

GATES OF PARADISE



TIANNA XANDER

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By

Tianna Xander

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Dedication

To my readers: Without which I would have no reason to continue.

To my editor: Without your continuing support and wacky comments in the margins there would be little laughter and excitement in my editing.

To Tina: As always a great big thank you for seeing what so many others didn't.

To all of my friends, family and co-workers: Thank you so much for believing in me and never making me feel like a pervert no matter how sensual or long my love scenes have gotten.

I love you all.

Chapter 1

Aliana dashed through the woods, not daring to look back. Sure that her father's henchmen were close on her heels, she kept running despite her exhaustion. Her feet pounded a steady rhythm through the forest. Branches slapped at her face and shoulders as she charged through the brush, barely taking the time to push them out of the way as she forged through the bramble. The dark, insidious feeling of evil grew increasingly closer and made her desperate. She had to get away.

Her breaths came in little more than short, strangled gasps. Why had she allowed herself to get so out of shape? Pain stabbed at her side. Her muscles burned. The farther she ran, the more she felt the illusory sensation of her father's men breathing down her neck. Why couldn't she shake them? First, she'd lost her hotel room and luggage, then her car. What next?

She wouldn't do it! Aliana refused to marry a man she'd never respect. Who could have a high opinion of a man who gave no thought to others?

He exploited those with less power and took advantage of the system. In short, the man was an opportunistic jerk. Not to mention a criminal of the worst sort. The real clincher had been when she'd walked into her father's home and accidentally heard them discussing a drug transaction and murder. She could have believed it of Doug Hamill, but...her father? That had been an unexpected blow, ripping away her innocence in a way nothing else could have.

Rounding a corner, she bent at the waist and rested her hands on her knees. She gulped great lungs full of air as she concentrated on listening for the pounding of footsteps behind her. Aliana rubbed her side, the burning pain almost strong enough to bring her to her knees. The cool air burned her lungs as she drew in each breath.

"Some twenty-fifth birthday present." She panted, still bent over. "I expected my trust fund not a fiancé." No wonder her mother had committed suicide. The reasons were clear now. She hadn't been able to live with Ali's father's source of income. Aliana knew she surely couldn't. How many lives had been lost supporting her father's expensive tastes? How many children died or were orphaned because of overdoses or bad drugs?

She fought off the urge to retch, knowing she couldn't keep up her frantic pace much longer.

Either she found help or a ride soon or those hunting her would find her passed out on the trail. No, dammit. She refused to give up, to be an easy catch.

A dog bayed in the distance, seemed to grow closer every second.

She took off running again. It was only a matter of time before they found her. She needed to get some money and a car before she collapsed in a heap.

The last thing her father would do was let her go if they managed to capture her. She held no illusions as to what he would do if he couldn't control her, make her marry his business associate—a man at least twice her age. He *was* a murderer after all. Ali still had the prepaid credit card her mother had loaded and slipped to her before her death. Keeping it was her only hope for survival. She had it and a few changes of clothes in the backpack strapped to her shoulders.

The setting sun nearly blinded her when she stumbled into a clearing. Bright light shone in her eyes, a shock after the darkness of the thick forest. Pebbles rolled beneath her feet as she slid down a rocky incline. She tried to reach out, to stop herself from sliding down the mountainside, but it was too little too late.

Aliana screamed, barely thinking to suck in a gulp of air before she plunged feet first into the icy

water of the rushing river below. Cold water swirled around her head. It pulled at her clothing, yanking her deeper and deeper as it dragged her over sharp rocks and tree limbs below the surface. Her lungs burned, ached. She needed to breathe! Opening her eyes, she clawed her way toward the light, glad the setting sun hadn't yet dipped below the horizon.

Breaking the surface was a feat. With the heavy backpack strapped to her, the rushing water tried to pull her down. Her wet clothes were heavy, a hindrance to her survival. Kicking off her shoes, she wriggled out of her wet pants, allowing the current to strip the wet denim from her legs before she drowned. She couldn't afford to lose her pack. She may as well die if she let that go.

It was almost full dark before she'd finally struggled to the shore. Battered and bruised, Aliana dragged herself from the freezing water and collapsed onto the rocky riverbank.

* * * *

"I don't know why this couldn't have waited until morning."

Dracen glanced over at his best friend, Griffin, and shook his head. "Because we'll both be too hungry in the morning and you'll be bitching because we didn't lug the water tonight." He

loved Griffin to death, but he certainly could do without the other man's constant complaints. He needed to get laid. Hell, they both did. It would most likely sweeten both of their dispositions.

Griffin sighed and nodded. "You know, I hate when you're right." He shifted the buckets in his hands.

"At least we can bathe while we're down here. One of us stinks." Dracen smiled and sniffed the air around them. "And I think it's you."

"Fuck off, Drace." Griffin bared his teeth in a grin. "If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it, fuck-nut."

Wasting no time once they reached the river, they stripped off their clothes and jumped into the freezing water.

"Shit! I forgot how damned cold the water here is this time of year."

Drace snorted. "I don't know how you manage to forget that every time we come here." He gave his best friend a sideways grin. "You brain damaged or something?"

"Kiss my ass," Griffin said, brushing the wet hair out of his face. "Maybe I subconsciously block it or something."

That wouldn't be surprising. Goodness knew he'd like to forget sometimes. But a bath was a bath and they *were* getting a bit ripe. A noise in the brush down the river had them both looking up,

alert. The last thing they needed was for some stray hiker to find them here, naked. They'd have a hard time controlling the mind of an already shocked human and they couldn't afford discovery. With the veil thin during the Sabbat, there would be more than one *visitor*. That's why they were here after all. To send any unexpected guests back through the veil before they realized what happened to them.

Drace held his breath as the noise grew louder, then breathed a sigh of relief when a lone wolf made his way from the trees and headed toward the water. He didn't see the body until the wolf bent his head to sniff the dirty mop of light-colored hair.

"Damn it!" Drace cut his way through the water. "Why does this shit always happen in our neck of the woods? Rescue workers will be all over the place again." He glanced over at Griffin. "You know how hard it is to keep the veil strong this time of year, let alone trying to keep it up with a shitload of people wandering around." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Now what the hell do we do? We do *not* need a search party up here." He felt the overwhelming urge to hit Griffin when he just shrugged. Instead, he shooed the wolf away with a growl and glanced down at the body lying prone on the shore.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and be able to patch this

one up and send him on his way before anyone realizes he's gone." He looked over Drace's shoulder. "Is he even alive?"

Kneeling down, Drace rolled the body over. "Stop being such a fucking optimist. It's making me sick." He reached down to feel for a pulse. "It's a woman." He brushed the wet strands of hair and mud from her face. "She's damn lucky this net didn't pull her to the bottom." He disentangled an old slime-covered fishing net from her head and neck. "She's just unconscious. Not to mention beautiful, if what I see under all this muck is anything to go by. She took quite a beating, too. *Someone* will be searching for her. You can count on it." After finding a steady heartbeat, he did a quick inventory of her injuries. Scratches and mud marred her face, neck, arms and legs. "She looks like hell."

"At least she was smart enough to kick off her shoes and pants when she fell in the water." Griffin said over his shoulder. "That's underwear, not a swimming suit."

Drace couldn't help but see the curling hair through the thin, gauzy material. His cock bucked at the sight. Angry at himself for being aroused by a woman who needed his help, not his lust, he took his ire out on Griffin. "No shit, Sherlock. There's nothing like pointing out the obvious."

Griffin stepped back, holding his hands out to

his sides. "Just trying to help." He looked back down at the woman. "Do you think it's safe to move her?"

Drace nodded. "I don't sense any serious injuries." He ran his hands over her arms, torso and legs just to be sure. "It's safe." Drace sighed. "I'll carry her. You get the water. We're going to need it more than ever now." He glanced over his shoulder. "And don't forget our clothes."

Still naked, Drace picked up the woman and turned toward their home hidden in the trees. What the hell were they going to do with her? He snorted. Hell, he *knew* what to do with a woman. He just didn't know what to do with one while she was unconscious.

Carrying her back to the house wasn't an easy task. She wasn't heavy, but with every inhalation, every time he drew in her scent, something within him wound tighter. Through the dirt and muck, he still scented her. A knot formed in his stomach. It was almost like warm, silky fingers wrapped around his balls, tightening on his sac. Every step brought them closer to the house. Every moment made his balls ache as they never had before. What was it about this woman that affected him like this?

He looked down into her face. Even unconscious she was beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He could see that

through the wounds and bruises that marred her complexion. Wet, blonde hair framed her face. High cheekbones gave way to exotic, almond-shaped green eyes that blinked up at him and her full, moist lips made him think of hot nights and hotter sex.

“But I don’t want to marry him, Daddy. He’s twenty-seven years older than me.”

She shuddered, her body frigid to the touch. It worried him. Hypothermic after laying half in the water and mud for so long, her teeth chattered and he picked up his pace, running toward the house. It was only a matter of time before she realized he wasn’t her father and began to fight him. Soon she would warm, and with luck, she wouldn’t catch fever. But something told him she wouldn’t see him as himself for quite some time. In her delirium, she would most likely continue to see him as the man who’d obviously tried to force her to marry someone who must be close to twice her age.

He smiled grimly. He was probably close to ten times her age. But unlike a human, he didn’t look it. His shifter genes kept him young a lot longer than a human. And right now, the last thing he wanted was for her to wake and think him too old for her. No. That wouldn’t do. That wouldn’t do at all.

He took a little of her within him every time he

took a breath and the less that stood between him and her bed, the better. Drace glanced over at Griffin, unable to miss the hard-on the other man sported. It most likely resembled his own. Damn! He needed to get laid and this waterlogged and frozen bit of fluff wasn't helping matters at all. What he needed was to get her back to the house and get himself back to the river for another dip in the icy water.

* * * *

"Go get some cloths to wipe her down with and warm some of that water. Don't make it too hot. We need to warm her slowly."

Griffin dropped their clothes and the soggy backpack at his feet and hurried to the stove. Lighting the burner, he set the last of their water to heat while he searched for some clean cloths. It was a good thing they'd just gotten here. The ratio of clean versus dirty would have leaned a lot more toward the latter if they'd been here a while.

"Got them." He dipped a few of them in the lukewarm water and rushed to Drace's side. "What the hell?" he muttered when he pressed his fingers against her flesh. "Is that normal? Should she be so cold?"

"Of course it isn't. Not for a human. We need to get her clean and dry so she'll warm up." Drace

grabbed his knife from its sheath, cut her shirt from her and released her front clasp bra.

Griffin's mouth went dry at the sight of her large, creamy breasts. His cock bucked and he turned to put on his pants. He couldn't bear to stand naked in such close proximity to such a stunningly beautiful woman. His body merely reacted the way it usually did when he found a woman in his best friend's bed. His mind knew he had no business lusting over a half-drowned waif.

Get a grip. She's not here for your pleasure. Damn shame that. He sighed and moved to join Drace who already had her partially cleaned up. Dark blonde lashes made shadowy crescents on her cheeks. Her full lips looked red against her pale face and he couldn't stop himself from wondering what they would feel like wrapped around his shaft. His cock jerked inside his jeans and he berated himself for not having better control over his wandering thoughts.

Heading back to the stove to get the water, he stopped by the cooler for a couple of beers. They needed something to cool them down. Hell, he may decide to pour it over himself instead of drink it. Grabbing two bottles of beer and the pan of water, he strode over to join Drace. "Here." He handed Drace the bottle. "I'm still trying to decide whether to drink it or wear it."

