Costa said softly.

"I know. I was thinking I might shift and have you carry me. Or scout ahead as a bird."

She looked back. Below them, the valley was cloaked in shadow; only the mountains rising above it still caught some light. They could make out the location of the crash by a few glowing patches where the metal had been heated by the fire. The smoke

would have been conspicuous in the daytime. But they had precious little time for it to be seen before the rapidly advancing darkness, and by morning it would have dissipated.

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we?” Diana said, low.

“Not nearly as much trouble as we’d be in if we weren’t shifters,” Costa pointed out.

“We can get food and survive out here just as effectively as the animals we shift into.”

“You’re being very optimistic about that. I’ve never actually hunted as a roadrunner, and do you see any wild pig tracks around here? Because I don’t.”

“Okay, let me rephrase that. We can survive until people come to find us. As humans, I’m not sure we could make it through a couple of days, especially since you have almost nothing to wear. As animals, we’ll be fine in the short term. Uncomfortable, but fine.” He stopped at a cluster of boulders with a nice view of the valley. “Let’s leave our stuff here, tucked underneath. It’s not precisely that I don’t trust Farley, but, well, I don’t trust Farley. Especially if he gets the gun.”

“You think he’d betray us? We’re his only chance of getting out of here alive, hurt as he is.”

“I’m not going to take the chance if I can help it, no. In fact, let’s stash the gun separately from our clothes. Wolverines have a keen sense of smell, so we may as well not make it too easy for him.”

They undressed in the deepening twilight. By now enough of the light had gone from the sky that Costa could just barely make out the pale movements of her limbs.

Diana laughed quietly.

“What?”

“Finally got your clothes off, and I can’t even see you.”

Costa moved a little closer to her. “You can touch me.”

He was aware of Diana moving closer in the near-dark, and felt the swift brush of her fingers, first on his upper arm, then sliding across his collarbone and down his chest. The night was growing swiftly chilly, but his shiver had nothing to do with cold.

“You’re very ... furry.” Her voice sounded thick as her hand moved across his chest, brushing against the thatch of hair.

“Good for keeping warm.” He touched her arm cautiously, barely making contact, moving his palm down her silky skin.

She let out a soft little gasp. The awareness of their shared nakedness was a palpable thing in the dark between them. Costa felt her sway toward him.

And then she jerked away. The hand lifted from his chest, leaving him feeling the night air’s chill acutely in that spot.

“I’d better go hunt up a lizard or two before they all go to to ground for the night.” Her voice was breathless, and he was aware of a swift movement and then the skittering footsteps of a roadrunner darting away.

Costa sighed.

This is going to be torment.

He shifted. The cool night air was suddenly comfortable, filled with tantalizing

smells. Costa moved around a little, getting used to his shift form, and picked up the gun in his mouth. He trotted uphill a little way, navigating mostly by smell and sound, and found a place to stash the gun where he figured that Farley would, at least, take longer to find it than in the pile of human-smelling clothing they'd left behind.

There was swift movement near his leg, a flurry of wings, and a light weight landed on the bristled hump of his shoulders. Costa would have smiled if his mouth had been set up for it.

Instead, he grunted and set off into the night. He could smell the water Diana had mentioned, as well as the tempting scent of the green things that grew near it.

After a little while, Diana hopped down and ran alongside him. By daylight they must have looked like a ridiculous pair, the odd couple animal buddies in the latest Disney animated feature.

But it was very nice to have her there, as he got used to the scent and sounds of her as a roadrunner. And he accepted her presence as the oblique gesture of support that it was.

CHAPTER 20

It was a long night. Diana spent part of it hunting, although roadrunners were mainly sight predators, so trying to do it at night was difficult and nerve-wracking—especially since she was aware that other wild creatures would be out and about, many of whom had a sharper sense of smell and a more acute ability to hunt at night than she did. There would be foxes, and owls, and bobcats. She ended up spending as much time as possible near Costa in the awareness that few predators likely to be found in this terrain would mess with a full-grown wild boar.

She caught a couple of lizards and a small snake by using her human mind's knowledge of where small, cold-blooded animals were likely to be found at night. She took the snake and one of the lizards down to Farley, dropping them off near his drowsing bulk, and then scurried off to eat her lizard at a safe distance. Her human awareness of what she was eating warred uncomfortably with her roadrunner sense that raw, torn-apart lizard was delicious.

She hoped Costa was having a better time with his diet of roots and grubs, but doubted it.

They spent the last part of the night sleeping in a patch of brush near the spring, Costa lying in a great snoring heap while Diana nestled down in the crook of his leg and relied on his protection and warmth. As dawn washed the stars out of the sky, she rose from the still-sleeping Costa, tilted her head and ran her feathered cheek along his leg. Then she darted to the spring to drink and scurried down the hill to have a look at the crash site again.

It was exhilarating racing along in the cool of early dawn. Now that she could see, she was less worried about predators; almost anything she spotted would probably run away if she shifted human. She raced down the hillside, enjoying the speed and strength of her roadrunner body, almost managing to leave her worries behind.

Almost.

The fire in the wreckage had burned itself out the previous evening, fortunately without setting anything nearby on fire, and now the scorched hulk of the plane created a baroque sculpture in the growing morning light. Diana circled it. The fire had torched off the spilled aviation fuel, and what she smelled now was mainly charcoal and burned oil. Nothing useful seemed to have survived the wreck; any survival supplies that had been in the plane were charred beyond use.

She flew up to sit on top of the burnt-out fuselage. From here, in the light of the rising sun, she had a good view of the trail they had left through the sand, veering and tilting, with broken-off pieces of the plane striking sparks in the morning sun. Looking at it from here, she couldn't help being amazed any of them had survived.

Also a darn fine piloting job, if I do say so myself.

Her keen hearing caught the sound of something large approaching through the sparse sagebrush on the hillside. Diana leaped into the air and spun around, prepared to shift if it was anything dangerous, but from up here she could easily see Costa coming through the brush and the boulders toward her.

She hadn't had a good look at Costa's shifted form since they were much younger. He was an extraordinary creature, large and hump-shouldered and powerful, covered in bristly hair that caught the sun with a reddish tint. Gleaming tusks curled from either side of his muscular jaw.

He was carrying something in his mouth, a bundle dangling from a cord or rope. As he got closer, she recognized their balled-up clothing. The rope was his boot laces. Costa looked up and saw her, dropped it in the sand at his feet, and shifted.

“Morning,” he said cheerfully, while Diana’s hindbrain tried to recover from the sight of Costa, muscular and naked and now with his lightly reddish chest hair catching the morning sun. He separated out Diana’s jeans and the shirt of his that she’d been wearing, then reached for his jeans and pulled them on.

Diana fluttered down from the top of the plane to land near him and shifted back herself. She was well aware of Costa’s appreciative gaze on her as she began to dress, darting swift looks at him out of the corner of her eye. She was also all too aware of the vivid sense-memory of last night, running her hands over his chest in the dark.

“Sleep well?” she asked to get her mind off it.

“Until I woke up to find you gone.” There was a slight edge to his voice.

She hadn’t thought about that part. “I would’ve left a note, but it’s hard to hold a pen in a roadrunner’s claws. Also, I didn’t have a pen.”

Costa snorted. “I checked on Farley on the way over. He’s all right, got through the night okay. I pointed him in the direction of the water hole so he can get a drink.”

“Good for him, I guess.” Dressed now, at least as dressed as she could get, she sat in the sand, brushing it out of her cuffs. “Quinn, what are the odds of someone coming for us?”

“A hundred percent,” he said immediately. “They knew where we were going, and they’re well aware now that we’re missing. An agent and a civilian can’t simply disappear without people looking into it. I checked in before we got on the plane,

didn't exactly give them many details, but the office knows we were flying to Alamagordo, and by now they'll know we didn't get there."

Diana looked up at the clear blue sky, flecked with small clouds turned gold in the newly risen sun. "I don't see a search and rescue flight."

"They may be too far north. You said we were pretty far off the flight path. Or they could still be checking things on the ground. I expect Thornburg is having a hard time right now, between my agents grilling him and his plane being even more off the grid than he was expecting."

Costa smiled a little at the thought. Diana wondered if he was imagining Agent Caine giving Thornburg the third degree. She would have enjoyed being a fly on the wall for that.

"Classic advice in the event of an accident is to stay with the vehicle," she said. "And I've seen plenty of evidence of the truth of that, doing S the roadrunner always thought in terms of "now," and that tended to bleed over into her human mind a little. The future seemed very far away.

They found their way back down to the spring by following an old animal trail. Diana hadn't gotten a good look at it before, as she hadn't yet seen it with her human eyes by daylight. It was actually quite a nice little place. Water bubbled up from the rocks, expanded into a pool and then trickled away in a thin stream that wound out of the hollow through cracks in the rocks, eventually vanishing as it soaked into the thirsty ground. Around the small pool, green leaves and grass framed it with calendar-picture perfection. There was even some degree of privacy, as the rocks sheltering the pool also hid it from casual eyes.

"Well, we're not going to actually want to splash around in the spring," Costa pointed out. "We have to drink from that. I don't think anyone wants my junk swishing

around in their morning coffee water.”

Diana burst into laughter. She wasn’t even sure why it was so funny; it just was. She laughed herself weak, leaning on a rock.

“I will take that as a confirmation of my position,” Costa said, eyes dancing. “So I guess that leaves either the spit-bath you suggested, or making ourselves a bathing pool.”

Diana wiped her eyes and cleared her throat. “It’s a good idea, but we don’t have anything to dig with.”

The sparkle in his eyes was joined by a grin. “ You don’t have anything to dig with.”

Before she could react, he quickly skimmed out of his jeans and boots. Diana barely had a moment to register fully naked Quinn Costa before he shifted into his boar shape.

Diana watched with interest, and some amount of amusement, as Costa used his hooves and his tusks, in combination with his powerful neck muscles, to excavate a hollow adjacent to the main pool. There was already a depression there; it looked like, in particularly wet years, the spring spilled over to create a series of small ponds. Costa scooped and scraped at the growing dampness in the widening hole, in the process getting his head and the wiry fur covering most of his body plastered with sand.

“You’re definitely going to need a bath after this,” Diana pointed out.

Costa snorted, turned, and with a delicately placed kick, knocked an opening between the two ponds. Water rushed to fill his newly excavated hole. As the level began to equalize between the two, he shifted back and placed some rocks and handfuls of

sand to close off the opening and stop the backwash from their bathing pool contaminating the main pond.

Diana eyed the bathing hole. The swirling water was opaque with silt and sand. It also wasn't very big, in spite of Costa's efforts, really more of a shallow mud puddle.

"I'm not sure if that's exactly what I was picturing," she said. "I don't think it's any cleaner than I am."

"It's settling now," Costa pointed out. Indeed it was, the sediment sorting itself and the water becoming clearer. "You're welcome to the first bath."

"How could I turn down such a gentlemanly offer?"

"I'll even turn my back if you want."

She did not want, in particular. But she also suspected she was going to be a highly undignified sight while splashing in a mud puddle, not exactly a sexy bathing beauty in a crystalline stream. "If you don't mind."

"Sure," Costa said easily, though she thought she detected some disappointment in his tone. He turned to sit on a rock, bare-assed, with his back to her.

"I thought you meant you'd go a little farther away than five feet," Diana said, stripping quickly out of her sandy clothes.

"There might be dangerous wild animals in the vicinity."

"Oh, is that the reason." She dipped a foot in the water, expecting it to be cold, but found it tepid and not entirely uncomfortable.

“How’s the bath?” Costa asked at the splashing noises, as she dipped herself further, trying to figure out how to get herself in past her knees.

“Less terrible than I was expecting. Oh, wait a minute!”

She was missing the obvious. She shifted to a roadrunner and dipped herself fully into the water. Now the too-small basin was a generously appointed birdbath, and the water did not feel cool at all. Roadrunners weren’t bathing birds, but she had seen enough birds in birdbaths to know how it was done. She dipped, splashed, preened, spread her wings luxuriously, and finally clambered out and shifted human again to find herself perfectly clean.

“Done,” she said, running her fingers through her wet hair to smooth out a few lingering grains of sand.

Costa turned around. Somehow, in all of this, it had escaped her notice that he was going to be struck full in the face by the sight of a naked, wet Diana standing a few feet away from him. It was only as the poleaxed expression spread across his face that she realized he was getting a dramatic eyeful.

“Since you were such a perfect gentleman, I’ll return the favor while I dry off,” she said, and strolled past him, with the breeze drying the water on her naked body, to sit down on a patch of grass.

Costa said something behind her that sounded like, “Guh.”

Soon, presumably as his higher brain functions came back online, she heard splashing sounds. Diana smiled and stretched out on the grass. It was very pleasant. The grass was thick enough to keep her from getting sandy all over again, and the coolness by the spring took some of the heat out of the sun. Once her back was dry, she shook the sand off Costa’s shirt, as much as possible, and put it on to help prevent sunburn. She

left the jeans for later; she didn't relish the idea of putting the sandy, sweat-damp denim back on her clean skin.

After a little while, Costa came over to join her, glistening and gloriously nude. Diana was stretched out on her stomach with her hands folded under her chin. She looked up with a smile, drinking him in, his body golden in the sun.

"Is this a private sunbathing spot, or can anyone join in?"

"Both," Diana said with a lazy smile. "It's private, but invited guests are welcome. Pull up some grass."

Costa lay down to dry off, and Diana rolled over and sat up. She hadn't bothered buttoning the shirt, and although it covered her breasts, technically, there was quite a lot on display. No performative gentlemanly behavior this time: Costa's gaze followed her.

Diana stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles. "Enjoying the view?"

"You have no idea."

"Same here," she said, inspecting his bare back and the taut curve of his ass.

They remained silent in comfortable companionship for a little while. With proper camping gear and food, Diana thought, the place would have been a peaceful and beautiful location for a weekend's stay. She plucked at the hem of the shirt laying across her bare thigh.

"You know, I've been thinking about what you said earlier," she said, and Costa propped himself up on his elbows to listen. "About how I could have gone anywhere, but I ended up moving back to a town two hours from where I grew up."

“I didn’t mean to?—”

“Let me finish.” She moved a little closer so that she could touch him, brushing a hand across his arm. “You’re right. And the interesting thing is how I didn’t even really think about it. I loved the life I’ve led, don’t get me wrong. I regret none of it. But when it came time to settle down, it never occurred to me to look for something permanent in any of the other places I’ve been.”

Costa looked at her wordlessly, and this time she met his eyes full on, seeing the swell of hope there. Diana swallowed and looked away, across the rocks and the valley to the clear gold sun on the hills.

“It’s home,” she said, low. “I love the desert and the mountains. I even love the difficult parts. This isn’t an easy place to live sometimes, and if I had stayed back then, I know I would always have found it too confining. But—but sometimes you have to try spreading your wings first to find out you belong. And I do belong here; I don’t think I could ever leave it forever.”

Leave it. Leave you.

Her hand rested on his thigh, and he sat up so that he could put his hand over hers. She was acutely aware of the nearness of him, the naked maleness of him.

“I’m not sure if you’re saying what I hope you’re saying,” Costa said, his voice thick.

“I don’t know either. I’m still working this out. But I think ...” She turned her head to look him in the face again. “In answer to the other question you asked earlier, I don’t know if we’d work out, but I think I’d like to try.”

For a moment nothing happened; he simply looked at her with his heart in his eyes.

Then he lunged forward, and she met him halfway.

There was nothing tentative about their kiss this time, nothing uncertain. Their mouths crashed together and Diana lost herself completely in the heat and urgency, as one of his hands came up to stroke her hair while the other curled around her waist, pulling her closer.

The next thing she knew she was straddling his naked lap, bare-legged and bare-assed herself, while they went on kissing as frantically as if their lives depended on it.

Kissing turned to petting. Her nipples were stiff and sensitive, brushing against his chest. It was as if twenty years of holding themselves back had built into impossible sensitivity.

Her legs were spread wide around his hips. When he thrust upward and buried himself in her wet heat, she cried out loud.

“Birth control ...” he gasped into her shoulder.

“Implant, don’t worry about it—don’t stop?—”

She couldn’t have stopped now if she’d wanted to, which she emphatically didn’t. Her hips jerked reflexively, and she found herself mounting towards climax with speed she had never experienced before. She cried out again as she crashed into a mind-numbing orgasm, and he gasped into her shoulder as she felt him jerk and spend himself inside her.

“Uh, wow,” he said after a moment, pulling back. “Did you—uh—was that enough?—”

“I wanted it, it was amazing, stop ruining the moment.” She kissed him to take any

sting from her words away, and then kissed him again.

And she might have gone on kissing him forever, if they hadn't been interrupted by the drone of an airplane engine.

They threw themselves apart. Costa grabbed his pants, and Diana hastily scrambled for her jeans and his shirt.

