Chapter 15

“Are you sure about this?” Reed nervously tapped his fingers against the tops of his thighs. “Can you trust your cousin not to turn us in?”

“I would trust my cousin with your life, possibly even mine. She may be a member of the constabulary, but she’s also a Darby. I don’t envy Liv the moral juggling she has to do—I’m a simple creature that way—but I do know she’ll keep all her pretty balls in the air.” We eased the cutter on to the main path, our Crow escort nowhere to be seen, which was exactly how we wanted it.

We kept the cutter to a path that went by the Bluffsdale arena. Once I caught sight of the Smoke, I would hit the pedal. I wanted to draw their attention away from Rey’s delivery.

You would think that it wouldn’t take too long what with the distinctive looking car and the Smoke actively looking for us, but so far no one had taken the bait. Maybe if I made myself shiny enough, I could catch someone’s eye. The path we were on was two lanes, the traffic moderately dense. I pushed down hard on the fuel pedal and started weaving around other swifts, cutters, and lorries. A little reckless and a lot too fast, I was sure to increase my visibility.

Reed was hunched in his seat, sunglasses on, eyes on the sky. I wasn’t certain how many of the constabulary had surfaced to catch us, but Liv had assured me the majority were stationed around the arena and surface paths. That wasn’t saying a constable on a swift would spot me, but since I had to keep my eye on the road anyway, I could be on lookout for them. If Reed watched the sky, then we’d be totally covered.

“It looks like we have company.” Reed pointed at one of the mirrors. Up in the sky behind us, silhouetted against the puffy white clouds, was a black outline that definitely had wings.

“About time. I was beginning to think we’d have to shoot off a flare or something.” I juked around a handful of swifts and cut off a cutter, making them lay on their horn. “Is it a dragon?”

“Not long enough,” Reed said, twisting in his seat. “Gryphon, I think.”

Better and better. Gryphons were faster than dragons over short distances, but their eyesight wasn’t as good. That would help us out nicely as long as we didn’t get caught. I edged my speed higher, weaving through the other vehicles. The thing I loved most about the Smoke was that they were predictable. There were certain guidelines in place for every occasion, like, say, a high-speed chase, and they would follow that protocol. Oh, occasionally you got a creative thinker, but for something like this, they would be by the book.

“How far off are we?” At this speed it would be smart to keep my focus on the other vehicles, so Reed as a navigator was coming in really handy.

“I can’t see the tree line yet.”

The route we were on curved around the edges of Bluffsdale, and if we followed it, the path would soon lead us along the edges of Burnham wood. The woods were vast, taking up a rather large area of Lanta. It was mostly undeveloped—a few horse paths for traders and people that wanted to fish on the Tchfauxtula river. You had to have a special license to fish there. Anyone without one would be eaten. That’s what the signs said anyway, and even though I knew lowland bears had a sense of humor, it was best not to push it. That was the main reason Burnham remained almost pristine in its beauty—it was the home of a rather extensive pack of bears.

Now that we knew we had a tail, I was hauling ass to make it to those woods. “Why don’t you open up the com. I want to hear what the Smoke are chattering about.” I told Reed the channel he needed to flip to while keeping an eye on our little sky friend. Static filled the cabin as he flipped through stations, occasionally catching snatches of conversation. Finally we landed on the channel the local Smoke was using. At first it was just code—which Liv had made all of us memorize a long time ago.

“What are they saying?” Reed asked.

“We’ve been spotted. They’re mobilizing pursuit, and so on and so forth.” The path curved to the right, revealing the far off edge of Burnham wood. Perfect.

The chatter on the com changed, causing Reed to become rigid.

“This is Allen T. Justice, sheriff of the Arkana constabulary. The criminal element you’re currently in pursuit of is my quarry. I need you to kindly back off and give me coordinates, over.” I recognized that voice. That was the voice of the guy who’d been trailing us the whole time. I knew why he made me nervous, but I was curious as to why he made Reed go still. We’d crossed the line from Arkana to Lanta. The sheriff had no jurisdiction here. Why was he still following us?

The voice that came through in response was pure southern lands molasses. “Over Sheriff Calais here, welcome to Lanta, Sheriff Allen T. Justice.”