Drace smiled. "It's not a bad idea, but it would

be a hell of a waste of good alcohol."

Griffin grunted his agreement and, kneeling down next to the other man, dipped a cloth in the pan of warm water and began to help Drace clean up the woman. "What do you suppose she was doing out there?"

Shrugging, Drace ran a dry cloth up the leg he'd just wiped off. "She's running from her father. Apparently, he wants her to marry an older man and she objects."

"Then we'd better keep our hands to ourselves." Griffin chuckled as he raised her head to wrap a dry towel around her filthy hair. "Anyone old enough for her to object to would still be younger than we are." Still, he knew they didn't look anywhere near their age. The girl would most likely think them in their early to mid thirties.

"Speak for yourself, dickhead. I fully expect to do everything in my power to get her into my bed. You can do whatever you want." Drace pulled the sheet up over her. "She's about as clean as we're going to get her without immersing her again." He made a face. "I don't think that's wise right now." He turned and headed toward the kitchen. "Don't we have some aspirin or something in here? I want to know where it is in case she develops a fever."

"I think we have some from the last time we

had a *visitor*. Nick brought it up the last time he was here." Nick, the second in command of their people and triad mate to their leader, visited often during the times when the veil was weak. In fact, the only reason they were here now was the state of the veil. In eight days, it would be at its most vulnerable. The last thing they needed was the distraction of a young, beautiful woman. Still, they would cope as they always did.

Drace grabbed a couple of the aspirins and a bottle of spring water. Shoving them into Griffin's hands, he headed for the door. "I have to get out of here before my head explodes. Get those down her throat and keep an eye on her. I'll be back in a little while."

Shrugging, Griffin accepted his task and headed back to the bed as the door slammed behind him. It was hard telling what Drace's problem was now. Maybe he needed to jack off or something. Hell, it wasn't a bad idea, but someone had to stay with their *guest*. He didn't dare leave her alone. Anything could happen, then he'd have not only Drace to answer to, but Adam Greer, Alpha of the pride. He didn't want anything to do with that.

* * * *

Aliana struggled to open her eyes. The lids

seemed so heavy. It was almost as though someone tied weights to her eyelashes! Groaning, she put her hand to her head. What happened? Moving was so painful, she limited herself to rubbing the one spot on her scalp that didn't hurt when she touched it.

Her last memory was of running blindly through the woods, trying to escape her father's men. Why did he want her to marry that creep? Didn't he know, didn't he care that the man's first two wives died under mysterious circumstances? Even *she* knew that.

Trying to sit up was almost impossible. The bed felt so soft and the blankets weighing her down so warm and comfortable, she almost didn't want to move. Years of self-discipline paid off. She would manage to gather her strength and move no matter what. Perhaps that was why her mother had insisted she read all of those self-help books and take so many self-defense courses. Perhaps she'd known that this day would come.

Stretching, she tested her muscles and tried to resign herself to the fact that her father's men had caught her. She'd given it her all, had ran until she nearly drowned herself in an effort to get away. It was nothing that should make her feel guilty. But she did. Remembering her mother's letter, she could almost hear the words.

You must do everything possible to escape him, Ali.

Nothing you can do or say will change his mind when he's made a decision. I begged him to stop this nonsense. I begged him to listen to reason. He can't see reason. His mind only focuses on business and what is good for profit. He's no longer the man he once was. I cannot cope with the monster he has become any longer. Please, take the money I've left you and run while you can.

Only there was no money. Her father had taken it and managed to hide it away in a bank somewhere. She had nothing, no one, to help her and now they'd captured her. The only thing left to her was marriage to a monster, death or finding another way to escape.

Finally gathering the courage to open her eyes and deal with her father's fury, she cracked one eyelid open and looked around. She rolled onto her side with a groan. Every muscle in her body ached. Where was she? Nothing looked familiar. Roughhewn walls reminded her of a rustic cabin. Colorful wool blankets hung from the ceiling to divide different sections of the room. They reminded her of the Native American blankets her mother bought on their last trip across the country six months ago. Her mother loved splashes of color all over the house and the blankets just seemed to fit the décor of the family room. They'd had so much fun together, both of them anxious to get home and tell of their wonderful time together.

But that was before her mother killed herself in an effort to escape her father's iron grip. How had he hidden what he was from them so well?

Blinking, she forced herself to remember where she was—in a strange cabin, with goodness knows who waiting for her to wake. Lifting her head, she took a look around. A small stove and sink in the corner only helped confirm the small interior and she knew, somehow, this was not one of her father's lodges. No, his cabins in the woods were more like ski resorts. The smallest had sixteen bedrooms. Whoever owned this had nothing to do with her father. She hoped.

Sitting up, she managed to muffle her surprised squeak when she found nothing but skin beneath the sheet and blanket that covered her. Who undressed her and why? Looking down at herself, she noticed the scratches and bruises that marred her flesh. Doing a quick inventory, she determined nothing was broken. She was just banged up a bit. Reaching up, Aliana pushed her hair from her face. Ugh. It was matted, with dried mud and twigs or something in it. Maybe that was why she was naked. Perhaps, she'd been filthy all over.

"It's good to see you're finally awake."

Ali jumped at the sound of the deep, male voice. A man peeked around one of the blankets that gave her some semblance of privacy. Holding the covers against her chest like a lifeline, she

glanced up into the strangest looking eyes she'd ever seen. Not many people had that strange cat-like yellow color. She'd bet her last dime on it. Golden hair framed his square face and fell just short of his broad shoulders. A light dusting of down, the same color as the hair on his head, made a narrow track to his hips, disappearing below the waistband of his jeans. She frowned, disappointed, when he turned toward the table and gave her a view of his back.

"My backpack!" Speaking of last dimes, everything she owned was in that bag. She frowned. Except her shoes. Did she really kick off her boots and pants in the water? How would she ever manage to replace them?

He glanced over his shoulder. "Your pack is fine. It's still a bit damp, but it's fine." Turning, he moved to push the curtain back a bit more and lean back against the backrest of a sturdy-looking chair.

Biting her lip, Ali looked down, unable to hold the man's unblinking stare. Nodding, she cleared her throat. "My... Where are my clothes?"

He smiled and pushed the blanket open a bit further. "I washed what you were wearing yesterday. Something told me you'd want them when you woke."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About thirty hours."

Holy cow! "Thirty hours?" No wonder her back ached and she had cottonmouth. She needed a drink of water to rinse the horrible taste from her mouth. But until she could figure out where she was, she'd stay put and let them think her incapable of running.

She peered around him, trying to figure out whether this was one of her father's men. Beyond the opening, she saw her blue lace bra and matching panties hanging from an indoor clothesline. She cast her gaze to the floor, her face burning with mortification. He'd washed her clothes and hung them up? In his house of all things! How long had he sat and stared at her most intimate clothing while she slept in his bed? Heck. The Earth may as well just open up and swallow her right now. She had no desire to ever look at the man again. It was too embarrassing! Where was that river she'd fallen into last night? She wanted to go drown herself in it. Now!

The man reached down and brushed his thumb over one of her burning cheeks. "There's no reason to be embarrassed. I have sisters and their things were all over the house all of the time." He winked.

As if *that* would help. Men! Did they think it was okay to hang a woman's under-things for all and sundry to see and stare at? Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. *Calm down, Ali. It's just one*

man. One man saw them, not the entire Army for cripes sake.

A door slammed and she jumped. Closing her eyes, she prayed it was the man's wife. But something told her he wasn't married. No man would have taken it upon himself to wash another woman's underwear if there was a wife hanging around. Not if he wanted to continue breathing anyway.

Gathering her courage, she managed to open her eyes just in time to see a gorgeous man with blue-black hair turn his back. He strode from the cabin, slamming the door behind him. What was wrong with him? *He* wasn't the one laying naked in a stranger's cabin with two drop-dead gorgeous members of the opposite sex hanging about. *She* was the one who should be storming out—with her clothes on, carrying her backpack. Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, she looked up at the remaining man and raised her brow.

Smiling, he turned and left the cabin. "Call out if you need my help. You're bound to be a bit weak."

Weak? Ha! She scorned the word and the condition. Weak was giving up without a fight. Weak was letting the strong oppress her. No. She wasn't weak. She would never allow it. She would struggle against this just as she would fight her father and the marriage he arranged until her

dying breath. She shuddered at the thought of Doug Hamill's groping hands on her. He would never touch her like that. She'd let them kill her first.

Standing, she held on to the wall for support until her dizziness passed. Then she slowly made her way to the things she needed to get dressed. Slipping into her panties, she couldn't help but feel grateful the man thought to wash them so they'd be clean for her. But it still didn't help her embarrassment. It was just a good thing she hadn't been on her cycle. That would have been mortifying.

After donning her bra, panties and blouse, she looked around for something to wear as pants. Even a towel she could wrap around herself as a skirt would have been welcome. Unfortunately, luck wasn't with her. She found nothing. She sighed. What she wouldn't give to have her backpack with her change of clothes and her cash with her. Where was her backpack? He'd said it was here. She sighed. It didn't matter. He'd said it was still wet.

Aliana thought about the handsome man and the other she'd only gotten a glimpse of. Both of them were built like construction workers or body builders. Their well-defined forms were enough to make her mouth go dry even with her current problems.

Grabbing a lap blanket off the back of the small sofa, she wrapped it around her waist, then sat down and rested her head in her hands. How could she be so tired from such little activity and how could she be so attracted to two men she'd just met? She didn't even know their names. What was wrong with her? Why did she still feel so drained? Everything was mind over matter. Everything. And if she didn't mind, why should it matter?

Aliana sat still for a minute, willing her strength to return. She refused to succumb to this weakness. She had to get up, get dressed—even if she had to borrow something—and get the heck out of here. The longer she stayed here, the more chance there was of her father and his men finding her. She couldn't allow it. And she couldn't allow her troubles to burden these two men. If she stayed here, she would only manage to drag them down with her. She could never live with herself if they died because of her.

* * * *

Drace slammed out of the cabin and started down the path toward the river. He had to get out of there. The scent of the woman's fear and slight arousal was driving him mad. His other self wanted nothing more than to pounce on her,

nuzzle her breasts and lap the sweet cream from between her slim thighs. He hungered for her in a way he'd never hungered for another.

What had come over him? Women didn't affect him like this. They relieved his sexual tension, nurtured his sometimes immature need for a woman's tender ministrations, but he never needed them. Never.

Reaching down, he rubbed his cock. It was as hard as a baseball bat in his pants. He grinned. Well, he sure had some wood. Stopping, he rested on a fallen log, unzipped his jeans and released his cock. This wasn't the first time he'd attempted to relieve himself since they'd found the woman lying in the river and it probably wouldn't be his last.

He grasped his shaft in his hand, moving his fist close to the head. His thumb caressed the crown as he slid his hand up and down the length while he fondled his balls with the other. Drace pictured the woman. The way she looked as she lay in his bed naked. Her soft breasts rose and fell with each breath, their rosy tips beckoning him to lean down and suckle the pert tips.

His stomach clenched and the muscles in his thighs tightened as he imagined sinking into her tight sheathe. How would she feel? Drace knew she would be wet. He could smell her arousal from just looking at them. She was sensual and

erotic. Everything he'd ever wanted in a woman. But she was human.

Nothing would stop him from enjoying her, but he could never marry her. Like every human, she would never understand what they were.