Diana only briefly glimpsed the plane above the hills around them. It was flying low, as if looking for something. Them, possibly. Or maybe it was a sightseeing flight giving the tourists an unexpected show.

"Hey!" Costa yelled, waving. "We're down here!"

"I don't think they can see us." Mercifully, given what they had been doing a moment ago. "We need to get down to the crash site."

Costa stomped into his boots, and they scrambled down the hill in a hasty flurry of activity. Diana thought they must have missed their chance, the sound of the airplane fading into the distance—but then it came back stronger, and she realized it had been circling, coming in for a closer look.

Now it reappeared, skimming across the sandy valley bottom. There was no chance it couldn't see the wreck, or read their SOS. Diana started to raise an arm to wave. Then, frowning at the plane, she grabbed Costa's arm as he began to lift it.

"What?" he asked, reacting to her alarm.

"Don't you recognize it? That's the same paint job as the one we crashed. And that looks like the same logo on the tail. It's not rescuers, Quinn." She shot him an alarmed look. "It's Thornburg come back to finish the job he started."

CHAPTER 21

Costa cursed. If the plane and anyone in it were focused on the wreckage and the SOS, it was possible he and Diana hadn't been seen yet. But he wasn't going to bet their lives on it.

"We need to get the gun," he said, gripping Diana's arm and pulling her into the shadow of a boulder. "If we're separated, it's in a crevice in the rocks a few dozen yards higher on the hill from where we hid our clothes last night. The cleft looks a bit like a V."

Diana moved closer to him as the plane banked over the wreck. "They might think we're dead," she said softly. "If I saw that, I might think there were no survivors."

"Not with enormous letters reading SOS next to it."

Diana started to answer, but just then there was shouting from up the hill. They looked up and saw Farley's small figure at the top of the slope that led to the spring, naked to the waist and waving wildly with his uninjured arm.

"Damn it," Costa muttered. "I knew we shouldn't have helped that guy."

"He wants to be rescued worse than we do," Diana pointed out. "He might not realize who they are, either."

The plane roared over them so low that they could make out every detail. It tilted a wing slightly, and Costa caught a glimpse of a sunglasses-wearing person looking

down through the window.

“No way they didn’t see us that time,” he murmured. “You want my boots?”

“They’ll just swim around on my feet, worse than nothing. Actually, I think it makes more sense for me to shift. You can carry my clothes, and I can get up to the gun faster than you can.”

“Yeah, that’s a good?—”

The engine noise of the plane dropped abruptly to a different register. It was circling, coming back, flying slowly. As it all but coasted over them, the side door opened and someone leaned out.

“Down!” Costa barked before he even saw whether the figure had a gun, but he wasn’t wrong. A spray of bullets raised puffs of dust and scattered rock chips around them. Diana screamed and threw her arms over her head. Costa pulled her close to him, arms around her as the hail of bullets died away and the plane sped off to bank wide across the sand.

“You okay?” they gasped out at the same time.

“I’m fine!” Diana said. “What do I?—”

“I’m fine too.” Costa gave her a little push. “You’re right! Shift and go for the gun!”

“What will you do?” she asked, hesitating in the act of stripping her jeans off.

“I’ll go a different way. Meet me at the spring.”

Diana nodded and her clothes dropped to the ground. The heap jerked around as the

roadrunner extracted itself from the borrowed shirt, and then she sped off up the hill, low to the ground and moving fast.

Costa scooped her clothes up and tied them hastily around his waist so he had his hands free and wouldn't lose them. Without anything to wear at all, she would be stuck as a roadrunner permanently, unless she was willing to risk the hazards of walking around in the desert completely naked.

Meanwhile the plane was coming back around in a big circle. He was terribly exposed here. Shifting would be no good to him; he would just make a boar-sized target of himself.

Trying to stay low, he ran up the hill, dodging and jinking and ducking among the boulders. Another shot chipped some rock close enough that the flying shards stung his face and arm.

Then the plane was over and rising sharply to avoid hitting the cliffs along the edge of the valley. Gotta get up to those, he thought, that'll give them something to think about.

He scrambled over the top of the hill and saw Farley some fifty yards away, barefoot and wearing nothing but jeans.

"I didn't know they were going to do that!" Farley yelled. "I swear!"

"Sure you didn't!"

"I'm serious! You guys helped me, I want to help you, but I don't know what to do. Where'd your girlfriend go? Is she okay?"

Costa decided to believe him—but not too far. "We got separated, so I'm not sure.

What are they going to do next?"

The plane made a wide circle and then came in low over the sand, raising a trail of dust.

"I think they're landing," Farley said. "They haven't been able to get you from above, so they'll go on foot. I can lie to them, tell them they hit you."

Costa shook his head. "They'd want to see the body. I'm not that good of an actor, especially if they decide to make sure the dead guy isn't getting up again."

Farley winced.

The plane landed near the wreck. Three guys piled out, all of them carrying guns. As soon as the last guy was out, the plane immediately spun up its engines and turned around with the clear intent of leaving.

"Going back for reinforcements?" Costa murmured.

The plane was having trouble. It slewed around in the sand, trying to take off, laboring to avoid getting stuck. Meanwhile, the three guys spread out among the rocks. It was clear they had a fix on the location of the fugitives as seen from the air and were trying to outflank them, but with only three guys, it was going to be hard.

Costa's thoughtful gaze fixed on the plane, which was still struggling to take off.

"Want to try to hijack a plane?"

"What?" Farley said.

"You can fly it."

Farley gestured feebly. “Not with one arm!”

“Good thing we have another pilot, then.”

* * *

Diana had encountered a minor but, in retrospect, predictable problem.

She found the gun where Costa said it would be, although she had to hunt around a little; roadrunners weren’t extremely strong in their sense of smell. Once she found it, she shifted human and pulled it out.

And there she was. Bare of ass and sandy of feet, crouching beside a boulder with a gun in one hand, all too aware of the breeze on her skin.

Roadrunners couldn’t carry guns.

She wondered if she might be able to hold it in her beak—but, although she was large for a bird (a full-grown roadrunner was about two feet long counting the tail), she wasn’t that big. Like all birds, she was extremely light, under a pound in spite of her size. The gun probably weighed more than she did. There was a good chance she’d fall flat on her face if she tried to carry it as a bird.

“I feel like a pin-up in the Playboy version of Gun she had also lost sight of the gunmen in the boulder-strewn wasteland, glimpsing them only now and then as they made their way through the brush and rocks.

She returned her anxious gaze to the plane. If it got off the ground, they’d had it. She wondered if it was possible to shoot at it from where she was, but she doubted that even a crack shot could have done it from this far away with such a small gun. And she definitely was not that.

“Where’s Quinn when I need him?” she muttered, knowing it was completely petty—but he was the one with a grounding in field tactics. She had no idea what made the most sense to do now, or even what she could do.

The sound of crunching footsteps on gravel announced someone behind her, and Diana spun around, half rising from her crouch and aiming the gun. She found Farley in the act of wildly raising his good hand to cover his eyes.

“Jeez! I’m not looking at you! Don’t point that at me, I’m on your side.” All of this came out in a rapid-fire whisper. Farley crouched down, keeping his eyes covered, and whispered, “Are you still pointing the gun at me?”

“Yes! Where’s Quinn?”

“Costa? He sent me to find you, told me where you’d be. He’s trying to get to the plane.”

“He’s what?”

Even as he said it, the pilot finally managed to find some purchase on the loose surface, and the plane turned and straightened out.

There was movement behind the burnt-out hulk of the wreck. Diana rose again, peering over the boulders. She was greeted by the sight of Costa’s great, humped, ursine shift shape, running flat out across the sandy valley bottom toward the plane that was even now gathering speed to take off.

“What is he planning on doing?” She tried to keep her voice low, but the noise of the plane gearing up for a takeoff helped cover it anyway.

Costa couldn’t have provided a better distraction if he’d tried—and perhaps that was

part of what he intended. Among the rocks, on the hillside and a ways off to her left, the gunmen were straightening up and frantically turning around. Someone snapped off a wild shot at the running boar, but as far as Diana could tell, it didn't come even close to hitting him.

There was a majestic quality to a running boar, especially a huge one like Costa. He was nothing like the javelinas Diana occasionally saw in the hills around Tucson, roly-poly piglike animals that bounced across the ground in an almost comical way. There was nothing funny about Costa at full gallop. His legs were much longer for his size than a domestic pig, his shoulder high and humped; it was almost more like watching a charging buffalo than anything that might deserve to be grouped in the same category as a pig.

The pilot probably didn't see him at first, but when the plane began to swing around into the wind for takeoff, the charging boar came into the visible field of view from the cockpit. Diana guessed the moment when the pilot saw him because the plane abruptly slammed into high acceleration, wheels churning up great rooster tails of sand, and the nose jerked up sharply in preparation for takeoff.

"Too soon, you fool," Diana murmured with professional scorn.

The plane wasn't going fast enough to take off yet. Instead the wings partly caught the air, the entire machine lifted off the ground for a moment in a bunny hop and then slammed back down, hitting harder on one side than the other. The wing dipped almost to the sand, and the machine went into a wide-swinging skid.

The change of direction and delay was the only thing that allowed Costa to catch up. A boar at a hard gallop couldn't outrace a motor vehicle running under full throttle. But he was able to gain enough advantage to come alongside the plane.

Diana realized she was holding her breath.

The boar leaped and slammed into the side of the plane, not headfirst, as Diana was half expecting, but rather striking it a powerful glancing blow with his shoulder. Airplanes were built similarly to cars but were lighter for their size, especially a smaller machine like this one, with an aluminum airframe and lightweight metals and plastics used throughout. A car would be better able to withstand a collision with rampaging wildlife, but they were meant to. There weren't a lot of charging wild animals at 20,000 feet.

The collision with Costa literally spun the plane around. It rotated like a top, and Diana discovered a sudden new source of terror as Costa (who apparently hadn't expected that either) came within a shaggy whisker of being grazed by the lethal, spinning propeller.

He missed it, and as the plane turned an entire revolution, Diana could see a great dent in the side where the boar had hit it. The pilot must be having fits.

The engine revved and the plane sped away. Costa lurched into motion again. However, now the gunmen had reached the edge of the sandy area and were shooting at him from considerably closer.

"We have to help him," Diana said breathlessly.

She started down the hill, mincing painfully in her bare feet over the rocks and thorns. She felt something stab her big toe, a sharp agonizing jolt, but didn't dare stop.

"Wait!" Farley stayed with her. "Those guys have bigger guns than yours—er, mine. Do you really think you can win?"

"I'm not letting Quinn fight them alone. I?—"

She didn't see it coming. She had completely let her guard down. So when Farley grabbed the gun, she was too shocked to do anything for the instant that it took him to turn the gun on her.

"Hey!" he yelled, backing away, gun pointed at Diana. "Hey, guys! She's up here!"

"You—you cad ." Diana gauged the distance between herself and him. With his broken arm and other injuries, she thought she could probably beat him in a fight. But she didn't like the odds of jumping on him when he was holding a gun on her. "We helped you! We could have just left you to die."

"I know, and I'm sorry." Farley looked agonized—but the gun didn't waver. "I've got my family to think of."

"Costa can protect your family, you idiot!"

"You don't know how well connected these guys are. I can't afford to take the chance."

* * *

Costa was not exactly having the time of his life, but there was something satisfying, after the kidnapping and the helplessness of their situation, about finally having a target on which to vent his fury—even if it was many times bigger than he was.

And, he hardly could believe it, he was winning. The pilot was managing to avoid him for the most part, veering around in the sand like a rally driver, but couldn't get up a good enough speed to get off the ground. Every time the airplane started to straighten out for a run at takeoff, Costa charged again.

He was aware that he was being shot at, but so far no one had even come close. They

had pistols, not guns meant for distance shooting. And absolutely nobody wanted to get anywhere near a boar-vs-airplane duel. The tremendous dust cloud further confused their aim.

It was a standoff, though. The pilot couldn't take off, but Costa also wasn't sure exactly how he was going to capture the plane this way. He needed to get close enough to shift and grab a door or handle so he could board it, and he'd be extremely vulnerable as soon as he did that.

He became aware that the shooting had stopped. A minute later, there was a shout from the edge of the sandy area which had become churned up with tire tracks and boar hooves.

"Hey! Hey, pig boy! We've got your girl!"

Costa spun around, snorting furiously.

It was true. Diana was walking out of the rocks at gunpoint, head down and fists clenched, looking furious. She was flanked by one of the gunmen and Farley, both holding guns on her. Someone had chivalrously given her a jacket, but she was otherwise naked and limping.

For an instant Costa's vision turned scarlet with rage. It was all he could do not to let his boar side take over completely, rampaging through the enemy and grinding their bones to a sticky paste beneath his hooves.

But the human side of him knew perfectly well that he would just get himself shot. And worse, Diana.

"Shift and surrender!" the gunman shouted.

Costa looked around at a sudden revving of the airplane's engine. The pilot had taken advantage of his distraction to get a good run at a takeoff, and Costa didn't think he could catch him now.

Well, he had given it his best. And there was no way in any universe that he was prepared to let them hurt Diana.

He shifted, and barefoot and naked, walked across the sand toward them.

"Sorry," Diana said when he was close enough that they could speak without having to shout. "You were magnificent out there, by the way. I didn't mean to be the weak link."

"You're not, and you have nothing to be sorry for." Costa turned his furious stare on Farley. "Him, on the other hand ..."

Farley winced. "Look, I appreciate that you helped me, and I really am sorry. But I'm not risking my family." He glanced at Diana. "Just like you're not going to risk her."

Costa hated that Farley was right. If he'd been in Farley's position and Diana's life was the one at stake well, he already knew how he'd handle it, because he had just done it.

The airplane's high-pitched engine whine turned into the drone of takeoff and it flew over their heads, a couple hundred feet up. Costa looked up at it and, unable to help himself, gave it the finger.

The man who appeared to be the gunmen's leader, a big guy with sunglasses and a scar across the side of his face, barked a sharp laugh. "Okay, whoever's got the radio, let him know that they're under control and it's safe to land."

Diana moved closer to Costa until the gunmen stopped her. She wasn't close enough to touch. But, however precarious their position, having her near at all gave him strength.

"Planning to kill us?" he asked. He wondered how far Diana could get as a roadrunner if he shifted and threw himself at the men. She could survive out here for a long time, and the SCB would send someone eventually—in fact, they were probably already looking. But he had a bad feeling she was no more likely to leave him than he had proven himself willing to leave her.

"No," Sunglasses said. "You're a lot more valuable alive than dead. In fact, after seeing you fight an entire airplane out there, I know exactly who would be interested in paying big bucks for you."

"Paying—" Costa began.

He only glimpsed the gun swinging in from the side as one of the others moved in swiftly and struck him. Sparks exploded in his vision. The last thing he heard was Diana furiously yelling his name, and then darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER 22

Diana was going to kill someone. She wasn't sure if it was possible to tear out a man's throat with a roadrunner's beak, but she was willing to take a literal stab at it.

With Costa limp and bleeding on the sand, they had ordered her to shift, and she couldn't think what else to do other than obey. Then she was placed in a cage so small that she couldn't possibly have shifted human again without badly hurting herself.

That was a few hours ago. She had spent the airplane flight very uncomfortably wedged in the back of the cargo area, unable to see where they were going or what was happening with Costa. She did hear when he woke up, which was a huge relief; there was a scuffle, some yelling and cursing, and she dimly heard them telling Costa to pipe down or they'd throw her cage out of the plane. At this point she almost wished they'd just get it over with; if it came to that, she was willing to at least try shifting human to see if she could break the cage. But Costa apparently capitulated, because there was no more fighting that she could hear. After that, they flew on for a long, hard-to-judge while, and then she felt them losing altitude for a landing.

They covered the cage with a canvas tarp, and so, once again, all she had to go on was her other senses. The cage was placed in some kind of motor vehicle and they drove for a time. Diana tried squawking and shrieking, but no one paid any attention, so she decided to save her energy and breath for the next opportunity she got at an escape.

She had absolutely no intention of falling asleep. In fact, if anyone had suggested that

she could fall asleep under these circumstances, she would have thought them out of their mind. But it was very dark in the cage, she couldn't really move much, and she'd had a very stressful twenty-four hours with little sleep the night before ... or the previous night, for that matter. It was hard to wrap her mind around the fact that it had been only two days since her house burned down.

So she dozed in the gently rocking cage. Sudden cessation of movement woke her up. She crouched unhappily in the cage, wishing she could at least see. (And bite.)

The cage moved again. Footsteps, voices. She was being carried somewhere. Then the cover was whipped off the cage and she found herself in a large, too-bright, too-white space.

Diana closed her eyes against the glare. Fortunately, as a desert bird, she was well adapted to bright conditions, and she half-slid her avian third eyelid over her eyes before peering around.

What she saw made her heart rate accelerate. She was very clearly in some sort of lab.