I’ve spent a little time in the northern lands, and while they have their high points, there is one particular thing that I’ve never heard them master, and that was the honey tones Sheriff Calais was currently wielding like a club. Her greeting was polite, sweet even. Her tones dulcet. And every single person who heard it was now mentally backing away. Sheriff Calais was going to chew Justice up and spit him out.

“And while we love visitors here in Lanta, that’s a big negative, sheriff. This is no longer your hunt. You’d best turn your cutter around and head back to Arkana. Feel free to take in the sights on your way. Might I recommend the Tallahatchee falls? If you stop in at YaYa’s Sugar Shack there, you can get the best cup of coffee you ever tasted. Lots to see on your trip back. Over.”

If Justice had a brain in his head, he’d bow out. So far I hadn’t seen any evidence that he had such a thing. This was going to be fun.

“Now you hear me, little miss—”

Oooooh, no. *Little miss*. He was a dead man walking. Allen T. Justice kept right on digging his grave. “I have tracked this dangerous criminal all the way from the wonderful state of Arkana. Slick Otter is the worst kind of scum.”

I snorted. I mean, I’m a criminal, but worst kind of scum? Please. I was guilty of bootlegging, not murder.

“I have Otter on destruction of property, resisting arrest, and kidnapping—”

Justice continued his tirade but I was no longer listening. I turned to Reed. “Kidnapping? Did I kidnap you?”

Reed had a funny look on his face, like he was trying not to laugh while simultaneously eating a lemon. “Kidnapping implies I didn’t want to go.” Reed reached toward the com and I slapped his hand away.

Over Sheriff Calais cut back in. “Kidnapping? Those are some serious charges. Who has Slick Otter *allegedly* kidnapped?”

“Allegedly?” Justice spluttered. “There is no *allegedly.* Slick Otter kidnapped the groom from a high profile wedding in Arkana. Very upper crust of civilized society.”

I looked at Reed, my eyebrows raised. He was staring at the com like it was a snake about bite him somewhere sensitive.

“I will keep those charges in mind, Sheriff Justice, but as I stated earlier you do not have jurisdiction in the great state of Lanta. While we thank you for your service, we’ll take it from here. Out.”

Justice’s response was mostly incoherent yelling and name calling, so I shut off the com. A narrow spot opened up in the right lane, and I shifted over to that side. We weren’t far from the forest now. I ignored Reed, putting that particular grease fire on the back burner for now. This was going to be a little tricky and I needed to concentrate. The path we wanted didn’t actually connect to the path we were on. We’d have to cut through a short swath of tall grass, head for the tree line, and follow it around for a quarter of a mile before we connected with a thin country path. I wanted to stay as out of sight as I could, which meant waiting until absolutely the last moment. I counted off in my head as the forest got closer. Five. Four. Three. Two…

*Now*. I yanked the wheel, canting the cutter to the side, almost tipping it. We sped through the grass, keeping so close to the trees that I was surprised my sails didn’t clip the trunks. The country path was thin and I almost missed it. I slammed on the brake and yanked the wheel, causing the cutter to drift to the side. Then I hit the fuel pedal, and we plunged into the forest. I retracted my sails. We needed a slim body here more than we needed speed. The forest was thick, the canopy cutting off a lot of the light. It was dark and cool, the large trunks of the trees taking away some visibility. People would have a hard time seeing us, and I would have a difficult time spotting them as well. I slowed the cutter more, easing around the S curves of the path. We needed to go deeper into the forest.

We snaked through the forest for several minutes before the path lurched to the side a final time, this time spitting us out at the edge of a rock outcropping. The rocks towered up over us, causing a natural pocket at the bottom. I slowed the cutter to a stop.

“Groom to a high profile wedding?”

“That’s misleading,” Reed said, looking faintly ill. “I wouldn’t consider the Justice family as ‘upper crust’ by a long shot.”

I wanted to bang my head against the dashboard, but that would be awkward and I needed to keep my eyes open. “Which Justice were you scheduled to wed?”