As he continued to pleasure himself, he imagined her body beneath him, soft and pliant. A familiar tingling began in his lower back, wrapping itself around his balls like tiny tongues licking him. The sac drew tight, pulling them up against his body. He threw his head back and reached for his orgasm. Drace imagined her soft body against him, her fingers and lips closing around him as she licked and nibbled his shaft, moved him closer and closer to the edge. He concentrated on her green eyes looking up into his, her lips caressing his skin. His imagination carried him over. And his hand moved faster, sliding over his cock as thick jets of semen shot into the air.

Biting back a groan of pleasure, he took a few deep breaths, taking a few moments to enjoy the sensation, before he tucked himself back into his pants. Goddess knew how long his peace would last. It had only been a few hours since the last time he'd sought release. Griffin was having the same problem. What did it mean? She couldn't be their mate. She was human.

Standing, he fastened his jeans and made his

way to the river. If she'd found her way into Paradise through the water, others could. It was obvious the veil was very thin here. They couldn't afford for anyone else to find their way beyond the veil. This was their side—their haven.

Shifters roamed free here. Shifting or using their magic at will wasn't an option on the outside, but there was nothing to stop them here. That was why their people decided to create Paradise, to move their town to the other side of the veil where they would always be safe. He'd heard a few other clans had done the same, but like Paradise, they were well-hidden. A movement in the brush caught his attention and he moved toward the river for a closer look.

Two armed men and a dog moved on the other side. Were they looking for his guest? It was very likely. After all, she'd been here too long already. They couldn't hope to keep hidden here forever. There was only one way to find out. Ducking behind a large tree, he concentrated on changing into one of his other selves. He couldn't use the cat. The men would shoot him at the first opportunity. Concentrating, he changed into a raven, spread his wings and took flight.

Chapter 2

The air was light, the breeze carrying him silently over the two men. A tree loomed near and he landed on the closest branch and leaned down to listen.

“Where do you think she’s gone?”

“What the hell do I look like, Reese, a fucking fortuneteller?” The man, wearing an Army ball cap, pushed his hat back and scowled. “All I know, is I want us to be the men who find the little bitch.” He grinned. “She’s a real pretty piece of ass. And I want my turn with her before we take her back to her old man.”

Drace narrowed his eyes. He’d be the first one to die if they found the cabin. He wasn’t perfect, had even used a few women for pleasure now and again, but he’d never taken a woman by force. He couldn’t imagine ever doing such a thing. Women, like the one in his cabin, were to be protected, taken care of, loved and cherished.

Reese laughed. “I know you want your turn.

Can I have sloppy seconds?"

A breeze rustled the leaves and brought the scent of a big cat to him. *Stay away from here, Griffin. They're armed and they don't look like they'd show any reluctance in shooting you if you show yourself.*

A short cough made its way through the brush and the men stiffened.

"What was that?" Reese raised his rifle to his shoulder.

"It sounded like a mountain lion or something."

Or something, you ball cap wearing prick. Drace watched them, waiting for an opportunity to strike if needed. He glanced over at Griffin. *I mean it. Stay away from them. Go back to the cabin and make sure there aren't more of these assholes wandering around. Get someone else up here to watch the gate while you're at it. We have to get the girl out of here.*

Griffin lifted his lip in acknowledgement and turned to leave. Underbrush shifted as he moved through it. One of the men lifted his gun to his shoulder and took aim.

Their drawing down on you!

Griffin immediately dove to the ground.

Drace flew from his perch and dive-bombed the two men. Plummeting down, he scratched their scalps and immediately disappeared into the trees, then landed on a high branch where he could see without being seen. *I hope you took that opportunity to get the hell out of here, you idiot.*

Silence greeted him and a knot began to form in his gut. They hadn't shot him, but that didn't mean they hadn't found another way to bring his friend down. *Griff?*

Leave me be for a minute. I'm trying to figure out if I should thank you or tell you to fuck off for calling me an idiot.

Relief flooded through Drace at the sound of Griffin's voice. *Just get back to the cabin where I know the two of you are safe. I have an advantage over you here.*

Yeah. I know. I wish I could shift into whatever animal I want. You've always been the lucky one.

Drace shook his head. Leave it to Griffin to try to make him feel better. The man knew he'd often wished he were a true part of the clan. Sure, the leader welcomed him, but there was just something to be said of knowing you weren't the last of your kind. He may be a shifter, but he wasn't like the rest of the people in Paradise. Sometimes he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be around others with the same abilities. Perhaps he would never know.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. We have to figure out a way to get rid of these two assholes. Where did they come through? We need to find out so we can thicken the veil. Jesus, Drace, we've been so caught up with that female in our cabin that we haven't been doing our job. It's hard telling how many others will get through. We can't strengthen the veil now. It will have to wait

for others to arrive while we protect Aliana.

You know I hate it when you're right. Drace sighed and looked around.

Join the fucking club.

They waited until the men went back to the river. It was only a matter of time before they found the spot where the girl came ashore. Then what? It was broad daylight. They'd be able to follow their tracks straight back to the cabin...and their guest.

Making their way back to the cottage, they walked in and caught their young visitor on the floor, her ass in the air, reaching under the couch where Griffin stored her backpack.

"I see you've found your backpack. It got soaked the other day. Everything is probably ruined."

She sat up so quickly, banging her head on the wood on the bottom of the sofa. He winced, sure that had hurt like a bitch. She looked up at him, her face red.

"I'm sorry. I remembered one of you telling me that it was here. I thought I'd start my search in this room and if I didn't find it, I'd ask. I wouldn't have invaded your privacy."

It wouldn't have mattered if she had. She wouldn't have found anything.

She licked her lips, her gaze darting back to the bag still beneath the furniture. "Do you mind?"

* * * *

"Of course not." Griffin strode over, picked up the couch by one end and held it out of her way so she could retrieve her property. "Better?"

She nodded, her face still red.

Griffin couldn't help but smile. She looked so fragile, so young and oh, so beautiful with her flushed cheeks and full, moist lips. He'd bet she had no idea how sexy she looked, especially when she licked those delicious looking lips and nervously ran her fingers through her hair.

She stuck out her hand. "I'm Aliana Maddock."

Warmth radiated up his arm when he took her hand in his. Small electric shocks coursed through him, raising his temperature and causing the hair on his arms to stand on end. No one had ever caused such a reaction in him. Ever. "It's nice to meet you, Aliana. That's a beautiful name. Allow me to introduce myself and my companion. Griffin Bedard at your service, ma'am." He bowed low, giving her the gallant treatment women throughout his exceptionally long life seemed to enjoy. "It is my pleasure to meet you, though we could wish it was under better circumstances." Drace moved up next to him and also bowed. "This is my best friend Dracen Giacomo." He grinned. "Don't worry. He doesn't bite."

Suddenly, she did the impossible and managed to get even redder than she was before. "I..." She licked her lips again. "I can't stay here. I have to leave." She sounded a bit desperate.

"Of course. We'll take you down the hill as soon as you're ready." Drace looked pointedly at her feet and raised his brow.

Griffin knew she'd never be ready with no shoes. But he also knew they couldn't stay here. Not with her father's henchmen so close on her heels. "I don't suppose you have a pair of shoes in your pack?"

She bit her lip. "As a matter of fact, I do. They aren't hiking boots though. They're just little white tennis shoes." She opened the bag and pulled them out, along with a pair of jeans. "At least they'll protect my feet."

That's just about all they'd do. They certainly wouldn't help her keep her feet on the uneven trail. The slick soles were more likely to have her slipping and sliding down the hill to town. Griffin made his way to his bunk, grabbed up his hunting knife and stuck it into his boot. Drace did the same while they waited for her to slip into her pants and the little bits of rubber and cloth on her feet. When he thought a sufficient amount of time had passed to allow her to dress, he turned to face her. "Ready?"

She looked up at him, giving him a curt nod.

"Yes. I'm ready." She stopped with her hand on the door and turned. "Before we go out there, I think it's only fair to tell you that my father has some men looking for me." She held up her hand when he would have told her they already knew. "Just let me tell you." Taking a deep breath, she continued. "My dad isn't a nice man. In fact, I just found out he's a drug dealer and murderer. He's insisted I marry his best friend and business partner, a man much older than me." She paused, looking at the floor. "They'll kill to get me back. Please don't risk your lives. If they come for me, just let me go." Raising her head, she gazed at them both through haunted eyes. "I'll find a way to escape again. I'll have to."

She didn't tell them she feared for her own life. She didn't have to. It was written all over her face. If she knew what her father was and what he was up to, she was probably as good as dead.

They'll get her over my dead body. Hell, he may not know the woman, but he'd sacrifice himself before he'd see another woman forced into a marriage not of her choosing. The council and *Tudra* had done the same to his people too many times. Women should be taken care of, cherished. Their roles in life were as helpmeets and partners not chattel. He fisted his hands at his sides. No wonder they'd found her unconscious in the river and she'd slept for nearly thirty-six hours. The

woman was on the run and exhausted. "When was the last time you ate?" He grabbed her arm, bringing her up short.

"Yesterday, I think." Her brow furrowed. "How long was I unconscious again?"

Griffin sighed and Drace moved to their small kitchen to grab something from the cabinet.

"Here. Eat this." Drace shoved something into her hands. "We need to get moving before..."

"Before what?" Aliana unwrapped one of the granola bars he handed her and took a small bite. Her eyes widened when they just looked at her. The color washed from her face and she looked ready to faint. "They've found me already?"

Griffin grabbed her arm and pulled her through the doorway. "Of course they haven't found you." He growled. "Do you see anyone standing about out here waiting?" He pressed his lips together for a moment before continuing. "They're close. We saw them when we went to the river to bathe. They're looking for you. There's no doubt about it."

"What...what will you do with me?" Her eyes were round, her green irises looking like emeralds in her pale face.

"We'll get you down the mountain and see to your safety, of course," Drace said, leading the way.

Griffin followed, tuning his senses to hear

everything within a thirty-foot radius of their position.

"Why would you do that for me?" She looked genuinely confused and not a little hopeful.

"Because our people once forced our women to do things they abhorred. We finally ended the rein of those who would have continued the practice. We find your situation not unlike that of our own women not so long ago."

* * * *

Aliana couldn't believe her luck. If they could get her to a town with a sheriff who would help her, she'd be safe. How long had it been since she'd felt safe? Too long. It had been months since she'd managed to escape her father. She'd been living in the woods and caves trying to throw his men off her trail. Nothing seemed to work. They always managed to find her. It was almost as though they could smell her. "Where are you taking me?"

Drace glanced over his shoulder. "To Paradise. We'll notify the authorities that you're here and find you a place to stay."

"You can't!" Ali panicked. They couldn't notify the authorities. It was as good as inviting her father to send his men for her. "I won't go back with them." She grabbed his arm. "You have to know my father is a ruthless man. He'll stop at

nothing to get me under his thumb again.”

“Don’t worry.” Drace smiled and patted her hand. “Your father has no power where we come from.”

Griffin placed his hand at the small of her back. Somehow, feeling the warmth of their hands seeping through the material of her shirt comforted her. Still, she didn’t know how to convince them that what they were about to do was a dangerous thing. “You don’t understand—”

“We do,” Griffin interrupted. “We can protect you better in town. There are more of us.” He threw a glance over his shoulder. “We need to get you to town and come back here with backup. Usually, there are only two of us per cabin.” He shook his head and sighed. “Something tells me we’re going to need a bit more than that this year.” He glanced at Drace. “Figures. Why does this kind of shit always happen in our neck of the woods?”