Her cage was sitting on a large stainless steel countertop. All around her, there were metal lab tables, shelves and gurneys of tools, and expensive-looking equipment of various types. Diana had no idea what she was looking at specifically, but the place reminded her a little of her high school science lab except much bigger and with more expensive-looking stuff in it.

I bet an angry roadrunner could do a lot of damage in here.

She saw no sign of Costa, which worried her desperately, but she reminded herself that they'd shown no signs, so far, of killing either of them. He had been alive on the plane, and if they were going to commit murder, it made the most sense to do it out in

the desert, rather than here in presumed civilization.

Where are we, anyway? She had no idea which direction the plane had been flying. They could be just about anywhere in a few hours' flight radius from the eastern Arizona area, which was a great deal of territory.

There were a few people in the room. Two of them (a man and a woman) wore lab coats, while the other two Diana recognized as two of the goons from the desert. Their dusty tactical gear and weapons looked strikingly out of place in the lab, especially next to the clean white lab coats of the scientists.

"The roadrunner is the next test subject?" the male scientist asked, and Diana squawked and pushed herself as far back in her cage as she could.

"Yes," the woman said. There was a sharp-edged, no-nonsense air to her. "You!" she added, snapping her fingers at Goon #1. "Help Mike restrain her."

"I think we're done here," said Goon #2. "I'm going to go check on the other one."

"Yes, go, whatever."

The scientists descended on the cage. Diana proceeded to make as much of a nuisance of herself as possible, squawking and flapping even though it meant bashing her wings on the inside of the cage. She did not like the words "test subject" at all .

Frantic fluttering did her little good. Wearing a pair of heavy gloves, the male scientist, who she assumed was Mike, deftly stuck a series of metal rods through the cage bars, somewhat clumsily aided by Goon #1. It was evident the lab had done this before. The rods didn't do anything except confine Diana, but she found herself crowded into an even tinier section of the cage, barely able to move anything except her head.

The female scientist, who Diana decided to think of as Ms. Frankenstein, drew up a syringe from a bottle, then donned a heavy glove on her off hand similar to the ones Mike was wearing. It looked like the sort of thing someone would use to restrain a rabid raccoon.

Diana tried to yell “No!” It emerged as “Awk!”

“Stop fighting, you troublesome creature.”

Frankenstein used her gloved hand to slide open a small door in the side of the cage that Diana hadn’t even noticed, exposing Diana’s shoulder, neck, and part of her wing. While Diana tried to maneuver her head around to bite her, Frankenstein wrapped her gloved fingers firmly around Diana’s torso. Diana struggled, but she felt the sharp sting as the needle was jabbed into her shoulder and then withdrawn. Frankenstein snapped the side door shut, while Diana shook with fear and rage.

“No, leave those,” Frankenstein told Mike, who had begun to withdraw the rods pinning Diana in place. “We’ll keep her confined until we see if there’s going to be a reaction, and then we’ll need to move her to a bigger cage and feed her.”

A bigger cage didn’t sound like good news for her chances of not being a roadrunner anytime soon, and she didn’t like the sound of if there’s going to be a reaction any more than she’d appreciated test subject. Diana shivered, and gradually realized it was more than just the aftermath of adrenaline and thwarted anger making her shake. There was a cold sensation spreading out from the injection site. Her wing on that side felt strange, heavy, and numb. She also experienced an odd, sharp taste in the back of her throat.

What on earth did they give me?

She told herself firmly that the objective wasn’t to kill her. There was no point in

using a shifter for testing if it was just a poison or something; any lab animal would have served as well.

But what is it going to do ?

Mike was now taking some measurements, including weighing the cage, Diana and all. She hissed and occasionally tried to peck or bite him through the bars, and nearly went ballistic when he brought another needle, but this one was merely for drawing blood.

The door opened. Diana hissed louder when the person who came in turned out to be Farley. He'd cleaned up a bit, and his broken arm was in a sling, which just made the bruises on his face stand out more vividly. Diana wished she'd had a chance to give him some new ones.

"Hey, you're both needed in Lab 2," Farley said.

Frankenstein looked up from her laptop. "Now what? We're in the middle of something." Mike was labeling the blood samples.

"I don't know. It sounded urgent. Halsted has some questions about one of the test subjects who's developed a problem. I didn't ask any questions."

"Fine, whatever." Frankenstein closed the laptop and pointed at Farley. "I need more blood samples from you when we're done."

"Yeah, you'll get 'em."

Frankenstein and Mike left the room. Farley went swiftly to the door they'd just left through, peered out, then hurried over to Diana's cage and started pulling out the metal rods confining her.

Diana squawked in disbelief. “Shhh!” Farley hissed at her. He felt around for a bit one-handed until he managed to spring the clamps holding the cage door shut, and for the first time in what felt like forever Diana was able to tumble out onto the lab table.

She shifted immediately. Farley stifled a yelp and turned his back.

“What are you up to now?” Diana whispered fiercely at him. She slid off the table and grabbed a discarded lab coat off the back of someone’s chair. She had to work one-handed as well; the arm that had been injected was nearly useless, and was starting to experience an odd cramping, burning sensation. “What’s your deal?”

“I hate what they’re doing here,” Farley whispered back. “I want to help.”

“Oh yeah, sure. I’ve heard that before!” Diana looked around for some kind of weapon. There were a lot of loose items, but not much that looked like it could be used offensively. She grabbed a laptop and wielded it one-handed at Farley like a short, wide club. “Stay away from me!”

“I really am trying to help!” Farley protested.

“If you wanted to help, you could’ve showed up ten minutes earlier, you know, before they stuck me with some kind of experimental drug.”

“They gave it to me, too.”

Diana looked at him in shock, now taking in the pallor that made the bruises stand out so clearly. He was shivering a little, which she had simply taken for pain from his broken arm. “How recently?”

“While they were treating me after we got here. I thought it was just an injection for pain. Then the doc told me they’d decided to incorporate me into ‘the program’.” He

made air quotes with his good hand.

“What happens to test subjects in ‘the program’?”

“I have no idea. I really don’t want to find out. Can we get out of here before they come back and find you loose?”

“Just a minute.” Diana scanned the room for a bag or a box. Nothing looked immediately useful, so she spread a lab coat on a table and started piling things on it: the laptop, the blood samples, scattered paperwork that had been laying on a desk.

“Do you have to do this now?” Farley protested.

“Yes. If the SCB is going to undo what’s been done to us, whatever it is, they’ll need information.” She opened a lab fridge which turned out to be full of samples. Diana grabbed a handful at random. “Did you see Costa at all? Do you know where he is? Did they inject him too?”

“I did see him, and I don’t think so.” Farley avoided her gaze. “I got the idea they want him in the arena, and didn’t want to risk taking him out of commission before the fights.”

The shifter fights—of course. That was what they had been talking about on the flight. No surprise that Costa’s airplane-baiting had drawn the attention of people who were interested in recruiting and betting on shifter gladiators. Diana supposed it was better than some of the possible alternatives.

“Okay,” she said, bundling up the lab coat around its contents. With one of her arms nearly out of commission, she couldn’t carry any more than this. “Which way to Quinn?”

“You mean the way out of here, right?”

“ You can leave. I’m not going without?—”

There was a sudden loud buzzing that reminded Diana of an office building fire alarm. A computerized female voice announced, “There has been a security breach. Please remain calm and stay in your assigned section.”

At the same time there was a series of loud clunking sounds that Diana recognized, an instant too late, as computerized locks slamming shut. She stopped her efforts to bundle up the coat and ran to the door. Yanking on it did nothing.

Farley looked horrified. “There must have been an alarm on your cage.”

“In that case it would have gone off when you let me out, not a few minutes later. This is something else.” Something Costa-related, Diana was almost positive. She looked around. There was another door on the far side of the lab, but she guessed before she tried it that it wouldn’t open.

“These doors must have some kind of emergency override, right?” There was a keypad next to the door. Diana examined it. Keys, a card swipe, and for good measure a biometric fingerprint reader. They really covered all their bases.

“Yeah, I’ve seen people using them,” Farley said. “I don’t know how it all works. I’m just the taxi driver.” He shuddered abruptly, an all-over shiver that seemed less to do with what he was talking about and more involuntary, and sat down weakly in a lab chair.

Diana could guess why. She felt feverish and shaky herself. On the bright side, her arm was coming back online, so she could use it a little more.

Absently, she buttoned up her borrowed lab coat as high as it would go so she was in less danger of flashing the world (well, flashing Farley) every time she moved. Then she began opening cabinets, looking in every one.

“What are you after?” Farley looked even worse, shaky and pale; Diana was no longer sure he would be able to stand up. If he couldn’t, he was on his own, she thought grimly.

“I don’t know. Something to open the door. Someone might’ve left a spare key card or something.”

The buzzer had cut out after the computer announced the emergency, but it came on again for a few staccato bursts, making her jump. “There is a security breach in progress,” the voice announced. “Please remain in place or proceed to the nearest secure location.”

“Was that gunshots I just heard?” Farley asked.

Diana paused in the act of rummaging through the cabinets. Standing still, she did hear some distant crackling that might have been fireworks—or gunfire muffled by several layers of security doors.

“Costa,” she murmured, “what on earth are you doing?”

CHAPTER 23

Costa had had better days.

Threats to Diana were the only thing that could keep him from fighting back—but it had worked. After regaining consciousness on the plane, he had submitted with teeth-grinding frustration to being chained hand and foot. Now, several hours later, he was still chained, this time in a locked room deep in a facility of some sort.

He had been blindfolded when they brought him here, so he wasn't sure what it looked like, or where he was. He also didn't know where Diana was, and no one had responded to his repeated demands to see her.

They left him alone in his cell, naked and handcuffed to the wall. So far they hadn't done anything except—through the bars—stamping one of his shoulders with a mark that, when he looked down at it, seemed identical to the red lion device on the card recovered from the crash site.

“This is Halsted's mark,” the goon who had stamped it told him, after getting hastily out of reach. “Means you're one of his.”

“One of his what?” Costa snapped, testing his chains. He looked down at the smeary red mark again.

“One of his fighters. You're going to be great on the shifter fighting circuit.”

“Yeah, do you remember any point when I agreed to this or signed anything giving

you permission? Me neither. This is kidnapping, and I'm a federal agent."

"You were," the goon said ominously, and left.

That had been a while back. So far they hadn't brought him any water or food, or even a blanket to give him relief from the cold concrete of the cell on his bare body. After the vigorous exercise in the valley, he was parched; his tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wondered if this might be part of their plan, actually—keeping him compliant by depriving him of basic necessities.

On the other hand, having a dry mouth made one thing easier. Back on the plane, he'd palmed a zipper clip off someone's backpack and tucked it into his mouth, thinking it might come in handy later. It was the only thing he could carry in his naked state, and the only place he could think to carry it.

He waited a long while to use it, knowing he wouldn't get another chance. But when no one returned to get him, he slipped it out into his hand. After prying at it with his fingernails and teeth until he managed to turn it into a crude lock pick of sorts, he started working on the cuffs of his chains.

He had gotten his hands uncuffed and was working on his feet when all the alarms went off.

"There has been a security breach. Please remain calm and stay in your assigned section."

Costa grinned to himself, and a tightly wound knot of tension in his chest relaxed a little. That was Diana; he'd lay odds on it. She was alive, well, and causing problems somewhere else in the facility.

Now he just had to get himself to where she was, which was going to involve getting

out of this cell.

He finished with the leg chains and let them drop, then stood up to examine the lock on the door. It was electronic, which didn't bode well for his ability to jiggle it open with the now dented and battered clip.

However, there was more than one way to get a door open.

With the chains off, he could shift freely. Costa backed up all the way to the far wall of the cell (not far to go, as it wasn't big) and shifted. Then he charged the door.

He took the blow on his shoulder, wincing as he was reminded of the bruises from his previous altercation with the airplane. The door shuddered but held firm. Costa backed up and took another run at it, angling to land the full force of his charge on the side of the door with the lock, which he figured was probably its weakest link. The door was sturdy and the cell was probably designed to contain shifters, but how long could it hold up to several hundred pounds of angry herbivore made by nature to pound on things?

The answer turned out to be seven or eight charges. He was sore all over and starting to lose count, but he felt it start to give on the last two tries, and finally he rammed it and was rewarded with the door slamming open with a crash that must have echoed all over the facility.

Momentum carried him on out into the corridor, and that was when the door at the end of the corridor opened with a loud click.

Costa spun around, snorting, head down. For a minute, he and the man standing framed in the open doorway stared at each other.

The man in the doorway was Agent Azarias Caine. He was wearing his usual dark

suit, with a tactical vest over the top and a gun in one hand. His sunglasses were shoved on top of his head. After eyeing the boar for a minute, he said, “That better be you, Chief.”

Costa shifted and straightened up, rubbing his aching shoulder. “Of course it’s me,” he snapped. “Is Diana with you?”

“No, but we have teams all over the facility.” Caine began to unbuckle his tac vest. “Here, you can wear my jacket if you don’t want to run around?—”

“I don’t care about that. All I need is a gun.” Costa stalked over and took Caine’s out of his hand. “This one will do nicely.”

Caine raised his eyebrows. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“You’re a dragon. Somehow I think you’ll figure it out.” Costa peered past him into the hall. “I need the Cliffs Notes version of what’s happening. Where are we, what are you doing here, how many people are with you?”

“Right. We’re a few miles outside Alamagordo in New Mexico with an SCB strike team. After you disappeared yesterday, it’s been an all-hands-on-deck situation. We requisitioned records from Desert Tours, and found out they’ve been making regular flights out here to a particular site that has its own airstrip. Figured that was our best shot at figuring out where you’d gone, and ...” Caine made a fluttery motion with his fingers. “Look at that, we were right.”

“Good work, although there’s been a lot more going on than just an uneventful flight across the state border. Come on, I need to figure out where Diana’s been taken.”

The halls were eerily empty, although now and then Costa saw bullet holes in the wall or heard the sounds of distant yelling. Every door was closed and locked. Caine

swiped them through with a key card.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Where do you think? Its owner was very happy to donate it to the cause, especially when I explained the alternatives.” Caine glanced at Costa, who was carefully navigating barefoot through a scatter of broken glass where a window had been smashed. “Are you entirely sure you don’t want to stop and find something to wear?”

“Waste of time,” Costa said grimly. “If the sight of a naked man with a gun yelling and running full tilt at somebody isn’t enough to intimidate them, putting pants on me isn’t going to help.”

“It would help me.”

“Diana first, pants later.”

“I can see you’re clearly not into her at all.”

This brought a powerfully vivid memory of Diana’s lean, strong body writhing against his, the way she half closed her eyes and the noises she made when she came ...

“Shut it, Caine.”

Caine smirked but didn’t say anything else as he swiped open the next door.

This opened into yet another plain, unadorned hallway, but this time they could hear the muffled sound of someone banging on a door somewhere along the corridor. “Help! Let us out! Is anyone there?”

“Diana,” Costa breathed.

He pushed past Caine and hurried to the door, only to realize he couldn’t open it on his own. Caine arrived, gave him a look, pushed him out of the way and swiped the keycard.

Diana stumbled out, wearing nothing but a lab coat, her tanned legs long and beautiful. She was tousled and pale, but when she saw Costa, she fixed on him as if there was nothing and no one else in the hall.

“Quinn! You’re all right!”

She threw her arms around him, and Costa buried himself in her kiss. Even as he kissed her, he felt something was wrong. She was shaking in his arms, trembling as if she would fly apart, and she felt feverishly hot to the touch.

“What’s wrong?” He absently waved the gun butt-first at Caine, who took it, and then cupped Diana’s face in his hands. She had been fine when he last saw her. “Are you sick? Did they hurt you? What did they do?”

Caine cleared his throat. “At the risk of interrupting this touching reunion, why don’t we go inside this—lab? I guess? Rather than having an entire conversation out here in the hall, where security guards could happen upon us at any time.”

“Right. We have to go inside anyway.” Diana gripped Costa’s hand and led him in. She paused to say, “Do you want some pants?”

“Why do people keep asking me that? If you have any handy, give ‘em to me. Otherwise I’m fine.”

“You sure are,” Diana said with an appreciative look and something resembling her

usual spark.

“Oh God, if I knew I was going to be subjected to naked flirting, I’d have called in sick.” Caine grabbed a lab coat off a hook and thrust it at Costa. “Wear this, for all our sakes.”

Costa absently donned it as he followed Diana around some chairs and lab tables. As he got closer, he realized there was a person lying on the floor, stretched out facedown in front of a wheeled office chair. In fact, it was?—

“Well, what do you know, it’s our old friend Farley,” Costa said grimly. “Good job, Diana. I knew you could take him.”

“No, it’s not what you think,” Diana protested. “He’s helping. Well, for now. But the point is ... they gave us both some kind of injection. He collapsed a few minutes ago, and I can’t wake him up. I’m afraid that’s going to happen to me next.”

A new surge of fury flooded Costa. “They gave you what ?”