“Junior, the Sheriff’s son. Only son.” His lips firmed and twisted down. “I should have stayed. Not to marry—I truly think I made the right decision there, but Junior…he’s sweet. Not the smartest, but kind, and his dad stomps all over him. I didn’t want to marry him, but I should have snuck him out of there. He deserved better than he got.”

I turned the engine of the cutter off. “That seems to be the way of kind people.” I caught a hint of movement in the forest. “The sheriff has no idea about what Rey and I are up to, does he? He’s just looking for you to save his son the heartache.”

Reed shook his head. “He likely has no clue, and the only thing he’s trying to save is his pride.” Reed reached a hand out and placed it on mine, then waited to see if I’d yank it away. “I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t remove my hand, but I didn’t move it to grab his, either. I stared into his eyes. “Were you afraid I’d kick you out because of the risk?”

Reed kept his gaze steady. “Maybe at first, but mostly…mostly I was just happy for the first time in a long time and I didn’t want to let that go. Selfish, I know.”

I squeezed his hand and dropped it, pointing my finger in his face. “Okay, but from here on out, you’re clean with me. I get having secrets, but I can’t stomach them in my navigator.” I popped open the hatch, jumping out to meet our welcoming committee. A handful of lowland bears, their fur various shades of brown, ambled out and sat down in a half-circle. They stopped a few feet shy of us, waiting.

“Hi,” I said, waving. I didn’t speak lowland bear, so we’d have to wait for our backup. By the soft rumbled rolling through the forest, they were right behind us.

Reed joined me, his hands out to his sides, his palms open. The bears eyed us curiously, but I couldn’t quite read their expressions. They didn’t look overtly hostile, and if our messenger got through, they shouldn’t see us as trespassers.

“Think the Crows got to them in time?” Reed asked.

I also kept my hands out. “If they try to eat you, we’ll know for sure.”

“You’re still harboring anger towards me, aren’t you?”

I pursed my lips, thinking. “You know,” I said slowly, “I think I am. But I’ll get over it quick-ish.” Quick for a Darby, anyway. We’re grudge holders.

The rumble ended as the Crows joined us on their swifts, cutting the engines, and parking them.

Demetri walked past me to greet the bear in front, a rather large male with deep brown fur. The Crow held his arms out, his posture relaxed, as a torrent of whistles, clicks, and chirps poured from his mouth. The big bear grunted, lifted himself up on his hind legs, and picked Demetri up in a hug.

“Is that a friendly hug or a preemptive strike?” Reed whispered.

“Friendly,” the rest of the Crows chorused, not bothering to keep their voices down. When the bear dropped Demetri, he turned his head, waving a paw at the group. They lumbered over to my Phoenix, shutting the doors we’d left open. The bears put their giant paws on the side of my cutter and pushed it under the ledge of the rock outcropping like it was made of cloud fluff. One of the smaller bears brought out a pile of netting, handing it to the group. With quick, efficient movements, they settled it over the Phoenix.

Demetri gave a smooth bow to the bears. The courtly manners should have looked out of place with the leathers and the swifts, but somehow it worked. When he straightened, he looked back over at me. “You won’t be able to see the Phoenix from the air. Up close, maybe, but no one will get up close.”

“Tell them thank you,” I said, dipping me head out of respect to the bears. “I assume I owe them a favor now as well?”

Demetri shook his head. “No. Cletus owes them a full recount of the story when you’re done, but I took care of the rest.” He gave me a wicked grin. “I’m going to have to start a tab for the Darby clan.”

My eyes narrowed. “It’s my tab, not my family’s.”

His face took on an expression of false pity. “You may think so, Otter, but that isn’t how the Crows work.” He patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry, we’ll probably take it up with you. Or the Chipmunk. Who can tell?”

I growled at him and he laughed. *Stupid Crows. No, more like stupid Otters.* I sighed.

He got onto his cutter and waved at me. “You coming?” I squinted at him, trying to see an alternative, but there really wasn’t one. We were at their mercy. Reed shrugged and climbed on after Min.

No point in pouting. I climbed on behind Demetri. He handed me a helmet, and as soon as I had it on, the Crows let out a *whoop* and tore off out of the forest. I had to hold on tight so I didn’t fall off.

*Clever, reckless Crows, and definitely one very stupid Otter.*