What in the world was he talking about? He made it sound as though the cabin was some outpost designed for lookout purposes or something. She shivered and rubbed her hands on her arms. Maybe it was a good thing they were taking her to town. They’d both acted a bit strange since she’d awakened.

“How far is it?” she asked, noticing the packs they both carried. Hiking her own pack up onto

her shoulders, she patted the strap, glad she hadn't lost it. Without money, she'd have no way of getting away. The credit card her mother left her was still inside in her wallet right where she'd tucked it.

"By ourselves, we would have made it down the trail in one day." Griffin glanced at her and shrugged. "But with you along, we figure we should get there sometime tomorrow evening."

Tomorrow evening? Ali shivered again. That would mean she'd have to spend the night in the woods with two strangers. Of course, with these two, it wouldn't be a hardship. The two men were hot!

Four and a half hours later, Aliana sat on a fallen log and groaned. "I can't move another inch."

"We could carry you the rest of the way down." Drace grinned at her, flexing his biceps.

She tried not to notice how his muscles bulged and flexed beneath his shirt when he did that. It was an exercise in futility though. Shaking her head, she bent forward and scrubbed her face with her hands. "I'm sorry. My legs feel like rubber and my feet ache." Lifting her leg, she pulled her shoe off and massaged her aching foot. "Can we stop here for a while?"

Griffin glanced at Drace. "What do you think?"

"It looks like a good a place as any to make

camp."

"Camp?" Aliana looked up, alarmed. "We don't need to make camp. I only need to rest for a few minutes."

Drace knelt down in front of her and she had to fight the urge to take a deep breath. Why was she so tempted by their scent? Both of them. Her fingers stopped massaging her foot, but they didn't stop trembling. What was it about Drace that made her want to grab him by the hair and suck his tongue from his mouth? She felt a similar pull from Griffin, but it wasn't as strong as the feeling she got for Drace.

Frowning, Aliana slipped her shoe back on her foot and stood. "We can't stay here. I don't want my father's men to find me." She didn't add that she was afraid she'd jump into bed with one or both of them if she spent much more time with them. She could feel her nipples tightening to hard nubs and her sex wetting her panties just from their mixed scents. Closing her eyes, she tried to gather some semblance of control over her unruly emotions. She wanted these two men more than she'd ever wanted another man in her life! What had come over her? She didn't even know them.

Sighing, she spaced back and forth as they began to set up camp. One of them, she was pretty sure it was Griffin, had a small tent in his pack. They both set it up and glanced her way.

"I hope you don't mind sharing." Drace indicated the dead wood lying around. "Would you collect some firewood while we set up camp?"

Aliana did as he asked with her legs trembling. She wasn't sure if it was from fatigue or from nervousness. She'd only slept with one man before and that didn't turn out the way she'd hoped. He'd been a grasping brute out for nothing more than his own satisfaction. She didn't know what she'd do if these two men decided they wanted to do more than just sleep with her. Her mind knew better, but her body wanted the fantasy.

At least she'd known Jacob for a while before she'd had such thoughts about him. Reaching up, she swiped her arm across her forehead and brushed the perspiration from her face. One thing was sure, she needed a bath before she'd even think about letting them come close to her.

"Is there somewhere around here to wash?" she asked as soon as she returned to the area where they'd pitched the small tent. Dropping the third load of wood, she eyed the tent with longing. Still, she knew she smelled and couldn't contemplate getting even one step closer to the two hot guys.

Griffin looked up and jerked his head to the right. "Over there through the trees. But you should have one of us go with you."

"Uh, I don't think so." She started to walk in the direction he indicated, then turned and

glanced over her shoulder. "I want to bathe, not give a striptease. Just set up camp. I should be fine. It isn't far, is it?" She wasn't stupid. Nothing could ever make her so independent that she wanted to be too far away in case her father's men found them. "If I call, you'll come for me, won't you?"

"Of course we will." Drace glanced her way. "It's not that far through the woods, maybe thirty or forty yards at the most. We'll hear and come if you call."

That was a relief. The last thing she wanted was to act like one of those dumb blonde bimbos from a horror movie who was just too stupid to live. She wanted a little privacy, but not at the expense of her life. She had even contemplated letting one or both of them come with her if it meant keeping herself out of her father's clutches.

Aliana had absolutely no delusions of the trustworthiness of her father's men. They would use her well before they turned her over. She hadn't missed the covert looks and the way a few of them always seemed to undress her with their gazes, even with her father present.

After about two minutes, she found herself on the edge of the river. Was it the same one she'd nearly drowned in? It seemed likely. Perhaps she'd get lucky and find her shoes. Shaking off the inane thought, she slipped off her pack, started to

undress and throw her clothes into the frigid water. After thoroughly soaking them, she beat them against a fallen log, then rinsed them out. That would have to do. She wasn't feeling up to a more vigorous scrubbing. Gathering the small bar of soap from her pack, she stepped into the water and waded further into the river where the water would provide some cover and she could wash. She shivered convulsively as the freezing river closed over her skin. Her nipples pebbled almost painfully and she was determined to wash and get out as soon as possible. A twig snapped in the woods behind her and she turned with a gasp. Had they found her?

* * * *

Drace held his breath and cursed Griffin's big feet. *I thought you were a cat. Can't you be a bit more stealthy than that? I think the whole mountain heard you.* He'd changed into his raven self again and landed on a branch just above Aliana when she'd undressed. It had been difficult for him not to stare as she'd stripped naked, then washed her clothes before walking into the cold water. He watched as she turned with a shrug and began to bathe again.

Shut up, you prick. I'd like to see you never step on a stray branch lying on the forest floor with feet as big as

this. I'd love to be able to fly overhead, never having to worry about setting something or someone off.

Drace suppressed a grin. It hurt to try to smile with a beak. He just loved it when he could get a rise out of Griff. *Stop whining and start watching the woods. We don't want anything to take us by surprise.*

Griffin coughed and raised his lip, showing off his large feline teeth. *Just be sure that you're watching the woods as well and not our little guest.*

Drace shook his head. It had been difficult to look away when she'd undressed and washed her clothes. It had been impossible to look away when she'd waded farther in and her nipples pebbled to tight, diamond-hard nubs. He would have licked his lips if he had some. He longed to wrap his lips around the dusky tips, lave them with his tongue and gently bite and suckle until she mewled with desire.

Damn! They would have let her have her privacy if they hadn't feared for her safety. The last thing he wanted was to be the voyeur he was at the moment. Imagining her naked and ready was hard enough. Seeing her naked and, he swallowed thickly, rubbing that wonderfully scented soap over her breasts, was something else indeed. Her eyes were closed, almost as though she imagined a lover's touch as she soaped her breasts and lathered her hair.

Dunking her head beneath the water, she rinsed

the soap from her hair, then reached down below to soap more private areas. It didn't take long to see she was pleasuring herself with her hand below the water.

To hell with this, Griff. I'm going in. I can't stand this. If she screams rape, come rip me apart because I don't think I'll be able to stop myself if you don't. Flying down to the ground, he changed back into his human self. *I hope you don't mind that I'm approaching her first.*

I don't mind as long as you intend to share.

He intended to share. If he had his way, they'd have her naked and between them in no time. Still, she was human and not likely to be receptive to a triad bond so they would take it slowly. One at a time until she was comfortable with them and accepted them both.

Pausing, he shook his head. When had he begun to look at this as something more than it was? She could never be more to them than a bed partner. She was human. Even though he'd heard their leader, Adam Greer, had sanctioned mating with humans, it was nothing more than a rumor. That is, until he heard it from the man himself.

Still, it wouldn't stop either of them from sleeping with her. Her scent was intoxicating and her beauty was unrivaled. He'd never seen a more beautiful woman in or out of clothes.

Changing back into his human form, he

stripped on the bank, dropped his clothes in a heap and dove into the water. In his hurry to reach her, he made a rather loud splash. She opened her eyes and turned with a startled yelp. The look of arousal was still on her face. She'd been about to climax if his guess was right.

"What are you doing here?" She moved back, lowering herself so the water covered her shoulders. The clear liquid covered her breasts lightly, only accentuating her beautiful breasts as her nipples grew harder in the cool water.

"I came to check on you and saw..." He let his words trail off as he noticed her face turning red. "I just wanted to help."

"To help?" She splashed water at him and turned away. She walked a few steps, then turned back to glare at him. "To help me or yourself?"

"To help you, if you'll let me. I'll stop there if you don't want it to go any further." Yeah, he'd stop, but it would kill him. He only hoped she wouldn't want him to stop by the time he was done with her. Drace watched her swallow visibly. At least she was thinking about it. Any other woman would have probably slapped his face. But she was strong and brave. It was probably those qualities that drew him to her.

Reaching up, he cupped her face in his hands, leaned down and gazed deep into her eyes. "Say yes." She wanted to. He could see it in her eyes. In

the way her body trembled as he held her and in the warmth of her touch as she circled his wrists with her fingers.

His gut clenched at the contact. His body reacted as it always did when he touched or scented this particular female. He watched as she blinked slowly and licked her lips. Plump and moist, they practically begged to be kissed. His heart nearly pounded from his chest and his mouth went dry. Everything around them seemed to go silent. Even the insects and frogs didn't make a sound. It was as if the world held its breath, wondering what her answer would be. All he could think of, all he wanted to do, was slip inside her velvety softness and have her supple body welcome him home.

Trembling fingers slid down his arms and grasped his elbows as he leaned closer. Drace tilted her head back with his thumbs, stared into her eyes and touched his lips gently to hers. Tasting her hot, sinfully moist mouth was his undoing. He shifted, pressing himself closer. His hands slid over her shoulders and splayed possessively over her back. Hot, wet, silky skin slid beneath his fingers. The warm mineral water from the spring below mixed with the cool mountain stream and softened her already satiny skin.

His mouth trailed lower, over her neck. Licking

small droplets from her flesh, he could feel her heartbeat grow faster until it raced beneath his lips. This strange feeling he had frightened him. It was more than want, it was some all-consuming need. He had to have her. Now. Drace became dimly aware of her hands pushing against his chest.

"Please," she sobbed. "I can't. I'm not ready for this. I can't."

It was all he could do to pull away. Something inside him insisted, no, demanded he make her his. Frustrated more than he'd ever been before, Drace ran his fingers through his hair. It probably looked like hell. He'd barely had time to think since meeting this little minx, not to mention groom himself properly. Maybe that was why she'd pushed him away. If she'd waited just one more minute, he would have had his fingers buried deep in her sex. Then perhaps, she would have been unable to beg him to stop.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to bring his raging hormones under control. Hands on her shoulders, he held her steady for a few moments until she regained her senses. After releasing her, he made his way back to the bank and bent to pick up his discarded clothes. They lay scattered over the forest floor where he'd removed them while he rushed to her in the water.

Drace fisted the clothes in his hands. He refused

to put them on right away. He wanted a bath himself. He'd merely wait her out at the edge of the water until she finally finished and gathered the courage to step from the water to dry herself off. As much as he wanted to look, he would be a gentleman and turn his back. He smiled. Besides, he'd already seen every one of her luscious curves. Sitting on a huge flat rock, he laid back to wait until she finished.