“I don’t know. I collected everything I could find for the SCB labs to look at. It’s on that table.” She pointed to a large bundle wrapped up in another lab coat. “From what they said, I think Farley and I are research subjects for some kind of experimental chemical. They didn’t give you anything, did they?”

“No, nothing but my brand new tramp stamp here.” Costa briefly pulled down the collar of the lab coat to show the red lion. “It’s just ink, associated with someone named Halsted, I guess. Otherwise they left me alone. But what—when—” He took a deep breath, twitching the collar back into place in spite of Caine’s attempts to get a closer look at the ink. “You said they injected you with whatever it was?”

“Yes, I’d say two or three hours ago, maybe.” She pulled down the loose neck of her

coat, similar to how he'd done, to display her shoulder. "They stuck me here. For a while, I couldn't move my arm."

There was an angry red circle showing up in a bullseye pattern around a bright, bloody pinprick. Costa touched it cautiously and felt a large welt surrounding the injection site. Diana hissed in pain and he pulled his hand away quickly.

"My head really hurts. It came on suddenly around the time Farley fainted." She rubbed her temple with her hand. "I can't believe the SCB's here. How did they find us?"

"Caine can explain." Costa put an arm around her, and she slumped on him. "Come on, let's get you out."

Farley made a sudden, choking sound, and his entire body jerked. Caine knelt beside him and matter-of-factly felt his pulse. "Going like a freight train." He looked up at Costa. "We need to get both of them to medical care."

"You're telling me! We need to find—" Costa broke off. Feeling Diana shivering against him, overwhelmingly struck by the urgency of the situation, he turned a steady stare on Caine. "Can you take us to the SCB labs? Will you?"

"What am I now, Uber?" Caine sighed, but he rose in a single swift motion, took a few quick steps to the table with the bundled-up lab coat, and deposited the clanking bundle on the floor beside Farley. "Get her over here. It'll need to be dark."

Costa lowered Diana gently to sit beside Farley on the floor, then went looking for a light switch. When he found the right one, the room was plunged into near total darkness. Costa stumbled into a table and barked his bare shin. "Ow!"

"Bet you wish you'd taken me up on the offer of finding you some pants, huh?"

Caine's amused voice came out of the dark. "Get over here."

"I'm trying," Costa grumbled.

A sudden light speared the dark: Caine using the flashlight on his phone. "Now can you get over here?"

Caine crossed the room through the dancing shadows and knelt beside them. He put one arm around Diana and a hand on Caine's shoulder. Before Caine turned off his phone and darkness swallowed them again, he saw that Caine had one hand on Farley's jerking chest.

Then there was nothing but dark. Costa felt Diana turn her face against his shoulder, and whispered into her hair, "Hold your breath."

He felt her inhale and did the same, just before the chill dark of Caine's particular form of transportation closed around them. The only thing that seemed real in the endless, cold emptiness was Diana, shivering as she leaned into him with a trust he wasn't sure if even she was aware of.

CHAPTER 24

Diana felt wretched, so much so that she barely registered the discomfort of another brief trip through wherever Caine went when he transported people. She raised her head as there was a sudden clatter, and she became aware of a much less profound darkness around them.

“Where are we?” Costa asked out of the dark. Diana reached back and felt a wall behind her.

“Employee bathroom in the residential wing of the SCB headquarters,” Caine said, sounding hoarse. “I’m not used to moving this many people around. Tight fit. Just a minute.”

The lights came on an instant later. They were, indeed, on the bathroom floor. Diana was abruptly aware of her nearly naked state and also that her toes felt halfway to frozen.

“Caine,” Costa said, rubbing his bare legs, “please remind me next time that you are correct. I should have put on pants.”

“Yes, you should have,” Caine said. His face looked pale and pinched. “And remind me next time not to transport this many unfamiliar people this far. We’re gonna need a gurney for this guy, unless you want to carry him.”

“I’ll get Mavis down here,” Costa said. He squeezed Diana’s shoulder. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yes,” she told him. “Go, go.”

Costa departed, leaving the bathroom door open. Diana checked on Farley. His breathing was shallow and rapid, and he felt slightly feverish to the touch. She felt as if she was running a fever herself, too hot and too cold at once.

“Agent Caine, do you have any medical training?”

“None whatsoever,” Caine said. “Nor do I want to. My skills lie in a different area.” He put a hand lightly on her shoulder, a respectfully restrained pressure. “There is a small lounge area with some chairs if you’d like to sit somewhere other than the bathroom floor. I’m going back to the fight in a minute, as soon as my head stops exploding.”

Caine helped Diana out into the hall with a light hand under her elbow. She looked at him thoughtfully, pushing past her own weakness and illness to see that he did look shaky and unwell. “Does it always do that to you?” she asked, as he helped her sit down on one of a pair of padded chairs at the end of the short hallway.

For a minute she didn’t think he was going to answer. Then he sat down beside her. “Not for short hops to familiar places. Transporting more than one person is hard. Long distances too.”

Diana laced her fingers together over her bare knees and looked at him sideways. He had his sunglasses over his eyes again, so it was harder to make out his expression. “Can I ask what it is that you do when you—do what you just did?”

He looked faintly amused. “You can ask.”

“But you won’t answer.”

“No.” After a moment he said, “Perhaps someday. You and Costa—may I ask what’s going on there?”

“You may ask.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up in the most genuine smile she’d ever seen from him. “Ah.”

“It’s not so much that I don’t want to answer. It’s that I don’t know.”

“Reasonable.” He reached out and, to her great shock, gave her shoulder an awkward pat. “For whatever it’s worth, you definitely get him riled up like no one else.”

She remembered the heat of Costa’s mouth on hers, the slick joy of having him inside her. A rush of heat overwhelmed her. “Good,” she said faintly, and rested her head in her hands. “I’d hate to think he doesn’t ...”

Whatever she was going to say faded out of her mind. “I don’t,” she began, and tried to stand up, gripping for Caine. Her hand closed on his arm, but the world seemed to come up sideways and smack at her. She was dimly aware of Caine catching her and lowering her to the floor.

“Hey—Diana?”

She couldn’t seem to answer. She lost a little time, glimpsed the ceiling of a corridor, was aware of movement.

She dreamed.

Monsters lunged at her from feverish depths, an uncoiling black snakelike thing and clawing animals that were straight out of nightmare. She hallucinated herself in the

desert, morning light rising around her, standing in front of a giant shape that she gradually realized was a roadrunner, but the size of a T-rex.

“Are you my shift shape?” she asked hesitantly, reaching a hand out toward it.

The creature dipped its head. At this size, the vast beak was like a jackhammer; it could have skewered her in an instant. But she felt no fear. She wasn’t sure if she got bigger or if it got smaller, but it was no taller than she was when she placed her hand cautiously on the side of its head.

It turned its head to the side so it could regard her from a golden bird’s eye.

“Are you trying to tell me something? I don’t understand.”

There was no reply. Diana blinked, and found herself peeling sticky, sleep-gummed eyes open as she woke. She turned her head weakly to the side. She was resting somewhere soft, head propped up by a pillow, and there was a blanket on top of her. Costa was holding her hand.

For a few minutes she just lay there and gazed at him. He had one hand wrapped around hers, and was holding a book in the other. He was dressed in sweatpants and a loose Phoenix Suns sweatshirt, which Diana guessed were either workout clothes he kept at the office or borrowed from someone. The same day, then? There were no windows or sources of natural daylight to give her guidance; in fact, a curtain drawn around her bed prevented her from seeing exactly where she was. But the fact that Costa was with her, and didn’t look worried or alarmed, soothed her fears. She wasn’t back in the lab; she was still at the SCB. And there were no medical personnel clustered around her bed, so she probably wasn’t dying.

Costa’s hair was tousled in a way that suggested a recent shower. It looked very touchable. Her hand twitched to reach out for it, and that was what tipped him off that

she was awake.

He raised his head swiftly. “Diana,” he said, and the next thing she knew, he was leaning forward and kissing her.

What started out as a swift, dry brush of lips rapidly turned deeper and more heated, and when he finally pulled away, she was gasping—and also felt a lot more awake. “Well,” she breathed. “All of a sudden I understand why a kiss got Sleeping Beauty’s motor running.”

Costa laughed. He cupped his hand against her cheek and stroked lightly up to run his fingers through her hair. “How are you feeling?”

“Weird. Achy. Thirsty. Am I allowed to drink anything?”

“Yes, of course.” Costa reached for a plastic cup with a straw on the bedside table. He helped her sit up, supported her while she waited out a head rush, then handed it to her.

While she sipped what turned out to be refreshing ice water, Diana turned her hand over and examined the back of it, where an IV was taped. The line ran to a slack bag on a stand beside her bed, so it looked like whatever they had been giving her was finished. The shoulder where she had been injected felt stiff and sore, as if from receiving a vaccine, but other than that, she didn’t feel too bad. There were sticky tabs on her chest holding EKG leads, which showed a steady, reassuring rhythm.

“What’s the word from the docs?” she asked. “For that matter, what time is it? How long have I been out?”

“Oh. Sorry. I forgot that you wouldn’t know.” Costa started to look at the watch he wasn’t wearing, then reached for a phone he also didn’t have on him, and laughed

ruefully. “It’s been almost twenty-four hours.”

“You’re kidding.” No wonder she felt so heavy and achy. “You haven’t been here the whole time, I hope?”

“I got some sleep,” Costa said, not very convincingly. “Farley woke up early this morning, and the last I heard, he was doing fine. He’s off in guest quarters with a guard on him. So they were expecting you to come around any time, but, you know—it’s hard to say for sure until it happens.”

Although his voice was light, Diana sensed the unspoken edges of the desperate worry underneath. Not sure what to do with that situation, she turned her attention to finishing the water instead. With her thirst slaked, she became aware that she was very hungry and also wearing nothing but a hospital gown. She could feel sand on her feet and legs every time she moved.

“So what are the chances of me getting food, some clothes, and a shower? Not necessarily in that order.”

Costa grinned and squeezed her arm. “Let me go get the doc.”

A moment later he returned with Mavis and several other doctors and technicians she hadn’t met yet, at least not while conscious. Mavis firmly shooed Costa out. Diana submitted to being prodded, having her temperature and blood pressure taken, and giving more vials of blood from an already perforated arm.

“So what’s happening to me?” she asked.

“I know this isn’t going to be as reassuring as you’d like, but at the moment, apparently nothing,” Mavis said, making some notes on her tablet. “Farley also seemed to be fine when he woke up. Your BP is a bit elevated and we’re getting high

white blood cell counts from both of you, but that's it. We're still analyzing the substance that was recovered from the lab in Alamagordo. I can tell you it's not a virus or a bacterial substance, it's chemical, but beyond that, we have no idea what it does yet."

"You're right, that's not reassuring."

"Well, maybe it'll be more reassuring if I tell you that you certainly don't seem to be contagious in any way, so there's no reason why you can't leave. I can get something for you to wear; I'm sure there must be female agents here who are about your size. We'd like you to check in if you experience any unusual symptoms, and come back for more bloodwork in a few days, but otherwise it seems pointless to keep you here."

"Music to my ears, Doc."

Ten minutes later, she was sitting in the SCB cafeteria with Costa, dressed in borrowed jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of low-topped boots that were slightly too big for her. Outside the window, the desert was brilliant in early afternoon sunlight. Diana demolished two sandwiches from the cafeteria vending machines, washed down with two cups of coffee and an energy drink.

"Yes, I know I'm making sure I'm not going to sleep anytime soon," she said at Costa's look. He also had a cup of coffee in front of him, along with a slice of pie. "I've slept enough. In fact, I've had enough. I am completely done with all of this. I've been kidnapped, experimented on, and had my house burned down. I literally lost my last set of clothes in the desert. I have hit my limit."

"What are you planning to do? For the record," Costa added, "I'm behind you a hundred percent."

Diana squeezed his hand. "I appreciate that. But honestly I'm not sure, at least not

yet. The SCB arrested a bunch of people at the Alamagordo lab, right? What have they found out?"

"I'm not really the person to ask," Costa admitted. "I've been out of the loop on most of it." He brightened. "Oh, but look who just walked in: the exact person who would know."

Caine had entered the cafeteria, moving in a way that suggested weariness. Costa waved him vigorously over toward their table. With glacial speed—evidently he didn't like being summoned—Caine collected a couple of sandwiches, a chocolate bar, and a cup of coffee, and approached their table.

"Just the man we wanted to see," Costa said. "How is progress on securing the Alamagordo facility?"

"No longer my problem." Caine stirred two packets of sugar into his coffee. "Delgado is handling the scene, along with the new guy from the Seattle office. They're going to be trucking over material for our labs to look at." He glanced at Diana. "You look better than the last time I saw you."

Diana grinned; coming from Caine, that was concern indeed. "I'm doing fine. The doctors couldn't find anything seriously wrong with me. Hopefully whatever they're bringing over will shed some light on it."

"We don't have much light to shed anywhere, but we're just getting started on questioning suspects," Caine said. "Well, okay, we did get one useful confession. The fire at your house was definitely arson. One of their security team spilled the details."

Diana rubbed a hand over her face. "I thought so. I guess it's good to know." She turned to Costa. "You know, speaking of which, my car's still over there. I'd like to go pick it up."

“Today?”

“Why wait? I just drank three cups of coffee and a Red Bull.”

Costa snorted and shook his head. “Well, I won’t be driving us, because my car is still at the Desert Tours hangars unless someone’s moved it back here.”

They both looked at Caine.

“No,” Caine said flatly. “I’m not your travel agent. Take a company car and drive yourselves.” He unwrapped a sandwich. “I’ve been on the go for two days solid since someone decided to get kidnapped. I’m sitting here and eating, and then I’m going home.”

Costa stretched and stood. “We’ll take a car from the SCB garage, then. You’re driving, Ms. Three Cups of Coffee and a Red Bull.”

“Try not to get kidnapped again,” Caine said before taking a bite.

CHAPTER 25

Costa had expected it to be bad, and it was.

Most of Diana's house still stood, fire-scorched walls surrounded by a great outwash of black ash and flame-retarding chemicals. But it was clear that there would be little to salvage. Even metal items would likely have been melted by the heat.

"Look at this." Diana plucked a butterfly-shaped wind spinner from a corner of the yard. Like many Arizona front yards, it was decorated with rocks and xeriscaping rather than having a lawn. "My last surviving possession."

"Diana, I'm so sorry." His words fell flat; there was simply nothing he could say to console that level of loss.

But Diana didn't seem devastated. She had been quiet as they wandered around the burnt-out house, but there was nothing about her that suggested the losses were affecting her too badly.

"I'm choosing to look at it as a fresh start." She twirled the wind spinner between her fingers. "I was pretty close to paying off the mortgage, which sucks, but it means I'm looking at a solid insurance settlement when that comes through. I could do almost anything with it."

"Leave?" Costa asked quietly.

The mere idea of Diana going away opened up a gaping hole in his heart. But he

wouldn't blame her. He couldn't think of a single reason why she would want to stay at this point.

Diana shook her head and turned away, still holding the wind spinner. "I don't know. I have some ideas. I'm keeping my options open. Come on, let's go see if my car's still there."

It was, parked right down the street where she had left it when they got the groceries out, a couple of days and a lifetime ago.

Diana slowed and stopped, and gave a short, startled laugh.

"So I guess my keys are somewhere out in the desert between here and New Mexico. My spare key, well ..." She waved a hand at the remains of her house. Then she put her hand over her face for a minute.

Hesitantly, Costa placed a hand on her back.

"Come on. I'll drive this time. Okay if we go to the ranch?"

"Nowhere else I'd rather be," Diana said with a choked little hiccup. However, when she took her hand from her face, she didn't seem to be crying.

She brought the wind spinner with her.

Back in Tucson, Costa swung by his condo to pick up several changes of clothes and toss some perishable items from the fridge. It was starting to feel like the condo was merely a stopover on the way to other places, like a hotel room where he occasionally refreshed himself but didn't stay.

Diana accepted the offer of some borrowed clothes of his to change into later.

“I also wouldn’t mind swinging by a Target or something. Your female relatives have things I could wear, but most of them either aren’t in my style, or my size. And I need some, uh. Intimate stuff. Underwear and deodorant and that sort of thing.”

“My lady’s wish, et cetera.”

It was a joke—but there was a much more relaxed feeling between them. Something had shifted during their time in the desert, pivoted and rearranged. Even though they hadn’t defined anything officially, hadn’t talked about the future, they had fallen into a closer harmony than they had enjoyed since their teen years.

Costa stopped by a store and Diana collected some things. Her wallet was also in the desert somewhere, so Costa took out his credit card, raised his eyebrows at her, and she sighed and shoved the basket of clothes and toiletries into his hand.

“Just as well I didn’t get pulled over on the way here, since I can’t legally drive without a license. I honestly forgot about that.”