Meanwhile, he thought with a grin as he brought his knee up and turned slightly toward the water, he'd relax here on the rock near the shoreline and let her look. Drace fought his grin widening as he watched her through his lashes. Good. She was staring at him. Let her look. Let her see exactly what he had to offer her. He reached down and caressed his still hard cock. Sooner or later, she would allow her more sensual nature to prevail and then he would have her right where he wanted her — flat on her back and screaming his name.

Chapter 3

Padding to the edge of the water, Griffin changed into his human form and watched the two with interest. If Drace couldn't get to her, no one could. The man was notorious for his conquests. Not one single woman in the village remained untouched after he'd arrived. It was almost amusing the way the women seemed to fall at his feet. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so damned irritating. Even he knew that Drace's tall, dark good looks were a favorite with the ladies.

She'd surprised him by pushing Drace away in less than a minute. The kiss they shared looked hot. It even stirred his loins. He reached down and shifted himself in his pants. Damn she was hot! He wanted her as much, if not more, than Drace. How in the hell could they convince her to sleep with the both of them when Drace failed to take her alone?

Griffin watched as she stared at Drace when he

rested on a rock on the shore. Her face was filled with desire. There was no hiding it with this one. She wore her moods like clothing.

Sighing, he returned to his patrol around the camp. The last thing they needed was someone sneaking up on them. Still, he couldn't help his gaze returning to Aliana as she finished her bath. He'd bet she had no idea how beautiful she was, washing that long hair, with her breasts rising just above the water to show glimpses of her dusky nipples.

Just once, he'd like to see her look toward him the way she watched Drace. The wistful expression on her face as she watched his friend almost made him jealous. Almost. If he didn't know that Drace would share, he might consider fighting for her. He may still have considered it if he hadn't seen the way she'd looked at him as well. She wanted them both and probably felt slutty for it. He grinned. That indecision would serve them well. They both wanted her together. Griffin couldn't remember a time when they hadn't shared a woman. Though it had happened, he was sure of it. But after a few hundred years of sharing and feeling the euphoria that accompanied sharing a lover, he couldn't imagine it any other way. He didn't want to either.

He'd heard Adam Greer, leader of the clan, talking about taking humans for mates. He'd said

it was possible, the only thing holding them back was finding human women with strong enough hearts and minds to implement his plan. He glanced out at Aliana again and grinned. "Something wrong?" She was glaring at him and he couldn't help but smile as she stood with her hands belatedly covering her breasts.

"Stop looking at me. I'm going to get out of the water now. Can I have some privacy?"

He looked away with a chuckle. She wouldn't worry about him looking now if she could have seen herself earlier when she had soap in her eyes.

* * * *

Aliana tried not to let them know she watched them. Males! The term was synonymous with *sexist pig* and *big pain in the ass*. When they weren't watching her, they were playing with themselves. She couldn't believe she'd fallen into the same trap herself. Self-gratification was the last thing on her mind when she'd walked into this stream. Hell, she couldn't help it if those two men were so drop-dead gorgeous it made her fingernails sweat!

Biting her lip, she tried to keep an eye on them both as she strode from the water. They didn't appear to be looking, but everyone knew how sneaky a horny male could be.

She wanted to give in to Drace, but she wanted

Griffin, too, and until she could choose between them, she'd have to abstain. The last thing she wanted was a reputation for having loose morals. Still, she couldn't help but wonder how she would feel in a few days if her father caught up to her. Though, if she had a lousy reputation for liking and engaging in kinky sex, maybe her *affianced* wouldn't want anything to do with her anymore.

It was worth a thought.

She grabbed the towel one of the men had thoughtfully set next on a rock next to her wet clothes and dried herself off. After wiping the excess water from her skin, she wrapped the towel around her hair and picked up a large, obviously male, shirt and slipped it on over her head. They were thoughtful. She'd give them that. They'd provided more for her emotionally and physically over the last day or so than her father had her entire life. He couldn't be bothered with things that didn't involve business. Perhaps that was how she'd ended up as one of his perceived assets. He had to take care of her now that her mother was gone so he'd traded her off like part of his inventory.

A cool breeze came down from the top of the mountain and she wondered how far they'd walked before the two guys had decided to make camp. She glanced back to the river just in time to see Drace rise and dive back in. He needed that

cool bath. His hard-on was still as big as ever. Aliana looked over her shoulder to see what Griffin was up to. He still sat on the log, looking alert, but his gaze also kept returning to her. He winked at her for the third time and she looked away, a blush heating her cheeks.

Aliana stopped short when they returned to camp. How would they all sleep in that dinky little tent? They'd said something about security while they slept, but it all sounded Greek to her so she had no idea how they planned to keep the camp safe. She *did* know that they both intended to sleep in the tent with her. They'd worked out the logistics on the way down the mountain. Her being the only female and being between them made a certain sense but she didn't know these guys!

Besides, how in the world was she going to be able to sleep with two hot men on either side of her? It would be too much like a sex sandwich. While not totally abhorrent, she still didn't know what to do. How could she give in and allow something like that to happen when she didn't even know who these two men were? She sighed. It was so tempting just to walk over to Griffin, grab him by the ears and kiss his socks off.

The sun had grown lower in the sky while she bathed and she was tired. There would be no fire because the two men didn't want to give their

position away. So, she assumed, there wouldn't be much to eat either. Perhaps it was just better if she crawled into the already-pitched tent and went to sleep. She was exhausted anyway. Then she wouldn't have to think about giving herself to the two men. She'd be asleep and, as thoughtful as they'd been, she couldn't see them waking her when they finally settled down to sleep. Not on purpose, anyway.

Aliana woke with a startled gasp. "What...?"

"Shh. Dinner is ready and you should eat. We would have let you sleep, but you've gone too long without eating already. You can't count two granola bars. They're empty calories." Drace held out his hand. "Come on. You have to eat."

"I didn't think there would be much of anything with no fire."

"We can still cook. Griff and I have several cans of chafing fuel. They're good to cook on in a pinch." He glanced back over his shoulder. "We have canned beef stew and bread."

"Oh."

Her stomach grumbled and he smiled. "I knew you were hungry."

Hungry? She was starving. She'd barely eaten since she'd been on the run from her father and his men. And most of what she'd had was cold and pulled from the trail. She'd begun to hate the raw potato-like roots she'd pulled from the banks of

rivers and the pine needle tea she'd brewed the couple of times she'd risked a fire tasted like shit. But it had kept her alive.

"I'm sorry it's not something better." He pulled her from the tent when she'd put her hand in his.

"Beef stew sounds heavenly. Believe me, after what I've eaten in the last few weeks, beef stew and bread sounds like a feast." She let him lead her to Griffin who held out a plate filled with the wonderful smelling stew and a slice of bread.

"There's more bread if you want." He waited for her to sit, then handed her the plate. It was all she could do to keep herself from digging into the food like some half-starved animal. Instead, she spooned a bite into her mouth and closed her eyes. It was wonderfully warm and tasty. She managed to eat it somewhat slowly, savoring every bite. After the slice of bread and half the plate was gone, she was stuffed. She held the plate toward Griffin.

"More?" he asked, ready to spoon more on her plate.

"No." She shook her head. "I'm full. I don't know what to do with the rest."

"Hand it to Drace. He'll eat it. I've never seen anyone who could put more away than he can."

Drace held out his hand. "I'll take it if you're sure you can't eat more." He shot Griffin a glare. "And not because I want to eat it. You didn't eat

much. Are you sure you can't eat more?"

She covered her stomach and nodded. "If I eat any more I'll be sick. I haven't had much to eat over the last several weeks."

"And it shows." Drace frowned and took her plate. "You'll eat more while we're with you. There's no reason for you to run anymore. You can stay with us for a while if you want." He held up a hand before she could answer. "No demands."

No demands. Why couldn't he have said she could stay if she slept with them? If they'd given her that ultimatum, it would have taken her reasons to keep to herself away from them. But no, they just had to be gallant. She sighed and closed her eyes. She didn't want to seem loose, but she wanted both of these men more than she'd ever wanted anyone in her life. It was just too bad she couldn't keep them.

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Drace watched Aliana as she gazed between them and wondered what she was thinking. Too bad he and Griffin had vowed not to read the thoughts of others because it was a breach of their privacy.

Her hair tumbled over her shoulders in tangled waves. She must have fallen asleep while it was still wet. Her startling green eyes looked up at him

filled with something he was sure was desire. She had the same expression on her face when she looked at Griff. Could it be that easy? Could she want them both and didn't know how to choose between them?

His shirt that she wore came down to just above her knees. The creamy white skin on her legs was still marred by the small bruises and scratches she'd gotten from her battle with the river the other night. Her delicate feet, wrapped in those silly little shoes, were barely protected from the dangers of the forest. Still, she'd slipped them back on and wore them to bed. He smiled. He'd remove them when they joined her. For now, he'd let her get back to sleep.

She was tired. The circles under her eyes attested to that. And she'd been hungry. It would have taken a lot more restraint on her part to hide the fact that she'd practically wanted to bathe in that stew.

He looked down at her plate, suddenly without an appetite. That hadn't happened in years. His physiology was such that he could eat ten, maybe twenty, times more than the average shifter. He rarely ever got enough to eat. That was why he carried granola bars with him everywhere. The last time he'd felt this way, he'd lost his mother.

Sighing, he carried their plates through the darkness to the river to wash them. Whatever his

problem was, the answer lay with the woman in their tent. He was afraid he knew. After washing the dishes, he returned to sit with Griffin in the darkness. "I see you set the safeguards."

"Yep." Griffin leaned back and crossed his legs. "I don't want to take any chances with her safety."

"Me either. What do you think?" Drace gestured toward the tent. "Did she have enough to eat?"

"Hell no. She's been starving for a while. That much is obvious." Griffin growled. "I'd love to get my hands on her father. The man has no business trying to force her into marriage."

"But if he hadn't, she wouldn't be here now."

"True." Griffin glanced toward the sleeping woman. "She wants you, you know."

"She wants you, too." Drace sighed. "She's determined to choose between us. Given enough time she may be able to." That was the last thing either of them wanted.

"Then maybe we shouldn't give her any more time." Griffin stood and took off his shirt. "We don't want her to want just one of us, do we?" He glanced at Drace. "You want an arrangement like Adam and Nick have, don't you?"

Drace sighed. "You know I do. I just don't know if I can mate with a human. You know you can mate with her. You're a cat like the rest. I'm something altogether different. Hell, Griff. I don't

even know what my base form is."

"I also know the scientists said *any* shifter can mate with a human. Human DNA is less dominant." He removed his shoes and pants. "What are you waiting for? Let's go make her ours before she can get away."

"I hope you're right about this," Drace said, removing his clothing. "The last thing I want is for her to wake up and run away screaming."

Griffin held the tent flap back. "I don't think there's a chance of that happening." He crawled inside and waited for Drace to join him. *An Aliana sandwich. Mmm... Doesn't that sound good?*

Sounds just delicious to me. He glanced over at her. Immediately mesmerized by the beautiful woman before him, he remained still. Taking a deep breath, he breathed in her wonderful scent. The scent of her soap and her arousal.

Reaching down, he rubbed his shaft through his underwear. What the hell were they going to do? Just wake her up and inform her they were going to fuck her brains out? That would be just this side of rape.

We can't do this, Griff. What if she thinks she has no choice? We can't let her think we intend to take her whether she wants it or not.

Drace wasn't sure Griffin even heard him. His expression was tight, filled with the unrequited passion he knew they both felt. It had practically

killed them to have this woman in the same house with them. How in the world would they ever handle being in the same tent, basically the same bed?

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Griffin finally glanced up at Drace. *Hell, I can't hardly think anymore. I can barely function. Jerking off does nothing for me. My head is filled with nothing but thoughts of her and how my cock would feel buried deep in her sex.*

Let me try to enter her dreams. I can't read her thoughts awake. I tried to earlier while we ate. I wanted to know if she was capable of accepting us. Don't worry. I remember our vow, he added at Griffin's sharp look. Perhaps I'll have a better chance asleep. If I didn't know better...

If you didn't know better, what?

I'd think she was a shifter herself. I haven't been able to read her like other humans. Have you? Drace frowned down at Aliana. She was so beautiful lying there with her hands beneath her cheeks, her blonde hair tousled, her full lips moist. She'd just licked them. What was she thinking with her cheek flushed and her channel filling with her sweet cream? He could smell her growing arousal. She's dreaming of someone or something who excites her. He took a deep breath. Can't you smell her arousal?

Nodding, Griffin moved to lie down next to her. His gaze devoured her. His eyes filled with desire. It was obvious for anyone willing to look that the other man worshipped the ground where she lay. *Cross the threshold into her dreams and see if she dreams of only one or both of us.* He glanced up, his expression bleak. *You know if she dreams only of me, I cannot accept her without you.*

As I cannot without you. Pray she dreams of us both.

At Griffin's nod, Drace lowered himself on Aliana's other side and concentrated on her thoughts. He'd never had such difficulty entering another's thoughts before. Even most other shifters were like an open book to him. Why would she be different? Relaxing, he concentrated on the center of his forehead. Visualizing the center of Aliana's, he imagined himself leaving through his *third eye* and entering hers.

It was dark. Fog-like ethereal mist surrounded him. In the distance, he heard a low moan. Turning in a circle, he tried to find direction. Where did the sound come from?

Another moan gave him a course to bear. As he walked toward the muffled sound, his feet moved from soft pine needles to concrete, to carpet. He soon found himself in a room he'd never seen before.

Lit with scented candles and lined with sheets

of white, the room seemed almost otherworldly. A subtle breeze blew through the room, the white cloth billowing out. It brushed his skin like silky fingers as he passed, following the soft sounds that led him here.

The way seemed almost endless. The sounds he could hear had his heart pumping and his blood surging through his veins. He could only hope to find what he wanted in this strange place her mind had concocted. After rounding a corner, he stopped in his tracks. A huge bed sat in front of him and on it were three people. He swallowed thickly as he recognized himself, Griff and Aliana in a tangle of arms and legs.

Keeping himself on the sidelines, he watched for a moment as both he and Griffin suckled the tips of her breasts. Looking up with lust-glazed eyes, she gasped as Griffin thrust his fingers inside her while his double's fingers circled her clit.

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The shirt they'd left for Aliana to wear rode up, exposing her thighs and stomach. It was unusually warm in the tent due to the spell he'd cast earlier and she'd managed to kick the sheet from their makeshift bed. Griffin was enjoying the view when Drace sat up with a gasp. "What the hell? Are you *trying* to wake her?" Even his whisper

seemed loud in the shadows.

She's dreaming of us. Swallowing, Drace took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before releasing it slowly. It was obvious what Drace had seen was at least as hot as what he could imagine doing with the lovely woman he'd so quickly become enamored with.

Aliana made him harder than any woman ever had. He ached with the need for release, his balls drawn up tight. Griffin had the nearly overwhelming urge to reach down and pull himself from his shorts, but he refrained. He had to keep himself under control. Aliana still hadn't agreed to mate with them. Even if she only agreed to have sex with them once, it was still her choice. But that didn't mean they couldn't do everything in their power to convince her to stay with them.

He conveniently dismissed the fact that he'd thought of her as mate material and instead, concentrated on how to wake her to their best advantage. He lowered himself to her side and placed his right hand on her stomach. The smooth skin quivered a bit before she sighed and shifted. Drace, following his example, rested his left hand just above her hip. Groaning aloud, she shifted, splaying her legs wide.

It was all he could do to keep himself from her as her scent wafted up, making his cock jerk. Looking down the length of her torso, he

wondered how many pairs of underwear she carried in her pack. The filmy white lace barely covered her, showing the darker triangle at the apex of her thighs.

How do we wake her?

Like this, Drace replied as he leaned down and covered her lips with his.

She returned the kiss, her hand trailing up over her breast to tangle in Drace's hair. Her hips undulated on the sleeping bag, rolling up toward him as though begging for his attention. Instead, he leaned down and placed his lips against her throat and suckled. Griffin knew the exact moment when she came awake.

Her body stiffened and she let out a little squeak of surprise. She pulled her lips from Drace's. "What..." Quickly sitting up, she scrambled away from them. Cornering herself, she drew her legs up, hugging them to her chest. "What do you think you're doing?"

Was it fear, desire or outrage he heard in her voice? He waited for the telltale signs that she didn't appreciate their advances. There seemed to be no obvious outrage. She didn't wipe her mouth or her neck. She merely sat and stared at them through large, luminous eyes that said more about how much she enjoyed what they'd done.

Her lips still glistened from Drace's kiss. Blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders in sexy disarray.

Her startling green gaze darted between them as though she was trying to decide which of them to trust.

"I know this will sound totally unbelievable to you, but I know what you were dreaming, Aliana." Drace leaned back, making himself appear more vulnerable. Griffin followed suit. She was scared and they needed to make sure she understood they wouldn't harm her.

"Yeah, right." She tried to laugh but it came out more like a nervous cough. She pulled the shirt down over her, trying to cover herself as much as possible. "I should have known better. I suppose you really work for my dad, too, don't you?"

"No." Drace shook his head. "We don't work for your father. I'm what our people call a *Dreamrider*. I can enter another person's dreams and see their innermost desires."

Her face glowing red, Aliana interrupted, "Or their nightmares." She frowned. "If what you say is true, how would you know the difference?"

Chapter 4

How *could* they know the difference? If what they said was even true. Her mother had told her of people with special powers who lived in a place that wasn't a place through a gate that wasn't a gate. Whatever *that* meant. Aliana had always assumed they were fairy tales though her mother always swore the stories were true.

Could she, by some strange twist of fate, have found the people who her mother said were invincible? She glanced at the two men before her and almost laughed aloud. She would have if she wasn't sitting in a tent with two half naked men, wondering if she'd get out with her life, never mind her virtue.

Her mother always told her the men had honor that ruled them above all else. She glanced between the two men she traveled with. If they had such honor, where the hell was it while she'd been sleeping?

"I'm sorry, Aliana. We never meant to make

you do something you didn't want to do."

She watched as he folded his arms beneath his head.

"After I entered your dreams and saw that you dreamed of Griffin and I pleasuring you, I thought it was what you wanted whether you would admit it to yourself or not."

"That's why they're *my* dreams. I can't help what I dream. I have no idea I'm going to dream them, let alone control what's happening in them. Perhaps that was a nightmare for me." Aliana felt a little twinge of guilt at that last remark. She'd enjoyed herself in her dream. She just never expected it to come true. Her mother's words had also come to her in her dream.

Don't let the conventions of others keep you from happiness, love. Two is always better than one and, in case I didn't prepare you well enough, there are things on this Earth that can't always be explained. Keep this in mind when you get to know your new friends. They will protect you and care for you as no other ever could and, though they may be loathe to admit it so soon, they love you more than life itself. Accept their help and, in turn, give them what they need of you. Believe me, my darling, you will find there are many things that are hard to explain. We are one of them.

Aliana had watched as her mother's skin turned an iridescent purple before she disappeared. What had that meant? Had her mother come to her in that dream to tell her it was

all right to act on her unnatural attraction to these two men?

At least she knew they both wanted her now. A thrill of both fear and desire slid down her spine at the thought that they both wanted her. Together. Should she give in to her temptation? The thought was absurd, but maybe she would be safer with them just because she was positive Doug Hamill would turn his nose up at another man's leavings. She didn't know how she knew that, but it struck her with a certainty she'd never had before. Doug Hamill would not want to take her as wife knowing she'd willingly lain with two men at the same time. The thought was rather freeing.

Squaring her shoulders, she lowered her legs and moved forward. Literally. Somehow she knew that taking this step would take her so far from her father's clutches that he would never come near her again. He could try, but she knew by looking into these two men's eyes that he would never succeed.

"I don't believe I'm doing this." She nervously licked her lips, then pulled the shirt off over her head. Her nipples pebbled when the warm air kissed them. Goose flesh rose on her skin and she glanced between the two men she was about to accept into her life. "Show me what you saw in my dream."

It came as no surprise when Drace reached for

her. He threaded his fingers through her hair and took her lips, laving his tongue along the seam, begging entrance, until she opened for him. He pushed his tongue inside to slide sensuously alongside hers.

Moaning, she arched into the kiss. The sound stopped abruptly when she felt Griffin's hands sliding along her side and stroking over her waist. His hands moved up over her rib cage to cup her breasts in his hands. He stroked and petted each one, pulling and twisting gently on her already swollen nipples.

She groaned into Drace's mouth as Griffin continued to torment her already sensitive flesh. The invisible strands of desire that connected her breasts to her nether region stretched tighter and nearly snapped as Griffin leaned down to suckle one tip and Drace nibbled his way down to the other. Her back arched, her body drawn tight as they both laved the pebble-hard tips.

Aliana closed her eyes, her head thrashing on the blankets. One of them, who she wasn't sure, slid his hand beneath the waistband of her panties, slipped through her folds and stroked her quivering flesh. Her body's cream coated his fingers. They slid through her sex easily as they both continued to suckle her. Mindless, she rolled her hips upward, reaching for the release she knew would soon be hers. She could feel it within

her, increasing with each expert stroke.

She threaded her fingers through their hair, holding each of their heads to her breasts. It felt so good, she wanted to scream. She came on a tide of desire that pushed her so hard, she was sure she would fall off the edge of the world.

"God, baby, you're so perfect." Drace lifted his head to blow cool air across her nipple. Impossibly, it hardened even more. "It feels like I've waited for someone like you forever." He pushed his hips forward, his hard cock pressing against her hip.

Griffin did the same on her other side. He pressed his thick length against her. She let her hands drop, wanting to take them both in her hands. Drace moved his arm out of the way, his fingers still buried between her legs.

Now she knew who brought her to her first real climax. She may be no virgin, but she'd never come before. At least not like that. Every woman had her toys.

Drace squeezed her sex. "You feel so wet, so slick. I can't wait to slide inside you. Do you want that?"

"Yesss," she whimpered, undulating her hips, mindless. "I want you. I want you both inside me."

"Not yet, baby. First we're going to make sure you're ready."

Ready? She couldn't be more ready. Aliana only wished they would get to it before she lost her nerve. She'd never contemplated anything like this before in her life and, now that she'd decided to do it, she didn't want the chance to change her mind.

Leaning down, Drace pressed his lips to hers while Griffin drew the tip of her breast into his mouth. The sensations were so new, so intense that she could barely think. She could only feel. Aliana arched up toward them. Pushing her breast to Griffin's mouth, she tunneled her fingers through their hair as Drace thrust his tongue into her mouth.

"You've never lain with two men before, have you?" Griffin raised his head.