“The SCB can help smooth the process of getting your ID and everything back.” Guilt assailed him; he had been too worried over everything else happening to her to even remember that she had lost most of her few remaining personal effects in the desert.

“I’ll take you up on that. Honestly, I’m almost looking forward to the everyday headache of dealing with my credit card company. I’ll pay you back for everything,” she added, as they went through the self checkout. “I do have a decent bank account, I just can’t get to it right now.”

Knowing how independent she was, Costa knew better than to tell her he’d buy her literally anything she wanted up to and including the moon if he could find a way to put a price tag on it. “I’m not keeping track, but I won’t be offended if you do.”

“I will,” she said, briskly taking the receipt from his hand.

Costa kissed her nose. Diana looked stunned, and he thought he’d overstepped, but she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and they walked out to his car with their shoulders bumping.

It was just— easy . When was the last time they’d been truly easy with each other? All the hurt and anger, all the awkward uneasiness, the way he never seemed to know the right things to say and they kept upsetting each other ... all of that seemed to have been washed away during their time in the wilderness, leaving behind a renewal like desert spring.

“How do you feel?” Costa asked her as they drove out of the city.

“Fine. A little headachy, like I’m getting over being sick. Pretty normal.” She spread one strong, tanned hand on the dashboard and flexed her fingers. “Any word on Farley?”

“No. Could you use my phone to text the office? It’s in my jacket. The unlock code is—” He hesitated very briefly. “0819.”

* * *

Diana unlocked his phone and didn’t remark on what they both knew, that this was her birthdate. Instead she opened the text app. There was an absolute sea of texts from his aunts: a picture of Em covered in mashed potatoes, a picture of Em not covered in mashed potatoes, Em asleep on a blanket ...

“It looks like Em’s doing fine with your family,” she said, suppressing a smile. There were also a lot of Quinn, answer your phone and CeCe, are you all right? that she tried to skim over, looking for anything important. “You have some texts from Caine.

Do you want to read them?”

“Read ‘em to me.”

“You’re sure?”

“No secrets,” he said with a quick smile that implied, No secrets between us again. Not ever again. “If it’s about the case, it affects you too.”

“Okay, well—there’s one from a half hour ago, probably while we were shopping, asking if you’re at the ranch. Then a few minutes later he says Delgado is heading out to the ranch soon because there’s something you need to see.”

“Huh. Tell him we’re on the way there too, and we’ll see her when she gets there. And ask him if he can tell me what this very important ‘something’ is.”

Diana typed the message. The answer came back a minute later. “He says you need to see it to believe it.”

Costa sighed. “Typical Caine. I’m not gonna worry about it now.”

She was going to put the phone away, but she had noticed something in one of the text chains that she couldn’t resist tapping to confirm. Then she laughed. “Is this me? Do you really have me in your phone as Acme No. 1?”

Costa looked abruptly embarrassed. “Uh, I forgot about that.”

“Why on Earth?”

“Because—looking at your name made me—” He swallowed. “It was easier to keep things how we wanted it, that is, fake, if I didn’t have to look at your name every time

you called me.”

“Oh,” Diana whispered. Thinking of how she reacted to seeing Costa’s name in her texts, she could understand perfectly. She relocked the phone and put it down on her thigh. “But why Acme No. 1? Is that like in the Road Runner cartoons with the coyote?”

“Yeah.” Costa flashed her a quick grin. “I don’t know why it made me think of you. I guess you out flying your helicopter around in the desert made me think of the canyons from those cartoons. Is that ridiculous?”

“Yes,” Diana told him. She curled her hand around the phone. Then, on impulse, she reached out and laid her other hand on his thigh, letting it rest there. “But it’s also sweet. I like it. I do hope my helicopters have always been a little more effective than Wile E. Coyote’s devices, though.”

He put his hand over hers, warm and comforting. “They’ve got a much better operator at the controls.”

* * *

The familiar landscape of the hills and canyons around the ranch seemed to rise up and welcome Costa home, folding him into its rumpled, rocky embrace. It felt as if nothing bad could happen to him here.

He knew that was false; a lot of bad things had happened here. His parents’ deaths. Diana leaving ...

But most of the bad had been elsewhere. Marco dying. All of the crime and ugliness that he dealt with every day. The ranch was a refuge, and he hoped on some deep level that Diana thought of it that way, too.

The thing he had come to realize, though, was that he never wanted it to be a trap for her. He remembered Diana's mother, a thin, unhappy woman who had disliked her ranch life and had died young from heavy smoking and drinking. At the time, Costa couldn't understand Diana's fears of ending up like her mother. He had seen Diana as too strong, too brave, too self-determined to ever let other people run roughshod over her dreams.

Now he understood much better. In his work with the SCB, he had seen too many women—and many men, too—trapped by life choices, by family obligations, or simply by rural poverty. He saw all too well what Diana had feared would happen to her (a too-young marriage, all her dreams stolen out of her hands). He would love to say he would never have done that to her, but how could he be sure? They had both been terribly young. Neither of them had the life experience to truly understand what they were signing up for, or what they were giving up.

By walking away, Diana had probably done the best possible thing for both of them.

And now He glanced sideways at Diana's profile as she looked out the window, relaxed and calm to an extent that amazed him after all she'd been through. Her hand still rested on his thigh, with his own covering it.

Now they were older, maybe not wiser, but certainly more experienced.

We know who we are. We know what we want.

And he wanted Diana. He had never stopped wanting her. All these years, he'd bounced off a series of short-term relationships and never quite understood why he couldn't find the long-term love he was looking for, and finally gave up on it—what he had wanted, what he had been looking for, was her. He couldn't find it because he hadn't been looking in the right place.

Now he knew. He would have waited a hundred years for her.

In the end, he'd only had to wait twenty.

CHAPTER 26

Diana was dozing in the passenger seat, but she woke up when Costa pulled into the ranch yard. She rubbed her eyes and looked around as he kept going, past the house and up a steep driveway that led to the saguaro cabin.

“We can go down to the main house if you want,” Costa said, glancing at her. “But I thought you might want a little while to get refreshed. It looks like that coffee and Red Bull is wearing off.”

Diana laughed and rubbed her forehead, where a headache had erupted again. “Yeah, I’ve definitely build up a tolerance over the years. You wouldn’t think so after sleeping for the better part of a day, but I feel like I’m crashing.”

Costa looked at her with worry. “How bad? Want me to call the SCB?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’m just tired.”

They collected the shopping bags and went inside. Diana hadn’t expected the cabin to remain untouched in their absence, but apparently it had, with no sign that anyone had been in it at all. Her empty coffee cup was in the sink, right where she had put it days ago. She rinsed the cup and put it away. The crib was still just as they had left it, and Diana laid a hand on it, caught up in a sudden urge to hold Emmeline in her arms again.

“With all that’s been going on, I completely forgot—are there any updates on Em from the SCB? Finding out who she really is, I mean.”

“None so far,” Costa said. He opened the fridge and began to put away the few additional items he’d brought. “The confiscated lab records from Alamagordo might shed some light on it. I think it’s definitely looking like Em was there for a while.”

Diana looked out the window at the afternoon sun. She thought about making coffee, then about lying down, and found herself standing still, her decision-making ability having completely deserted her.

When a hand brushed hers, she looked up with a flinch of surprise.

“Come on,” Costa said quietly. He took her hand and led her into the bedroom, where the bedcovers were still rumpled from the last night they had spent here, together yet apart. “Lie down for a little while. Everything will still be there after you rest.”

Diana sat on the edge of the bed and took off her boots. “Just for a few minutes. I don’t think I need sleep. I just need ...” She trailed off, unsure what she actually did need.

My house back? My life back? But she had passed some kind of personal Rubicon, she sensed. Even if everything was magically put back exactly as it had been in the blink of an eye, she wouldn’t be the same.

Costa adjusted the pillow. “Here, this looks comfy. I’ll go, if you want me to?—”

“No,” she said, turning to look at him. “I want you to stay.”

They lay down fully clothed on top of the covers. Costa drew her against him, and she settled without complaint, tucking her head into the crook of his shoulder. He put an arm over her. For a while, she simply lay there, comfortably drifting. The world felt far away from her, outside a bubble consisting only of the two of them. She didn’t feel as if she was going to fall asleep. It was simply nice to be here, not having to

move or think or do anything. Content.

Costa spoke at last, his voice so quiet that she felt it as a low rumble in his chest as much as she heard it with her ears. “I could leave, you know. If you want me to.”

“Leave?” she asked, too lazy with sleep and satisfaction to move. “Leave what? The bed? The ranch? The SCB?”

“Any of the above. Except maybe the bed.” He stirred a little, adjusting position. “I’m serious. I’ve spent most of my adult life at the SCB, and all of my life in Arizona. I could quit. Get a new job. Go somewhere else. Your forties are the traditional time for a midlife crisis change of career, right?”

Diana laughed quietly against his shoulder. “You’d be unhappy.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her. His gaze was incredibly soft. “I’ve been thinking about that. It’s interesting. I know that when we talked about this before, when we were so much younger. I never could have left back then.”

“And I understand why,” Diana said softly. Her heart broke for him. “I don’t think I did understand, then. You had to care for Marco, and stay on the ranch to take care of things here. It was important to you. I shouldn’t have tried to talk you into leaving.”

“You had every right. I could always say no. I mean, I did say no. But now ...” As he spoke, he began to slowly stroke her hair. “It’s different. Everything is different. I’ve had twenty years to live the life I chose, and I’ve enjoyed that life; I never regretted it.” He paused, and she saw a flicker of unhappiness on his face, as if remembering all the regrets he did have.

“You didn’t make the wrong decision,” Diana said swiftly. And then, touching on the

one thing they had never talked about openly: “What happened to Marco wasn’t your fault.”

Costa jerked, like a man drifting into sleep and jolted suddenly out of it. “He joined the SCB because of me. Big brother Quinn, giving him direction, being a surrogate dad after our parents died.” He almost spat the words. “I don’t know if you know exactly what happened; it was after you left.”

“He died in the line of duty,” Diana said. After all this time, she got the feeling that he did want to talk about it. “I heard the story. He was a hero.”

“And his wife is a widow, and his son has no father.”

“And none of that is your fault. Not a single bit of it.”

Costa let out a long sigh. He didn’t pull back; he just kept running his fingers through her hair. At long last, he said, “I know. I was so damn hard on myself afterwards, I don’t even think I noticed when I stopped. I guess I’ll always feel some guilt for it. He was my little brother. But somewhere along the line, I guess I got it into my head that I needed to take care of Jay, help raise him the way I helped my aunts raise Marco after our parents died.”

“And then what?” Diana asked quietly. “If you try to save the whole world, there’s always more world to save. It never ends. At some point, you have to find the right balance of living for other people, and living for yourself.” She took a deep, shaky breath, preparing to talk about something she’d never spoken of to anyone. “I went the opposite way, you know. I was so afraid of—of ending up like Mom that I threw every responsibility out the window and ran off to see the world.”

“Some people would consider joining the Army a pretty responsible thing to do.”

“Maybe it was. But I was running away, not towards. I didn’t even know Mom was sick until she was pretty far gone.” Diana swallowed. She closed her eyes, afraid if she kept them open, tears would blur Costa’s sympathetic face. “Everything that happened, my folks having to sell the ranch, Mom dying—maybe it wouldn’t have happened if I’d stayed.”

Costa’s hand faltered on her hair, then went on stroking. “You can’t blame yourself for your mom getting cancer, or your folks having money problems. That would have happened whether you stayed or left.”

“I know. It doesn’t stop me feeling guilty about it, though.” She opened her eyes and blinked past a little mistiness. “I guess that’s the point. You’re right, there’s nothing I could have done about the big picture stuff. But there are things I could’ve done to be a better daughter. I could have missed fewer holidays and birthdays. I wouldn’t have spent so many Christmases in foreign parts of the world, sending cards and packages a month late. You had all of that—the Christmases, the holidays. You’ve been there for all of Jay’s birthdays. I missed nearly all of my mom’s, from the time I was eighteen until she died.”

Costa gave a little sigh and a faint smile. His hand cupped under her head, fingers buried in her hair. “I’m not going to indulge you in feeling guilty about your life choices, any more than you would for me.”

Diana huffed a soft laugh. “I guess not. But the thing is, we made completely opposite decisions, and bad things happened anyway. I feel like some things would have been better if I’d stayed, but maybe not. You think it would’ve been better if Marco hadn’t followed in your footsteps, but who knows? Bad things can happen in rural ranch country, too.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Yeah. So, we made the choices that felt best for us then. And we followed those paths as far as they’d go, wherever they led. In my case, apparently it led right back to Arizona—and to you.”

Costa leaned over and kissed her. She put a hand behind his neck, and they explored each other’s mouths for a little while. Familiar and new—the way things had always been with him. As if she had known him forever, which she had, but also with new wonders to discover around every turn.

They broke apart slowly, but kept their foreheads together, her hand on his neck and his fingers in her hair.

“And now what?” he murmured, lips nearly touching hers.

Diana had opened her mouth to reply, or maybe to kiss him again, when there was a sudden knocking on the outer cabin door.

Costa sat up. “If this is an invitation to dinner, come back later!”

“Hey, boss, it’s me,” Cat Delgado’s voice said. “They said you were up here. Are you busy?”

Costa looked down at Diana. His lips twitched. “Well, are we?” he murmured.

“I think this’ll keep,” Diana said, grinning back up at him. Her heart seemed to hum with an eager, warm energy. “But we’re just tabling the discussion, not abandoning it.”

“Deal.” He gave her a hand up, and raised his voice. “Come on in, Cat. We’re not asleep.”

It was later than Diana had realized, she discovered once she was vertical. Afternoon sunshine had given way to the warm colors of evening, painting the cabin's interior. She wobbled a little and got her balance with Costa's hand on her arm. They went out to the living room, where Delgado was looking around curiously.

Delgado turned swiftly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"We were just resting." Costa smoothed his hand through his hair. "What on earth is so important that you had to drive out here in person?"

"Something I didn't want to trust to the phone system," Delgado said. She shot a quick glance at Diana. "It's not bad, I don't want to alarm you, but—you need to come see Farley, right now."

CHAPTER 27

Sunset's colors bathed the ranch in warm gold and pink tones, and the air was balmy but not overly hot. Out in the pasture, Jay was working his pony in the late light, and waved to them. It was a perfect rural Arizona evening.

Costa walked so fast he was half jogging, and the women had to run to catch up.

"Why the hell won't you just tell me?" he snapped.

"I told you it wasn't that bad!" Delgado shot back. "I just don't want to predispose you beforehand, that's all."

"You're doing a great job of worrying me beforehand!"

They arrived in the central ranch yard. Delgado had parked here, and most of the Costa clan were gathered, blocking Costa and Diana's view of whatever they were looking at.

"Move," Costa growled, shoving his way between two aunts.

He had no idea at first glance what he was seeing. His first thought was that it was an eagle fighting with some kind of furry animal. Then he began to parse out the details: there were wings, and there was an animal, and the animal was a small bear, no, a large wolverine, and the wings were mantled over its back. The wings were attached.

The wolverine was wearing a tracking band on its ankle, such as the SCB put on

people it wanted to keep tabs on.

It was Farley.

Costa cursed loudly, which caused two of the aunts to shush him. Farley jumped and shifted back to a naked human, still wearing a tracking band on his bare ankle—it was designed to expand and contract through a person’s shifts. He sat down heavily in the dust and hastily tried to cover himself. Delgado stepped forward and wordlessly handed him a bundle of clothing.

“Thanks for the demonstration, buddy,” she said.

“What the hell was that?” Costa snapped.

“Language!” said Aunt Brill.

“Nice way to talk about a person who’s right in front of you,” Farley retorted, trying to put on his pants without exposing himself to the assembled female relatives.

“It happened for the first time at the SCB,” Delgado explained. “Can we go inside and have some coffee or something? It’s been a long day.”

Diana moved close to Costa, her hand brushing his. He looked at her swiftly, looking for panic, but instead she merely looked fascinated. Leaning close to Costa, she whispered, “I already have wings. Do I get a second set of wings?”

“Do you want a second set of wings?”

“Not really.” But she slid her fingers into his, and they went into the ranch house hand in hand. Costa noticed Delgado watching this and attempted to appear smooth, which failed when he almost ran into the doorframe.

The ranch house was filled with cooking smells, and Vic was with Molly on the sofa, playing a game on a tablet while keeping an eye on Emmeline in a playpen. Costa had completely forgotten that they had guests.

“Nicole still here?” he asked, bending over to fondle Emmeline’s hair over the top of the playpen. The child gave a happy squeal, as if she recognized him. She was lying on her back and playing with a mobile hooked to the playpen’s edge.

“Nicole went back to Seattle while you were off grid,” Vic said. “I’ll give you the rundown on my investigation in a little while. I understand you have business.”

Delgado took them off to a quiet corner, Farley included.

“Okay, so what happened?” Diana demanded. “Why does he have wings? Do I get wings? More wings, I mean.”