Aliana wished she could see his expression. Would telling him that she'd never been with two men at the same time make them leave her wanting? She didn't think she would survive if they decided she was too innocent or naïve. Yet Aliana didn't want to lie to them either. If this was the beginning of something special, something lasting, she didn't want to start it with lies. Licking her lips, she slowly shook her head. "No. I've never been with two men at the same time before." *Please don't let them leave me like this.* She may beg if it came down to it.

Closing her eyes, she almost shouted with relief

when Griffin's fingers curled around the elastic around her waist and peeled her panties down over her legs. The two men inhaled sharply as they uncovered her sex. She bit her lip, wondering what they thought of her. What if they were disappointed with her? Would they stop, leave her wanting instead of bringing her much-needed relief?

If only it wasn't so dark. If she could see their faces, perhaps she would know what they thought of her. She didn't know how they could see her, but somehow, she knew they saw every inch of her exposed flesh. Were they happy with what they saw? She fought the urge to cover herself. Let them look. She needed to know.

Aliana struggled to rise. Moving closer, she reached out and pulled them to her. Drace lowered his head to her left breast while his experienced fingers returned to her nipples, plucking and twisting until she squirmed beneath them.

"You're so perfect. So beautiful," Griffin said against her lips.

"She is," Drace agreed, his mouth still pressed against her breast. The vibrations sent darts of pleasure shooting through her. Invisible threads drawn between her nipples and sex grew tighter until she was sure she would scream.

Cream seeped from between her legs. Every

nerve ending was on fire. The incredible sensation of the two men's hands skimming over her flesh, touching and teasing was enough to drive her over the edge again. Finally, she threw back her head and screamed. "Make love to me. Please. I can't stand it anymore!"

Raising her hands to her face, she covered her mouth. This was it. She was reduced to begging, pleading that they take her at long last. Her body convulsed with pleasure. Her head thrashed wildly against the silky material of the sleeping bag beneath her. The tactile sensation of the cool material against her warm flesh was a sharp contrast.

Drace moved to lie on his back. "Straddle me, love." His words were rough, guttural. It was almost as though it hurt to say the words.

Rolling, Aliana crawled over Drace, pressing tiny, inexperienced kisses to his damp, chest. Her tongue trailed over his flat nipple, her fingers sliding over his smooth chest. Reaching down, she grasped his hard on and eased herself down onto it. God, he was huge.

Inhaling sharply between her teeth, Aliana placed her hands flat against his sternum and sat still for a moment before wriggling and seating herself more firmly onto his hard length.

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Drace inhaled sharply. Was she trying to kill him or just unman him? Her passage wrapped around his cock like a tight, wet velvet fist. He gasped when she wriggled again and her muscles grasped him tighter. Sweet Jesus, if he didn't regain control soon, he'd come before Griffin seated himself into her ass.

"Ride him, Aliana." Griffin moved behind her, straddled Drace's legs and kissed her neck. "Ride him. Make him come deep inside you."

What the hell was Griff thinking? Drace stifled a groan as she raised and lowered herself over his hips. Her breasts jutted proudly upward, her dusky nipples dark against her pale skin. Sexy.

Honey blonde hair fell over her shoulders in glistening waves. Reaching up, she pushed her fingers through her hair in an effort to toss it back over her shoulders. The action thrust her breasts up and outward, the pouting tips rose and fell with every move, like an invitation to lean up and feast upon her creamy flesh. Unable to stop himself, he rose up and took one hardened peak into his mouth. His cock jerked inside her tight channel as her muscles gripped him tighter once again.

Giving the small diamond-hard bud one final flick of his tongue, Drace lay back and concentrated on nothing but holding back his

inevitable release. If it were up to Griffin, he'd have him coming deep inside her luscious channel and they wouldn't have the opportunity to take her at the same time. Drace couldn't allow that to happen. He needed this. He needed the closeness of a triad bond, now more than ever. There was nothing like taking a woman together. The sensation, the sense of closeness to his best friend was unlike anything else he'd ever experienced. Now there was more. He wanted to feel the closeness, the rightness of it all with both of them. He could only pray she would accept them both into her life permanently once this was all over.

Gritting his teeth, Drace tried to keep himself from climaxing. He imagined everything from insects to battle and still found it difficult to detach himself enough to keep her from milking his semen from his body.

Her scent, the feel of her silky skin sliding against his was nearly enough to lose himself in her. Finally grabbing her hips to keep her still, he held Aliana close against his hips. Every time her silken channel gripped him tighter, every time her passage pulsed around his shaft seated so deeply inside her, his cock bucked, begging for its release.

"Use her own cream to ready her for your entry, Griff." Drace gritted his teeth. Sweat beaded on his brow and his body grew more rigid by the moment. A soft whimper escaped Aliana's lips

and she wriggled, driving him even closer to the edge. Soon nothing would stop him from shooting his release deep inside her waiting channel and she would be his, theirs, to share if she would have them.

Her lips moved over his bare chest, inciting a riot of feeling deep in his gut. He wanted this woman more than he'd ever wanted another female before in his life. Gentle hands brushed over his sensitive nipples, a curious tongue following shortly after. Supple fingers traced the lines of his face and jaw. He drew one into his mouth, then the other, suckling, waiting, needing to feel Griff's slow invasion of her perfect ass.

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The sound of Drace's hoarse command drew Griffin from his trance. The sound, the scent of his best friend and the woman he intended to take to mate making love had his senses reeling. His cock jerked, bucking upward as if it couldn't wait to sink inside her beautiful ass.

He watched as Drace gritted his teeth and did his best to hold her unmoving and still she managed to wriggle about and make him groan. He stroked the length of his cock and shuddered, unable to stop himself from imagining the way she would feel. His cock was longer, bigger than

he'd ever seen it before. If he thought on it much, he may think the same of Drace's. Not that he paid much attention to the size of the other man's erections. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that they both were finally making love with the woman they intended to take to mate. Or perhaps, he thought with a wry grin, it was just because she made them horny as hell. Whatever the reason, he didn't care.

Reaching down, he thrust two fingers between the two already joined. Aliana whimpered and wriggled downward. Cream seeped from between her legs and he pulled it from where Drace's cock was firmly seated within her to her back entrance. Smearing the slick cream over her tight rosette, he inserted first one, then two fingers. After making sure they moved easily within her, he scissored his fingers back and forth, stretching her even more.

Aliana groaned, wriggling her ass down onto his hand and he smiled. *Our mate is passionate, Drace. Can you feel how she begs me to enter her?*

Drace nodded, his eyes closed and teeth clenched. Corded muscles stood out on his neck. *Are you trying to kill me?*

Griffin chuckled. *Doesn't the anticipation make it better?*

Of course it does. Drace glared at him over Aliana's shoulder. *But that doesn't mean you need drag it on indefinitely.*

Looking down the long line of her flawless back, he reached out and caressed her spine. Moving lower, he stared at the perfectly shaped ass before him with awe. Griffin disagreed. This was worth dragging on forever. Reaching out, he took each of her hips in his hands and pulled her back. He ground his hard cock into the cleft of her ass and closed his eyes. Even this felt extraordinary.

Finally opening his eyes, he gazed down at her luscious rear and the tiny rosette he would soon enter and thanked everything that was good that they had found this woman. It seemed strange to admit, but after such a short time, he knew she was the one. The only one. This was the only woman who could love them both equally and accept them both into her bed. He didn't know how he knew it. He just did.

Reaching around her waist and between her legs, he circled the tight bud of her clit with his fingers and gathered more of her body's natural lubricant while Aliana shuddered and moaned between them. He smeared more of her cream onto the tight rosette, then pressed the head of his cock against it. Griffin threw his head back and clenched his teeth as he pushed the head of his huge shaft into her tight ass. His ears rang and the top of his head felt as though it might pop off. The feeling of her ass stretched around his cock was

nearly his undoing. Part of him wanted nothing more than to ram it home and fuck her until she screamed. Another, gentler, part wanted to move slowly, making sure he'd wrung every ounce of pure pleasure from her body.

Moving slowly, the head of his cock passed the outer ring, settled into her ass and he groaned. A few slow strokes later and he'd managed to fit his unusually large cock into her ass to the hilt. Her muscles grasped his cock in an unyielding grip. The muscles in his stomach clenched. His ass and leg muscles spasmed with the effort and he nearly collapsed onto them both.

Sweat beaded on his brow as he began to pull out. They needed movement, friction. All of them needed the release that hung so close all they need do is reach out and grasp it.

Her ass clenched tight around him as he slowly pulled out. Tight muscles pulled, dragging against his sensitive nerve endings as he moved to plunge back into her. A bead of perspiration ran down the center of her spine and he leaned forward to taste it with his tongue. It tasted like her—a bit of feminine spice and a lot of wild.

"You're so tight, Aliana. I don't know how much longer I can hold out." Griffin continued to drag his cock from her only to ram it back in while she whimpered between them.

Drace reached up, took her nipples between his

fingers and twisted the tight peaks until she groaned and her hips bucked, driving them both deeper into her stretched body. "I can't hold out much longer either. Come for us, baby. Come one more time."

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Aliana didn't know how much more pleasure she could take. It was hard to believe she had one man buried between her legs while another fit so snugly into her rear. She'd been afraid that having both of them push their hard, thick lengths into her would tear her asunder. Yet here she was, both of them buried deep into her flesh and she loved it! The feeling of being stretched to the limits, of having two men inside her at the same time was so intense, so wicked. Never in her life had she ever considered taking two men at once until she met these men. Now she couldn't imagine herself with only one man again. How had she become so attached to these two in such a short time?

"Be ours, Aliana. Stay here with us. Be our vessel, our mate," Griffin said, just before his tongue laved her shoulder blade.

Drace grabbed her hand, brought it to his mouth and slowly kissed his way up to her wrist. "Yes, Aliana. Be ours."

Ali couldn't answer. She could barely think. All

she could do was feel as the two men claimed her. Groaning, she couldn't speak with her mouth pressed tightly to Drace's chest, her tongue slowly curling around his flat nipple. The sensation of them both thrusting into her was almost more than she could bear—as though she would die from the pleasure. Their alternating thrusts took her higher and higher, until she feared the fall back to Earth might kill her if the resulting orgasm didn't.

Drace pushed her up and away so he could roll her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, his hand kneading her breast as his mouth suckled the other, his teeth gently nibbling. Her womb spasmed, cream coated his cock. Nothing, nothing could feel as wonderful as this. She screamed another orgasm, her channel and ass clenching around the two wonderful cocks imbedded deep within her body.

"Shit, Aliana. You're so tight," Drace moaned, his teeth clamped together, his neck bulging with the effort to hold back his own climax.

Griffin groaned behind her. Like Drace, his movements became faster, more choppy, as though he could barely move, as though if he moved he would come, but if he didn't he would die.

Moving with them, she felt another climax growing closer. Clenching her teeth, she squeezed

her eyes shut in an attempt to concentrate, to hold back. She wanted them all to come together. Griffin's breath came in short gasps as her rear rubbed against him every time she met Drace's upward movements.

The force of each powerful thrust drove her higher, closer to her own release. She mewled, trying to tell them to hurry, she needed this, needed to come, but she was sure, they were nothing more than mindless cries of pleasure.

Perspiration dripped from her body, mingling with that of her lovers. Her body slid sensuously against Drace as Griffin held her from behind.

Drace continued to alternately suckle and nibble her breasts while Griffin leaned down and suckled the curve of her neck. She climaxed when they each nipped one of her shoulders, their teeth sinking into her flesh. Whatever their reason, the pleasure pain was the most erotic thing she'd ever felt in her life.