“We didn’t know until he shifted,” Delgado said. “I mean, he didn’t know either. Actually, why don’t you tell them.”

She turned to Farley, who was still buttoning his shirt.

“Yeah, it was a complete shock,” Farley said. “So I was in and out of you guys’ lab at the SCB, they were trying to figure out what that stuff they injected me with was doing, and I just felt weird, you know? Like I had the flu or something.”

He looked at Diana, who nodded. “It’s a little better now,” she said. “I still feel kind of achy, tired and strange.”

“Yeah, same. Anyway, nothing seemed to be different, so they had me shift, and—wings. I guess.”

“Do they work?” Costa asked.

Farley and Delgado both stared at him. “I didn’t think to try,” Farley said. “Can I try?”

“Not yet,” Costa said hastily, thinking about the possibility of their main witness flying off into the desert. “So the wings were just there? Did they grow when you shifted, fledge out and so on? Or just appear fully formed, like they’d always been there?”

“Yeah, just there. Like they’d always been there. And—I can’t really explain it, but you know what it’s like when you’re shifted, right? How the animal side of you just accepts things? And my wolverine half was okay with it but not okay with it at the same time. It was just this crazy weird feeling. A little like what I guess animals must feel when they’re radio-collared.” He gestured to the anklet. “Kind of like the way my animal side feels about this. It’s there and it’s not hurting me and I’m not gonna try to chew it off, but it’s not supposed to be there.”

“But you had no idea about the wings until you shifted?”

Farley shook his head. “Not at all.”

Costa looked at Diana. “I think you’d better shift.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

As they went out the back door, Aunt Maura called, “Dinner’s in ten minutes!”

“We’ll be there!” Costa called back.

Behind the main ranch house, there was a small playground area with kiddie swings,

an inflatable pool that was rarely filled in the summer due to water shortages, and a homemade miniature golf course that Costa remembered helping build with Marco when they were kids. Dusk was gathering rapidly, turning the hills blue and the sky purple.

Diana reached for the buttons on her shirt, and Costa leaned close to Farley. “You’re going to turn your back and not turn around until she’s shifted.”

Farley gulped and spun around. “Got it.”

Costa carefully averted his eyes, for the most part, but he was peripherally and viscerally aware of Diana disrobing. She folded her clothes and put them on a patio chair. “Okay,” she said.

Costa turned back. The roadrunner was standing at the edge of Aunt Lo’s rock garden.

He had seen plenty of her in the desert recently, but now he looked at her closely, trying to determine if anything was different.

Roadrunners were large birds, relatively speaking, about two feet long from their tail to the tip of their spearlike beak. Aside from their general shape, they looked very little like the cartoon. Diana’s feathers were mottled dark brown and cream, with long, nearly white legs. She held herself low and lean, like a running velociraptor—which, indeed, she more or less was.

Seeing Delgado and Costa both watching her, joined after a moment by Farley, she straightened up and preened a little, nibbling at the feathers under one wing. She stretched her wings out, tentatively flapped them, and turned her head around on her supple bird neck to look at her back.

“Two wings,” Costa said, relieved.

“She doesn’t look any different,” Delgado said. “Do you mind if I take a picture of you to show the lab?”

Diana shook her head, a weird effect on her roadrunner body, and Delgado took pictures from a few angles. Diana obligingly spread her wings and turned to display different angles. Then, while Delgado flipped through the photos and texted them to work, Diana shifted back and reached for her clothes.

“Nothing?” she asked, sounding disappointed.

“You look completely normal,” Costa said, finding himself deeply relieved. “Maybe it didn’t take. You might need several doses or something.”

“I only got one dose,” Farley said. “Maybe it doesn’t work if you already have wings.”

As much as Costa hated to agree with Farley, it wasn’t a bad theory. Then Aunt Lo came out to call them in for supper, so the work conversation was put on hold until after the food.

As usual, the table groaned under a delicious spread, with a huge pot of spaghetti and Aunt Brill’s patented marinara and meatballs, garlic bread, a salad from Aunt Maura’s winter garden, side dishes of sweet golden corn and yams and Aunt Lo’s beet salad. There were two kinds of pies for dessert, with homemade vanilla ice cream.

Emmeline ate some mashed yams sitting in Costa’s lap, took half a bottle, then was passed between the aunts until she was placed in her playpen and fell asleep on a blanket.

“I’m never leaving here,” Vic said, as they all drifted into the living room with coffee or, in Molly’s case, a glass of juice. “Roll me to a bunkhouse. I’m a city kid, but I’ll learn to wrangle horses. You don’t even have to pay me, just feed me.”

Costa grinned, and accepted a small jot of brandy in his coffee from Uncle Roddy. “Did you learn anything from the shifter underground?”

Vic tilted his head towards Molly. “Let me get Princess Hummingbird settled in the guest bedroom with a story, and then I’ll fill you in.”

Vic and Molly went off to one of the guest rooms. Delgado and Farley appeared to be looking at family albums with Aunt Maura. Costa decided to steer clear of that entire situation, so he and Diana went to a sofa by the window. Now that it was dark, there was little to be seen, just reflections and the pale glow of the halogen light by the entrance to the ranch yard.

“You still feel okay?” Costa asked Diana.

“I really do.” She took his hand, ran her lightly callused fingertips over the ridges of tendons on the back. “I think if it was going to do anything, it would have by now. I have to say, I’m a little disappointed.”

“In what?” Costa asked. He turned his hand around to squeeze hers. “Not being the world’s first four-winged roadrunner?”

Diana laughed softly. “It would certainly have been interesting. I guess that must be what happened to Emmeline.” They both turned to look at the baby in her crib. “But why on earth do they want to put wings on people?”

“I think I can answer that, sort of,” Vic said. He had just come in and angled to join them at the window. Sitting on the end of the couch beside Costa with his elbow on

his knee, he went on. “There are rumors in the shifter underground of really unusual fighters. People with talents and skills, and sometimes shift forms, that they’ve never seen before.”

“Oho,” Costa murmured. “Okay, that makes more sense.”

Diana looked back and forth between them. “They’re giving people wings to compete in shifter fights?”

“More like to clean up in shifter fights,” Vic said. “I mean, I didn’t know this was exactly what was going on, and neither did any of my informants. But remember the card I showed you. Regular fighters are tracked and logged, and their shift forms are known. Think about how it might go if you were betting on a fight between a low-ranked raccoon shifter and a bear. But then the raccoon turned out to have wings. You could get some unexpected betting upsets. Anyone who knew what was going on could clean up.”

“That is insane,” Diana said flatly.

“People will do a lot for money,” Costa pointed out.

“That’s true, but why give wings to a baby? She can’t fight.”

Costa was still chewing that over when Delgado arrived to join them. “Hey, Chief, I was just talking to your aunts, and since there’s plenty of room, I think I’m gonna spend the night out here. Farley too. I need to check in, but I can’t get a cell signal.”

“Use wifi calling,” Costa said. “I’ll show you how.”

A couple of minutes later, he was thoroughly frustrated. Delgado’s phone simply wouldn’t get on the wifi. Costa went to find Aunt Brill, probably the most

technologically adept of the elder relatives.

“Oh, it might be down again,” Brill said over her shoulder as she and Aunt Lo loaded the dishwasher. “It happens now and then. Try the computer, or she can use the land line.”

Costa sighed and tapped the household computer to wake it up. Brill was right, there was no wifi signal. “Use the phone,” he told Delgado.

“You guys really are living in the previous century,” Delgado remarked. She picked up the cordless phone, a clunky white model that was fifteen or twenty years old if it was a day. Then she frowned and tapped the buttons a few times. “Hey—I’m not getting a dial tone. You don’t have to press anything for an outside line, do you?”

“What? No, you don’t.” Costa snatched it from her and listened. She was right, no dial tone. He pushed some buttons. The screen was lit up, but it was blank. “Aunt Brill, did Uncle Roddy do something to the phone?”

Uncle Rodrigo woke with a snort in his armchair, nearly spilling his cup of spiked coffee. “What? Me? Who? I was nowhere near her!”

Aunt Brill came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel. “What’s wrong?”

“Phone’s down,” Costa said. He set the phone back in its cradle. Alarm bells were jangling in the back of his mind. “Vic, there’s a tethered phone upstairs in the hall, the old-fashioned receiver kind. Go see if it’s working.”

Vic nodded and took the stairs two at a time.

“What’s wrong, CeCe?” Aunt Brill asked him quietly.

“Nothing, I hope,” Costa said just as softly. “When did the wifi go down?”

“I don’t know. It was working earlier when Lo was updating the family farm blog.”

Costa gave her a startled look. “We have a blog?”

“You haven’t been checking the blog?” She snapped him with her dish towel. “I know you know about it. Lo sent you an email.”

“Do you have any idea how many emails I get in a typical day?” Somewhat guiltily, Costa recalled that he had all family emails set to go to a particular folder that he checked once in a blue moon. Mostly his aunts sent him memes, chain letters, and links to petitions with topics like saving a local artesian well or amending sales regulations for eggs from small chicken farms.

Vic came downstairs. “No dial tone,” he reported.

“Great.” Costa swept a swift gaze around the room. Aunt Brill looked curious but uncomprehending, Uncle Roddy blank. The other aunts were clattering around in the kitchen. Jenny and Jay, as far as he knew, were up in their house on the back of the ranch. As for his people, Delgado looked quietly alert, Diana alarmed but calm, and Farley blankly worried.

“Okay, people,” Costa began, “I think we have a situation,” and just then the lights went out.

CHAPTER 28

It was Costa's alarm that set Diana into a low-key churn of contagious anxiety, but when the living room plunged into blackness, her heart leaped into her throat. She heard Delgado exclaim.

The lights were only out for a few seconds before coming back up, not as many or as bright.

"What happened?" Diana asked anxiously.

"Power dip," Brill said, patting her arm. "Don't worry, hon. We've switched over to house power. There's a battery bank, and a generator if it lasts too long. We get outages out here all the time."

But Costa had gone swiftly to the window. "The main gate light's out," he said.

"It's not on the battery backup, you know that, CeCe."

Costa cursed under his breath. Diana joined him at the window. He was staring out into the ranch yard, but nothing could be seen, just their reflections and the living room behind them. "Turn those lights off!" he snapped over his shoulder.

After a startled moment, someone moved to obey. Most of the lights went off except for the ones in the kitchen. Now they could see the ranch yard, lying in the light of a sliver moon.

“What’s wrong?” Diana asked quietly.

Costa cursed again. “We’re cut off and I think we might be under siege. Aunt Brill,” he said, louder, “is anyone else up at Jenny’s with her and Jay?”

Brill shook her head. “Just the two of them. CeCe, what’s making you react like this? You’ve seen plenty of power outages.”

“What’s the matter is that we made some powerful people very mad, and powerful people have friends. Damn it, damn it.” Costa turned to look out the window again.

“Language, CeCe!”

“I don’t see anyone,” Diana said quietly. “And no lights on the road.”

“They might be coming in stealthy. No headlights. But someone cut the power and the phones, so they’re not too far away.” He took a breath. “And with just one road, that means we’re cut off. Go check the doors and make sure they’re locked and bolted,” he told Vic, “and get the rest of the aunts in here. We want everyone together. Molly, too.”

Vic nodded and went off at a near run. Costa locked the front door and shot a large deadbolt, which Diana hadn’t even noticed.

Costa beckoned Delgado to join them at the window. Farley started to follow her. “Oh, no you don’t,” Costa snapped, pointing at him. “You, stay there. In fact, go sit in that chair there, and stay where we can see you.”

“Are we in danger?” Farley asked. “Is someone coming?”

“You would know, wouldn’t you? Go sit there!”

Delgado joined the small group at the window. Aunt Brill had come near as well, but Diana supposed there was no point in excluding her from what seemed to have turned into a war council. The aunts were as involved in this as anyone else. Uncle Rodrigo seemed to have drifted back to sleep.

Costa noticed her too. “Aunt Brill, are there any guns in the house?”

“There’s the shotgun that Maura uses to keep the jackrabbits out of her garden. And your brother’s hunting rifle might still be in the basement, I think.”

“Get them,” Costa said grimly. Brill hesitated. “Now, please,” he said, and she went. Turning to Delgado, he asked, “Do you have a service weapon?”

“In my car,” Delgado said. “I didn’t want to bring it in the house with the kids.”

Costa sighed. “Mine’s also in my car, and my car isn’t here. So what we’ve got for defense are any weapons my relatives can scrounge up plus your sidearm.”

“I’ll go get it.”

“Not yet.” As he spoke, Costa began walking around, closing the blinds.

“You really think they’re here?” Diana asked. Her heart was racing.

“I do. I just don’t know how close or how many. We have to get in touch with the SCB somehow and get backup. Aunt Lo!” he said, as Vic herded the other two surprised aunts into the living room, Maura clutching a dish sponge and Lo with a large, empty casserole dish in her hands. “Is there anything we have other than the phone or computer for getting a signal out? A HAM radio? Anything?”

“Well ... er ...” Lo turned helplessly to Maura.

“There are the old CBs,” Maura said promptly. “We used to have them in the farm trucks before we got this newfangled wifi calling.”

“That’s right,” Costa said. “I forgot about that. Do you still have them in the house?”

“Er ... I don’t know.” Lo and Maura looked at each other. “I think they might be in Lo and Brill’s house,” Maura suggested.

“I’ve got a pair of field radios in my trunk,” Delgado said. “There’s not much range, but we might be able to get a trucker to pick us up.”

“I’ll go get—” Lo began, just as Delgado went on, “I can go out to my car and?—”

“No!” Costa said sharply. “No one leaves the house until we have a plan. Once you’re out there, you might be cut off, and we won’t be able to get in touch with you. We need to get someone up to Jenny and Jay’s to check on them, too.”

Delgado said quietly, “Who are Jenny and Jay?”

“My sister-in-law and her son. They’re in a house on the back of the property.”

Costa’s voice was grim. Knowing how protective he was of his brother’s widow and her son, Diana knew he must be going half out of his mind with the urge to have everyone where he could keep an eye on them.

In fact, the whole situation was a kind of nightmare scenario for him. Costa had devoted his life to looking after and protecting his family. Now danger had come for him, and there was only one of him and a whole group of them, split between different households.

But one thing was different from all of Costa’s worst-case imaginings, she knew.

“You’re not alone, Quinn,” she said aloud. “We’re here. Tell us where to go and what to do.”

Vic came back with a sleepy Molly and settled her on the couch, wrapping a blanket around her. “Don’t worry, sweetie,” he said quietly. “We’re just having a power outage, so we figured everyone should be together in the main room. Nothing to worry about.”

Costa looked around the room. Diana could see his quick gaze cataloguing the entire group, making sure everyone was accounted for: his agents, the aunts, the kids.

“Okay, we gotta do a few different things,” he said quietly. “We need to get someone up to Jenny and Jay’s to check on them and lock them down. We need to get a message out to the SCB. And we need to secure the kids and civilians, probably here, as it’s the best place.”

“What about moving everyone down to the cars?” Delgado asked. “We could just leave.”

“We could,” Costa said, “but we’d be targets. Especially on the road. All they’d have to do is create a blockade or disable our vehicles, and we’ll be sitting ducks.”

“I hear engines,” Molly said suddenly from the couch.

In the sudden silence that followed, Diana did too.

“So they’re coming,” Costa said. “Auntie—” He addressed it to the group generally. “Do we still have the big gate?”

“Oh, yes,” Aunt Lo said. “It hasn’t been closed in years, though.”

“We can at least force them to come overland. Uncle Roddy’s traps will be good for something after all.”

“Are they shifters or humans?” Aunt Lo said, and Costa turned in her direction.

“What?”

“The people that you believe are coming for us. Shifters or humans?”

“I’m not sure,” Costa said. “We know they have some shifters working with them.” His eyes narrowed. “But I doubt if it’s an all-shifter task force. Probably some or most of them will be human.”

Maura turned a look on the other aunts. “So they won’t know any animals running around aren’t normal animals.”

“If they know about the shifter underground fights, they know about shifters,” Vic pointed out.

“So?” Aunt Lo asked, her eyes bright. “Do they know the countryside, do they know what’s usual out here? Are they going to pay any attention to a wild pig or two, just running around?”

“What are you thinking?” Costa asked her.

“I think one of us should shift and head up to Jenny’s to make sure they’re all right.”

“All right, I’ll leave you to decide who’s going to do that. If you can safely get them down here, do that; otherwise hole up there. Someone else see if you can find those CBs.” The sound of engines was louder now; Diana sensed time was running out. “Vic, you’re in charge of household defense. Cat, get the gun and radios from your

car.” He turned to Diana. “And you and I are going to close a gate. Vic, lock the door behind us.”

“What about me?” Farley asked.

Costa ground his teeth. “With us,” he decided. “I’m not leaving you here with them.”

They went out onto the porch. Diana could pick out distinct engine sounds now. “At least two or three vehicles,” she said aloud, but quietly. Delgado was already off the porch, barely visible in the dark.

“There,” Costa said. He pointed. Diana caught a brief glint of moonlight, far off down the road, reflecting off something in the dark. Costa was right, they weren’t using headlights.

“Where’s the gate?” Diana asked.

“Down here. Come on.”

They went swiftly off the porch and across the edge of the yard. Her eyes were adjusting to the moonlight. She couldn’t see the cars from here, but suspected they would be in sight soon enough.

Costa stopped at the pole that normally held a light to flood the yard. There was a high fence and a large metal gate. Together, he and Diana swung it shut with a screech of rusty hinges. A heavy old padlock dangled from the gate. Costa snapped it shut.

“Hope somebody still has a key, or we’ll have to cut that off,” he muttered.

The sound of engines was growing louder. Costa turned to Diana.

“There’s a reason I wanted you to come with me for this,” he said quietly. “We may or may not be able to raise anyone on the CBs; I don’t know if the signal will make it out of the canyon. So I want you to go for help. Shift and fly to a neighbor, see if you can find someone with a working phone. They’ve obviously cut the lines, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re also using some kind of jammer, like they did on the plane the other day.”

“I’m not going to leave you,” Diana retorted.

“The best thing anyone can do is get help from the SCB. And you can fly.”

“So can Farley. Send him.”

“I’ll go,” Farley offered. “I really do want to help you guys. I mean it this time.”

“I don’t trust you,” Costa snapped. “And I want her?—”

“Out of danger?” Diana interrupted. “Too bad.” She grabbed his hand. “We’re a team. And we don’t have time to spend arguing. We need to get moving.”

Costa sighed. He turned to Farley.

“Fine. From here, if you can get your wings to work, the fastest way is cross-country.” He pointed. “There are several houses along the road. Get to the nearest house, find a phone, tell the SCB what’s going on. And in particular, tell them to get Agent Azarias Caine out here. He can be here fastest.”

“Azarias Caine,” Farley repeated. “All right. I’m on it.”

He started stripping off his clothes. Costa grabbed his arm.

“Everyone I care about most in the world is here,” he said between his teeth. “If you betray us, you won’t be able to run far enough or fast enough to get away from me.”

Farley nodded without speaking. A moment later, his pale, naked body dropped to a crouch and vanished; the wolverine was nearly invisible in the dark. Diana sensed motion, and there was the sharp snap of his wings unfurling. It took some heavy flapping, but he got off the ground, and she saw him flying low across the rocky ground beside the road.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t get turned around,” Costa muttered. “That’s a last resort, but we won’t count on him.”

“Boss! Here!” Delgado arrived and pressed a walkie-talkie into his hand.

“Great. At least we have short-range communications. You got your gun?”

“Yeah,” Delgado said. “Do you want?—”

“No. I want you stationed here at the gate, in the shadows where they can’t see you. Darkness works both ways,” he added grimly. “It covers them, but it also covers us.”

Delgado nodded and fell back, just as the glint of moonlight on darkened headlights and a roar of engines announced the arrival of several vehicles on the other side of the gate.

“Stay with her,” Costa told Diana under his breath.

“What are you going to?—”

Costa interrupted in what she was coming to think of as his “leader of the SCB” voice. “I’ll talk to them.”

Diana's urge to protest faded in the face of his obvious determination. Delgado was starting to make a protesting noise from the inky shadows alongside the gate.

"No buts. You're my backup. Delgado, if they start shooting, you start shooting back. Just don't shoot me."

The vehicles, several large SUVs and a Hummer, had stopped outside the gate. All Diana could see was a dark mass, with doors gleam in the moonlight as they opened and a number of men climbed down. They all seemed to be dressed in dark clothes, and she saw the flash of reflections off weapons.

"This is private property," Costa shouted. "Authorities have been called and are on their way. I don't know if you were told this, but I'm the head of a federal law enforcement agency. Turn around and leave."

Diana held her breath.

The headlights of the Hummer came on abruptly, and Costa was flooded with light. He squinted, putting a hand in front of his eyes. In the backwash of reflected light, Diana saw several men on lightweight black body armor move around the cars. All of them were armed, pointing their weapons at Costa.

"This doesn't need to get violent," one of them called. "We're here for a few specific people, and that's all we want. We'll take them with us. If you're Cesar Costa, you're one of them."

"If you take me, will you leave?" Costa called, and Diana's heart leaped straight into her throat. There was no immediate answer, which was answer enough, and Costa snapped, "No deal, then. I'll tell you what you're going to do, which is turn around and leave immediately. Or you can stand out there all night until the SCB team I've called in gets here."

“You’re cut off,” the spokesman sneered. “You couldn’t have called anyone.”

“If I don’t check in regularly, they’re under orders to send a team out.”

“Yeah, well, we have orders too, and our orders are to take you with us.”

“Orders from who?” Costa demanded.

“Surrender and come out here, Costa. We can take you in alive, but—” The guns aimed at him seemed to take on an ugly air of threat. “—we don’t have to.”

At that point, Diana became aware of a low rumbling, vibrating through her feet. She might have noticed it earlier, but it had been blotted out by the noise of the convoy of vehicles.

“What the hell?” someone said on the other side of the gate.

Diana turned to look.

There was something coming towards them through the parking area, some kind of big piece of heavy equipment. It wasn’t until it made a slow, graceful turn in front of the gate and stopped that she realized it was a bulldozer.

A big one.

It was now blocking the gate completely. The engine died away.

“That’ll slow them down!” Aunt Lo announced cheerfully from the driver’s seat.

“Glad I could get the thing started, it?—”

“Get down from there!” Costa jumped up on the treads on the away-from-gunmen

side to help her down. “Good thinking, now get back in the house.”

“Wait.” Lo caught at his hand. “We think there are more of them at the back of the ranch. Rod’s pretty sure one of his traps got sprung up there.”

Costa cursed. “Someone was supposed to go up to Jenny and Jay.”

“I was doing that,” Lo said, “but I saw the dozer first. Do you want me to?—”

“No! Diana!”

“Here!” Diana called from the dark.

“I need you to get up to the back of the ranch. Don’t do anything, don’t engage, just make sure that Jenny and my nephew are somewhere safe. Can you do it?”

“I will,” Diana said.

It took everything in her to turn her back on Costa and the situation at the gate. But he was right, she was less help here than she would be protecting the noncombatants. She took off running into the dark.

Away from the gate and the Hummer’s headlights, the night was like pitch. She had a vague idea of the layout of the ranch, having been here enough times to know that there was a dirt road that went up behind the barn and outbuildings to the second cluster of residences on the back of the ranch, currently occupied by Jenny and her son.

Diana glanced back once, but the lights at the gate washed out her night vision, so she looked away.

This would be easier if I shifted. She would definitely be faster as a roadrunner. However, she wasn't sure she wanted to lose her human advantages, such as hands and height.

She spotted Jenny's cabin by a light in the window, the sort of dim light that suggested a candle or emergency lamp. At the same time, she heard crashing nearby, off to the side of the road. Diana slowed her headlong run to a panting walk, pressing one hand to a stitch in her side.

She definitely should have shifted.

From somewhere in the darkness, there was a loud crunch and someone yelped, "Ow!" in a hoarse male voice.

Diana slowed further and began to furtively cast around for a weapon. A stick, anything. Costa had told her not to engage, but they were closer to Jenny's cabin than she was.

"What is it with this place?" There were at least two of them; she could tell by the voices. "Was that a pit full of stakes back there? What kind of farm is this?"

"Stop getting distracted! We got a job to do here."

They were almost to the cabin. Diana gave up on trying to find a stick or rock; it wouldn't be much good against men with guns.

She'd have to fly, get to Jenny's ahead of them, and get the door barred and Jenny and Jay in the attic or basement. It was the only thing she could think of to do.

With vague regret at losing yet more clothes, Diana tore off her shirt and jeans, and shifted as she went, spreading her wings as soon as she was clear of her clothes.

It was strangely difficult to get airborne. Something was wrong with her; she felt ungainly and weird. She ended up covering the distance to the cabin in a series of long, gliding hops. Everything was off kilter; nothing was where it ought to be. When she landed at the porch of the cabin with a thump, she found herself looking down at the steps, and she stood still for a moment in utter confusion.

Normally things around her got huge when she was a roadrunner. It was dark, that was true, but she definitely should not be able to look in the cabin window when she wasn't perching on anything.

Oh, she thought. I think I know what that injection did to me now.

She couldn't tell exactly how big she was, but she was much, much larger than a normal roadrunner. She thought from the sheer perspective of her height off the ground that she might be six or seven feet tall.

Just then two men came stumbling out of the dry brush alongside the cabin. Diana looked around. Her night vision wasn't that much better as a roadrunner than a human, but with the light from the cabin window, she could see them vaguely, enough to tell that they both had body armor and guns.

They saw her too, and stopped.

"What the hell's that?" one of them said.

"In this place, who knows?" said the other. From the voice, it was the one who had been complaining about the stake pit earlier. "Could be a big sculpture, maybe?"

"Could be a trap."

Diana didn't like the idea of moving while they had guns pointed at her, but she also

didn't want them to get close enough to start poking at her. She spread her wings, or tried to; they were much bigger than she was expecting, and one of them smashed into the porch railing.

Diana shrieked the scream of a furious roadrunner, but it came out much louder than it ever had before, almost deafening.

Both men yelled in abject shock and terror.

Diana sprang at them. Her reflexes were still roadrunner-swift, even at her new huge size. One of them snapped off a gunshot, but it went wildly astray, and then Diana landed on him with her entire body weight. She was still relatively light for her size, being a bird, but he was flattened.

Now that she had other people to compare herself to, she could tell she was even bigger than she'd assumed, with her head seven or eight feet off the ground. It turned out that a roadrunner's spearlike beak, intimidating to lizards at its normal size but not to a human, was a formidable weapon on a roadrunner that was eight feet tall. She lunged at the other gunman, who shrieked as his gun was plucked out of his hands, and then screamed and simply fled when Diana started after him, stabbing forward with a beak that was a foot and a half long and sharp as a knife.

He fled off the road, and there was a sudden shriek and he disappeared.

That was definitely one of Uncle Roddy's pit traps.

The other one was trying to pick himself up. Diana kicked him a couple of times, then shifted human again. There was a dizzying moment of perspective shift when she had to deal with not getting bigger, but getting smaller. Collecting her jangled equilibrium, she grabbed his gun and then padded swiftly, barefoot, toward the cabin porch.

The door opened, and she saw a woman in a long skirt framed in the dim light of the candlelit interior. The woman, presumably Jenny, had a shotgun in her hands. “Who’s out there?”

“Get inside!” Diana snapped. “Lock the door!”

She hurried in, and Jenny slammed the door, shot the deadbolt, and turned to look at her.

“I had to shift,” Diana explained. Now that she was standing in Jenny’s living room, she was acutely conscious that she was totally naked, with nothing on her except the gun in her hands. “The ranch is under siege.”

“Here.” Jenny reached for a robe thrown across the back of an armchair and handed it to her. “I thought I heard gunshots, but what do you mean, under siege? By whom?”

“Enemies of Quinn’s and mine, we’re pretty sure.” Diana pulled on the offered robe. “Uh ... I’m really sorry about showing up like this.”

Jenny smiled. “Don’t apologize. You’re family. What should I do?”

Diana stared at her briefly. In all this time, it had never really occurred to her that Costa’s family considered her one of them.

But of course they did. It had been evident all along. She was welcome at all their family gatherings. They always asked after her. None of them had thought twice about Diana turning up in the middle of the night with nowhere to go; they just offered her shelter and spare clothes.

She took a quick, shuddering breath. There definitely was no time to have a sudden epiphany and a breakdown.

“Most of them are down at the main gate, but others might be on their way up here,” she told Jenny. “The important thing, the thing I’m here to make sure, is that you and your son are safe. Do you have somewhere in the house that you can lock yourself in, like a basement or a bathroom?”

“There’s a storm cellar,” Jenny said. “Do you think that’s necessary?”

“Just in case. Do you think it’d hold someone off even if they were trying to get in?”

Jenny nodded. “It locks from the inside.”

“Okay. You two get in there, and I’ll make sure someone comes up to let you know when it’s all clear. Hopefully it won’t be too long.”

“What about you?” Jenny asked.

“I need to get back down there and help Quinn.” Diana started to hand Jenny the gun, which she knew she couldn’t carry as a roadrunner—and then realized that she very much could carry it as a roadrunner. In fact, she could probably carry the robe too.

This was going to take some getting used to.

“Is everyone else okay?” Jenny asked anxiously.

“For now, as far as I know. Go ahead and get yourself barricaded inside. There’s no need to alarm your son; just get both of you to safety.”

Jenny nodded. She hesitated, then put the shotgun over her shoulder and squeezed Diana’s arm. “Be careful, and take care of Quinn too. He looks out for everyone else, but he’s always needed someone watching his back.”

“He has someone now,” Diana said. “Lock the door behind me, and put the light out.”

She went out on the porch. Behind her, she heard the lock snick home. An instant later, the light in the window died. She glimpsed a flickering flashlight inside, which quickly disappeared.

Diana stood on the porch with the night wind fluttering the robe around her. She looked down the hill. There was only darkness down there now; the headlights had gone out. Suddenly she jumped at a distant chatter of gunfire.

The fighting had started.

But looking beyond the ranch—far beyond it—Diana saw headlights on the road, distant sparks in the dark.

Someone was on their way. Backup? Police? Or just a rancher returning to some distant spread in this rural back country.

Gunshots crashed again. There was no time to wait.

Diana jumped down to the ground, wincing as her bare feet hit the ground. She shifted, dropping the gun and shedding the robe. Then she picked up the gun in her beak and started down the hill, running with great long strides.

She had always loved running as a roadrunner, but this was amazing . She wasn’t sure if she was objectively that much faster than she had been at her smaller size, but it certainly felt like it. She felt like a racehorse.

By the time she reached the front gate, all hell was breaking loose.

It looked like the assault team had tried to go around the gate and the bulldozer

blocking it. Now there were vehicles off in the sand—one of them was clearly stuck—and a lot of yelling from people encountering Roddy's various traps.

She heard a loud, rumbling snort, halfway to a snarl, and saw Costa in boar form charging someone. Relief flowed through her.

Needing to see better, she leaped into the air and landed on the hood of one of the SUVs with a thump. The metal dented under her feet.

From here she could get a better look at the fighting going on around her. To her amazement, they did have reinforcements now. She saw a horse—Jessie—rearing and kicking someone, and another of the invaders was being chased by a crocodile. It was total chaos now, with people scattering, being attacked by animals, and running into traps whenever they left the road. Diana smelled blood and saw one guy down with what looked like a spear through his leg.

She spotted someone else lining up a shot on Costa. Diana leaped at him, stabbing him in the back with her beak and knocking him down where she could stomp on him a few times.

And then suddenly it was over, the noise and wild commotion dying away to groans and the sound of someone—that was definitely Caine's voice—barking orders.

A light snapped on. Headlights were illuminating them again, but this time it was Delgado climbing down from the driver's side of the SUV where she had just lit up the scene. Diana saw both of the interns—Fifi looked terrified as she held a gun on a prisoner up against the side of the Hummer, while Jessie was gleefully kneeling someone in the back while she cuffed him and read him his rights.

“Diana!” Costa shouted.

Diana started toward him without remembering what she currently looked like, until she realized she was looking down at him, and Costa was staring at her.

“Whoa!” someone said.

Diana cocked her head to the side, looking at Costa, who reached out a careful hand and touched the side of her beak. For an instant it seemed as if she had forgotten how to shift, and then she did it in a rush. The transformation was different when she was this big; rather than the world suddenly shrinking around her as she got much bigger, her change in perspective was negligible, except that Costa had his hand on her cheek and she was naked.

He seized her in his arms, and she clung to him, shaking.

Caine arrived out of seemingly nowhere, shrugging out of his dark suit jacket. He held it out, and Diana untangled from Costa’s embrace and put it on. It was big enough to hang over her hips and provide at least some semblance of coverage.

“Where is everyone else?” Costa asked. “Who’s here?”

“I brought all the available personnel I could get together on short notice, and we came in the fast way,” Caine said. “The sheriff’s department is coming by road, because they had a cruiser a lot closer than the SCB, so better get the shifters buttoned up. SCB backup will be here later tonight. Your, er, informant was very clear on the need for prompt action, and I can see why.”

Vic appeared, naked except for a borrowed jacket. So that had been the crocodile, Diana thought. “Sorry, boss, I know we were supposed to stay at the ranch house, but it looked like some help was needed.”

“Thanks,” Costa told him. “How’s everyone at the house?”

“Fine when I last saw them. One of your aunts is keeping watch over the kids with a shotgun, and another one is—uh, around here somewhere, in her shifted form. She seemed to be having a good time trampling people.”

Right, Diana thought, Costa’s whole family were boar shifters, and it seemed the females weren’t that much smaller than the males.

“Well, I’ll give him this—Farley came through for us,” Costa admitted. He looked at Diana. “Jenny and Jay?”

Diana grinned. “Just fine. They’re in the storm cellar.” Her whole body was thrumming with adrenaline, and she never thought she’d be this willing to admit that she didn’t really mind being injected with an experimental shifter drug if it did this to her.

“Everyone else is okay?” Costa asked, the question more or less generally directed to Vic and Caine.

“Everyone’s okay,” Vic confirmed.

Costa put an arm around Diana, and she leaned against him. “Okay, let’s get this mess cleaned up, send someone up to Jenny’s to give them the all-clear, and find out what on Earth just happened.”

CHAPTER 29

“They’re hired mercenaries,” Caine said.

He, Costa, and Diana were sitting on the porch of the ranch house with cups of coffee as night began to fade, the sky lightening to gray above them and details beginning to emerge from the darkness.

The ranch was a whirlwind of activity as SCB agents cleaned up the scene and ushered handcuffed suspects to two vans. The aunts and Uncle Rodrigo had gone to bed after being debriefed—very eagerly debriefed, as they were happy to talk about their part in all the excitement. Uncle Roddy had been especially delighted and vindicated by the success of his traps.

Costa was starting to experience the adrenaline crash that usually came in the wake of frantic activity, and could feel weariness creeping up on him, a reaction to the last few days as well as the previous night.

“Mercenaries hired by whom?” he asked, realizing that his attention was drifting. Diana’s hand rested on his arm; she had moved her chair close to his. That was distracting, as well.

“Still working on that,” Caine said. “But it’s definitely related to the underground shifter fights.” His gaze, behind the sunglasses he was wearing in spite of the fact it was barely dawn, dropped to Diana’s hand resting on Costa’s arm and then flicked away. “Oh, and with everything else going on, I haven’t had a chance to tell you this yet. You will be interested to know there’s been some headway on getting

information out of the scientists and other personnel arrested at the lab in Alamagordo. Specifically, they know what the substance is that Diana was injected with. Maybe not its exact composition, but what it's meant for."

There was a small gasp from Diana, and her hand tightened on Costa's arm. "What is it?"

"It's unlikely to hurt you, for one thing," Caine said. "It affects shifters in their shift form, and produces unpredictable and temporary effects."

"Unpredictable?" Costa said, and "Temporary?" Diana said at the same moment. She sounded disappointed.

The corners of Caine's mouth twitched. "Yes. It's meant to be used in the shifter fighting rings, as a sort of—well, I guess you'd call it a kind of doping. Shifter steroid use."

"We were speculating it might be something like that," Costa mused. "Vic thought so. According to him, shifters on the fighting circuit have their shift forms and capabilities tracked, so anything that throws a monkey wrench into that could make some serious money for someone who knew it was going to happen."

Caine nodded. "From what we've managed to get out of the scientists, that's exactly it. They're still working on the formula, and as you found out, Diana, the side effects can be unpleasant."

"No kidding," Diana said. "I wouldn't have wanted to fight in the state I was in at first. Kinda getting on board with it now, though. How long exactly is temporary?"

"That's another thing that's still in flux as they work on the formula. Maybe a few days to a few weeks."

“Farley’s going to be disappointed to hear that he’s losing his wings,” Costa said. He grinned, but the grin slowly faded as he thought about the other set of maybe-temporary wings on the ranch. “What about Emmeline—that is, the little girl? She’s another test subject, isn’t she?”

“Ah, that’s where things get interesting.” The speaker was Mavis, coming up the steps with her medical bag in one hand. “Yes, I’m still making house calls,” she added to Costa. “Nice place out here. Pretty country. One of these days, I’d love to see it in daylight.”

“It’s starting to look like I’m going to host the next SCB company picnic out here,” Costa said. He realized that his hand had moved over to cover Diana’s while they were talking, as he noticed Mavis looking at it. He defiantly curled his fingers around Diana’s. “Now what’s interesting, exactly?”

“Emmeline,” Mavis said. “That’s what you’re calling the little girl?”

“Yeah.” Costa found himself suddenly defensive. “Does it matter?”

“It matters in the sense that we know who she is now.” Mavis pulled a chair over. “And her real name is Madison Tyler.”

“Madison,” Diana breathed. “Well, it starts with an M.”

Costa couldn’t sort out what he was feeling. Madison. It was nice to know after so long, but it was strange to think of her as anything other than Emmeline.

But she had a family somewhere. Loved ones who missed her, who she deserved to go back to.

“Her family must be frantic,” he said. “Was she abducted?”

“She turned up in the search for missing children that the interns have been running,” Mavis explained. As she spoke, she took out a blood pressure cuff and gestured for Diana to provide an arm. Diana rolled her eyes but did so. “She went missing from a foster home in a Phoenix suburb a couple of months ago.”

“Foster care?” Diana asked, as Mavis firmly repositioned her arm and checked the reading on the cuff. “What about her parents?”

“Not in the picture. Teen mom who gave her up and severed parental rights shortly after birth, father’s unknown, and probably the one who was the shifter. She was slated to be adopted by a couple in Phoenix, but that fell through when she vanished, and they’re currently adopting another child. We think,” Mavis added, briskly removing the cuff after making a note of the reading, “that someone in the foster system was paid off to find and supply a shifter child to the lab.”

Costa felt a hot surge of fury. “Do we know who?”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it.” Mavis also looked angry.

“That’s horrible,” Diana said, her voice a near-snarl. “Has it happened to any other kids?”

“Not that we know about at the present time. Now that we’re watching out for it, we can be on guard against it. Nicole Yates was saying that she and the Seattle SCB are working on a system for better tracking of shifter children in foster care, since they have special needs that most children don’t. So this will provide a good incentive to get her project moving, as well as giving us a way to help prevent such things happening in the future.”

Caine had listened to all of this quietly with his fingers laced together between his knees. Abruptly he spoke up. “Why a child, instead of an adult test subject?”

“Ah, yes, that’s where it gets truly interesting, in an awful way. For adults who have come into their full shifting capabilities, it’s temporary. But the head researcher from the lab—I refuse to dignify her with the term ‘scientist’—told me that children, and especially young children who haven’t come into their shifting yet, might be permanently changed. They were only starting to explore that option, and Emmeline, or Madison, seems to be the only test subject they have so far.”

“And the only one they’ll ever have,” Costa said with conviction.

“Indeed.”

“Do we know how she got on the plane?” Diana asked.

Caine spoke up. “It’s pure speculation so far, but it’s safe to assume she was picked up from the lab in Alamagordo to be transported somewhere else. The flight safety agencies have closed the case on the crash as an accident, but the SCB is running a set of toxicology reports on the deceased pilot. We may never know exactly what happened on that plane, but there’s a good chance the pilot had a fatal attack of conscience when he found out the cargo was a kid, and they decided to get rid of him, one way or another.”

Mavis nodded, scowling. “And then cover up their mess later with you, Diana.”

“Lucky me,” Diana said. But right now, leaning on Costa’s shoulder with his hand over hers, she did feel lucky.

“I’m going to guess that somewhere among the lab security guards, we’ll find a doped shifter or two, as well as someone who matches the description of whoever was asking your paramedic friend about you, Diana.” Caine stretched and stood up. “On that note, I’m going home before the sun comes up.”

“Night,” Costa said cheerfully. “Say hi to Gilly for us.”

Caine wandered into the house, presumably to find a dark place. Mavis consulted her notes.

“To answer a question you’ve probably forgotten you asked,” she said to Diana, “yes, it’s possible Emmeline, or Madison, might keep the wings. Or perhaps they will fade over time. She may even develop other abilities we don’t know about yet.”

“What’s going to happen to her?” Diana asked.

Mavis looked at Costa, who shrugged and said, “I think that’s up to us. She could go back into the foster system, but I don’t recommend it unless we can find a shifter household as a placement for her.”

“Or,” Diana said quietly, “someone could adopt her.”

“Yes,” Mavis said. She smiled. “Someone could adopt her.”

* * *

After the agents had left and the ranch was once more calm, Diana and Costa went up to the saguaro cabin, where they made slow, lingering love in the rumpled bed. As if their entire lives had been foreplay, it was long and gentle, with care and attention to every part of each other’s bodies.

Afterwards, they slept curled up against each other, and woke in the drowsing heat of afternoon. Outside, life on the ranch seemed to be going on as usual. There were voices calling to each other, the snorts of the horses, the bleating cry of a goat, the sound of an engine running somewhere.

“So, just to make sure we’re on the same page,” Diana said as they dressed after a lazy, shared shower that they stepped out of only when the cabin’s small hot water tank ran empty and the rust-smelling water turned lukewarm. “We are together now, right? I mean, officially together.”

Costa laughed. “We were always officially together.” He hesitated. “You do—want it, don’t you?”

Diana rolled her eyes in tolerant annoyance. “Quinn, I just had you in every possible way. Of course I want it.”

“Oh, good.” He breathed out on a sigh of relief, and then swept her into his arms, making her squeal and laugh. He loved that laugh. He could listen to it forever. “Kiss me, woman.”

“We’re an actual couple for five minutes and you’re already referring to me as ‘woman’? This bodes ill.” But she kissed him with enthusiastic willingness. Pulling away, she started to laugh.

“If you’re talking ill omens, I think the fact that you’re laughing at my kissing technique is another one.”

“No, no.” Diana shoved him playfully, still laughing so hard she could barely speak. When she sobered enough to be more coherent, she explained, “I was just wondering if we’re going to tell everyone—you know? How on earth are we going to explain the anniversaries?”

“They already thought it was the world’s longest courtship. I mean, in some sense it was.”

“True.” Diana’s urge to laugh seemed to die as she considered this. Reaching out, she

squeezed his hand. “Thank you for waiting for me to come to my senses.”

“Really? I should be thanking you. World’s most patient woman, right here.”

They walked out into the late afternoon heat, hand in hand. It was clear from the rising temperatures that the end of spring was near, and summer’s oven would soon be upon them, stealing the flowers and the mild weather for another year. But you appreciated things more, sometimes, when you didn’t have them every day, Costa felt. If the desert bloomed year round, the flowers wouldn’t be so special.

“What do you think about Em?” Diana asked quietly.

“Adopting her, you mean?” He paused, thinking around the reality of it before giving an answer. “You know, I think for a long time I’ve been afraid something would happen to me like happened to Marco—I mean, I’m not afraid for me, but for anyone I might leave behind.”

“Is that why you never got married? Had kids?”

“I was also waiting for the right woman to come along.” He squeezed her hand. “Not quite realizing that she already had. But yeah, I think I was, and now—I keep waiting for that fear to materialize, and it doesn’t. Does that make sense?”

“It does, yeah. I feel like there’s something about the way Em just fell into our lives that made it feel as if it’s meant to be. Do you feel that way?”

“I don’t know about meant to be. I do know that I think I’m ready to open a new chapter in my life.”

“Me too,” Diana said, and she was gazing off the porch, across the arroyo at the sun-bleached sprawl of her old family ranch. “Me too.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:40 am

Summer in the desert was a long, calm season. The flowers and comparatively lush landscape of spring had long since vanished, their soft greens and golds and splashes of pink replaced with the browns and muted red-gold that people more typically associated with this part of the country. Some might call the summers brutal, and in some sense they were. But living with them meant relaxing into their rhythms. It meant learning to appreciate the comparatively cool, sun-kissed mornings, the soft evenings and brilliant stars in the always startling chill of the night.

You couldn't live in the desert without loving it, Diana thought. Well ... you could. People did. But those people preferred to shuttle between their air-conditioned homes and offices, perhaps with a stop at an equally climate-controlled restaurant in between.

Right now she was sweltering in the meager shade of the trees at the top of her family's old pasture, lying on her back and watching a bird circle lazily in the clear blue bowl of the sky.

The sound of someone approaching made her prop herself up on her elbows. She watched Costa ride up the pasture on the back of one of his family's horses. The pasture, after years of neglect, was far too dry to support livestock—at least for now. Perhaps, with care and work, it could be lush and useful again.

Costa swung down from the horse's back and led it into the shade of the trees. "Figured I'd find you up here."

"Your tracking sense is truly uncanny," Diana agreed. She sat up. "Where's Em?"

“She’s at Jenny’s.”

Diana nodded. Em was now officially Madison Emmeline Tyler, soon to be Madison Emmeline Costa when the adoption paperwork went through. But she would always be Em to them.

One thing about Costa’s family ranch was that there was never any shortage of willing babysitters. If anything, the difficult thing was finding time to spend with Em by themselves.

“What do you have there?” Diana asked as Costa took down a large basket that had been strapped behind the saddle.

“I think my aunts decided that we must be starving over here.”

Diana laughed. “How could we starve when they’ve already brought us a month’s worth of food?”

The purchase of her family ranch from the Halversons had just closed a week ago. The insurance settlement from the loss of her house had been easily sufficient for a generous down payment, and from there—well, they would make it work, she thought.

The details of exactly how she was going to get her job to flex with living on the ranch at least part of the time was something she hadn’t figured out yet. But she’d already gone through a couple changes of career so far, first of all leaving the Army, and then settling into her Arizona job; perhaps it wasn’t too late in life to experience another. Tucson had some interesting opportunities, including local pilot jobs, as well as park ranger work or perhaps switching to a full-time first responder career. She was looking forward to exploring some different options.

After all that had led up to it, she was a little surprised, but in a good way, that her

relationship with Costa had turned out to be so easy. They had simply settled into the new thing that they had now, which turned out to be a step away from the old thing, after all. They were taking it slow; after all, they'd waited twenty-odd years, so another few months wasn't such a big thing.

Some might say they were already moving too fast, between buying the ranch—which had both their names on the paperwork—and fostering to adopt Em. But they weren't living together yet; Diana had a new apartment with a year-long lease, which she felt would give them plenty of time to settle into their new roles without having to pick up an entire shared household's duties immediately.

As always, they were doing things their own way, in their own time.

Costa unpacked the picnic basket. There was a folded throw on top, which he spread out and then began to stack with sandwiches, individually wrapped slices of pie on their own saucers, potato salad, cookies, a jar of lemonade ...

"They really do think we're going to starve," Diana said, picking up a sandwich.

"Well, not for the next few hours, at least."

Costa, no stranger to traveling in the hot and dry back country, had also brought water for the horse. He turned it loose to wander the pasture if it wanted to, and the two of them dug into the picnic basket, interspersed with light kisses slightly flavored by lemonade.

They chatted lightly about work, Costa skirting around talking about Vic's investigation of the shifter underground fighting rings; apparently that was on the move, but Diana knew he couldn't give her too many details, so she didn't push for it.

"I heard Caine and Gilly have set a wedding date at last," she remarked between bites of an absolutely heavenly slice of blackberry pie.

“How’d you hear it before I got a chance to mention it?”

Diana laughed. “The interns. We stay in touch. They are strangely fascinated with Caine’s love life.”

“The new interns have imprinted on Caine like a bunch of ducklings,” Costa said. “It’s adorable. He says he hates it, but he seems to be taking to his new mentor role like—well, like a duck to water.” He held up another slice of pie. “Want this?”

“I couldn’t eat another bite. I’m stuffed.”

“Then help me put this away, and we might commandeer the blanket for other activities. That is, if you’re not too stuffed to be?—”

“Stuffed?” Diana asked, giggling. “No, never.”

After putting the picnic basket in the shade, they made love quietly on the blanket, and then lay together as the sweat of exertion dried on their bodies.

“Full circle,” Costa murmured, slowly stroking his hand down Diana’s bare back. “It started here, and it ends here.”

She nudged him. “Don’t make it sound so final.”

Costa laughed. “I love the thought that Em is going to get to know the place like we did. You can show her all your favorite hiding places.”

“Maybe it’ll be up and running as a working ranch by then,” Diana said.

“You want that?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to see the place come alive again. Maybe I’ll rent it out, come

out here on weekends—I haven’t really decided yet. I don’t think the full-time ranch life is for me, but a year ago I couldn’t have imagined that I’d someday live here and I’d be happy, so who knows?”

“Who knows,” Costa echoed. The slow stroking went on, and Diana leaned into it, like a lazy cat being petted. “The future’s a mystery, but so far it’s shaping up pretty well.”

It was indeed, Diana thought, letting the peace of the day and the comfort of Costa’s presence wash over her.

In fact, it made her think about how life felt a little like flying a search and rescue grid. At first it was an unbounded landscape full of possibilities, with the target you sought—a happy life, a satisfying ending—somewhere in that vast sweep of options. Some people got lucky and stumbled into their happy ending on the first try. But most of the rest of them, she supposed, were like her and Costa—methodically exploring the grid, trying different possibilities, finally narrowing in on the goal.

And she had no complaints with where she had ended up, not a single one.

* * *