* * * *

Aliana's climax triggered Drace's own. He'd barely survived the tightness of her sex, the wet, slick slide of his cock into her silken channel. Griffin followed them both, an expression of complete bliss upon his face.

Above him, Aliana slid into unconsciousness.

After Griffin stood, went to his backpack and pulled a wetwipe from the disposable pack, he bathed Aliana's ass, then himself, before rolling over and tucking her securely against his front. They may reach Paradise a bit later than they'd first expected, but it was worth every second of their tardiness.

They'd been on the trail little more than an hour when Drace's internal alarm went off. Reaching out with his senses, he tried to figure out where the danger lay. Someone was on their trail, he just couldn't pinpoint where they were. Sighing, he wished he dared to change forms. As an animal, he could sniff them out—find them no matter where they were or how silently they hid in the dense underbrush. He glanced around them casually, trying not to alarm Aliana. She'd already been through too much the last few days. Besides, the last thing he wanted was for her to panic, run off and get herself captured. No matter how alone they appeared to be, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were hunted.

He looked up, wishing for a bird or small tree animal, but there was none. Old majestic oaks, stately cedar and tall maple trees stood silent but for the rustling of the leaves in the slight breeze and the rush of sap through their veins. Holding up a hand, he signaled the others to be quiet,

listening to the rush of air through the leaves. Nothing. Not even a squirrel stirred in the trees to help him find his quarry. Perhaps he was just being over cautious and it was all his imagination.

I feel it, too, old friend. I only wish I could figure out where they are.

Drace grunted his agreement, ignoring the perplexed look Aliana cast his way. *If I didn't know better, I'd think they were Tudra. I would think them shifters, at the very least. Whoever they are, they're good. I'll give them that.* They had to be. He and Griffin both had been trained *Tudra* and they had been among the very best. As all of Adam Greer's men had been. That was how they'd managed to regain power in Paradise. He'd been so completely occupied with his inspection of the forest around him, he turned, startled when she cried out and nearly fell. Instead, she'd fallen into Griffin's arms.

"She tripped on an exposed root." Griffin pointed to the unearthed culprit. It was large, thick. The earth around it was black, moist from the root's violent exposure.

"Are you okay?" He knelt, his hands gently probing her ankle and foot. "Your ankle doesn't appear swollen. Want to try it out?"

Griffin held her by the shoulders while she tested it.

Frowning, her lip between her teeth, she put weight on it a few times. "It hurts a little, but I

think I can manage.”

Still kneeling, Drace studied the root and the freshly exposed soil and surrounding vegetation. Lowering his voice, he waved Griffin closer. “I think this was a set up, but I can’t be sure. Leaning down, he sniffed the dirt, doing his best to utilize the senses he had, giving it a more thorough investigation. “I don’t think Aliana’s slight weight could have yanked so much of this from the ground.” He lifted it, showing Griff the root was half the thickness of his wrist.

“I’m slowing us down. You knew I would.” The expression on Aliana’s face was apologetic. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be silly. You aren’t slowing us down.” *Not that much, anyway.* Drace wanted to smile, but the danger he sensed wouldn’t allow it. It wasn’t the time. It was time to act. To ferret out their stalkers and put an end to their existence. Closing his eyes, Drace used his magic to seek out their stalkers. Until Ali knew what they were though, they could do nothing about them. Clan laws forbid telling an outsider what they were. The life of the entire community depended on secrecy and stealth. They lived their lives, hiding just out of sight—leaving Paradise only long enough to travel to larger towns and big cities to get supplies that couldn’t be made or grown by the townsfolk.

They appeared almost as ghosts. A glimpse in

the corner of one's eyes. They were there and gone in less than a second, unless one knew what to look for—how to find them. Or, as in Aliana's and her followers' case, they accidentally stumbled upon an unguarded gate during major sabbats.

Drace cast a gaze up to Griffin. *Please tell me you remembered to contact someone to take our duty while we escorted her down the mountain. It makes me ill to think we've left it unguarded.* Standing, he brushed his hands against his legs, rubbing the moist soil on his jeans.

Griffin gave him a dirty look. *Do you think I'm stupid? Of course I did. My brothers have gone to take our place.*

Drace looked around. *We should have stayed there. We're nothing more than fucking moving targets out here.*

Don't say that aloud. Griffin glanced at Aliana. *She's already scared to death.*

We have to tell her. The only way we're going to stay ahead of them is to change. Drace sighed, knowing his friend's answer before it was spoken.

Are you mad? You know we can't do that. The penalty for that is...

Drace ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't give a good damn what the penalty is, Griffin. I won't let them take her." He gestured to the path ahead. They'd stopped where they were, not only because of Aliana's injury, but because both of them knew a trap lay ahead. "You know what lies

before us as well as I do. There's nothing more than a narrow path with a cliff on one side and loose rocks above. I refuse to let them win."

Aliana stepped up, limping slightly.

Damn those men for hurting her even a little. Drace glanced up. *She has a right to know who she has slept with, Griffin.*

"Are we on Government land or something?" Her eyes rounded. "Is this some secret facility like area fifty-one?"

Griffin shook his head, turned his back, hands on hips and looked at the ground.

Drace glanced over at his friend. He knew he put their positions in jeopardy, but right now, nothing was more important than keeping her safe. Griffin agreed or he'd stop him from telling her. "If only it were that simple. We could blind fold you and lead you out." He scrubbed his face. "Damn it. We have enemies in front of us waiting in ambush and still more enemies on our tail." He turned to Griff. "If you have a better idea, tell me now. I'm all out."

The other man just shook his head. "You're right. We should have taken our chances at the cabin. At least there we'd have cover."

Taking Aliana by the arms, Drace led her over to a large rock and sat her down. He frowned at her limp. "Just stay there for a minute and let me explain. What I have to say is something you'll

need to hear sitting down."

* * * *

Snorting, Griffin leaned against a tree. "Isn't that the damned truth?"

"What is it?" She glanced first at Griffin, then Drace. "It can't be that bad." She paled. "We aren't about to be bombed or something, are we?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

Aliana crossed her arms and gave him a level look.

He tried not to look at how the action pushed her breasts up, how her cleavage called to him to bury his face between the two full mounds even while danger seemed to lurk around every corner.

"Then what on Earth is it? What can be so bad that it's against the law to tell me?"

We're wasting time here. I don't like it. Drace said before he turned to her. "Well..." He cleared his throat. "It's not against *the* law to tell you. It's against the laws of our clan."

Pushing himself away from the tree, Griffin knelt, rested his hand on her knees and continued at her bewildered look. "Our clan is different. We have our own laws and punishments. We only abide by..." he paused, just stopping himself from saying human. "We abide by American laws when we leave Paradise."

"Oh." She looked around, licked her lips. "Is this a reservation? Are you two Native Americans?"

He took a deep breath, not knowing what the hell they'd do if she ran. If she couldn't bring herself to believe them, she'd run and he wanted to be close enough to stop her if she tried to bolt. There was no doubt she would believe them in the end. He only wanted to make sure she didn't get a chance to take off. If she did, she may run into her father's hired men.

Griffin sighed. What the hell was going on here? So many humans shouldn't have been able to pass through the magically sealed gates. Not without help. He could understand a lone woman. Clan fables were filled with women stumbling through the gates to find their mates on the other side. It was those stories that first had their researchers studying the chance of bonding with humans in the first place. But the men couldn't get through a gate without help. The men he and Drace discovered the day before were human. Which meant someone led them here.

The only thing worse than leading a human to Paradise was leading them back out again. They couldn't allow the humans to live to tell a tale now that they knew where to find a gate and how to pass through. Paradise was more than a town. It was a refuge for any shifter. The human

government would destroy that. Their people would be hunted, dissected and pressed into service. He shook his head and glanced at Drace. His friend was right. They couldn't allow that to happen.

Griffin gazed deep into Aliana's eyes. "You must understand. What we're about to tell you is the truth. We must tell you..." He sighed. "And show you. It will leave little time for your brain to process it." He laid a hand on her arm. "But you must process it."

"You may want to scream, become hysterical, but you cannot." Drace glanced over his shoulder. "We don't have the luxury of time."

Reaching up, Griffin cupped her cheek. "If you can find it in your heart to trust us, everything will be all right. We'll protect you from your father's men. No matter the number."

Drace broke in. "We have no more time to waste. I think they wonder why we haven't proceeded into their trap." *I feel them moving in.* "Take a deep breath, Ali. Be strong like I know you are."

* * * *

Aliana sucked in a deep breath, her mind awlirl. What could possibly be so bad, so unbelievable that she wouldn't believe them? Or worse. What

could possibly be so horrifying that she'd run from these two gentle caring men into the grasp of her father's private army? Nothing could ever be *that* bad.

"We aren't human."

"W-what?" She stared at them, her eyes wide. Of course they were. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course you are." She poked them and blushed. "You sure look human." Her hands began to shake. What if they were part of some strange Government cover-up? If they weren't human, were they aliens?

She pulled her knees from beneath their hands. "You wanted me to breathe." Aliana waved her hands, close to hyperventilating. "Well, give me some room then. Back off." She held one hand out in front of her, the other on her chest. Her gaze darted around, looking at everything, but seeing nothing as her mind raced. *Oh, my God! I've had sex with them without protection.* What kind of child would she have if she got pregnant? Would she have some strange human, alien hybrid?

Standing, she began to pace, slapping at their hands as she tried to grab her when she passed. They kept trying to make her sit down, but she couldn't. How could she sit when her mind spun at a million miles per hour? She was too wired, too...something.

She moaned, her hands over her face. Why did

the weird stuff always happen to her? First her father wanted to marry her off to a man she'd never met and could never respect like some ancient lord of the manor. Now this. She had sex with aliens. What was next? Dinner on Mars or a disco on Jupiter?

Turning, Aliana started back the way they'd come. She had to find the river. Somewhere in that freezing water she'd fallen through another of Alice's rabbit holes. Ali's mind spun, knowing she had to get out of here. Get away from them. She didn't know them. Didn't know what they were. What if they were a couple of crazies who kidnapped women and buried them on this mountain when they grew tired of them? Shuddering, she scrubbed her face with her hands, not knowing what to do. What if they were axe murderers or something? Why hadn't she thought of that before? A hand fell onto her shoulder and she screamed.

"Let us show you what we are. I don't blame you for not believing us," Drace said as Griffin looked on. "Just calm down a bit, watch and we'll show you."

It was the last thing either of them said before Drace disappeared and a raven appeared in his place. Griffin, too, was gone and in *his* place was a giant mountain lion, its lips parted in a grin. Or was it a snarl? Ali really had no idea which.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod." Turning, Ali ran as fast as she could toward the cabin. "It wasn't real. It wasn't real," she chanted to herself as though the repetition would make it so.

A gunshot rang out and something heavy struck her from behind. She lay on the ground, her face in the dirt with something weighing her down. It was so heavy, she could barely breathe. The weight shifted, slowly moving off her and she rolled away from it, looking up into the amber eyes of a big cat. Aliana stared at it in horror as the face grew closer and its rough tongue lapped her cheek.

It's Griffin, Ali. Don't be afraid.

Aliana brought a trembling hand to her lips, holding her scream at bay. Whatever they were, they weren't shooting at her. She had to hold it together at least for a little while.

Snarls and gunshots rang through the woods. She heard the loud roar of something she couldn't place and watched as a man ran screaming through the woods, his clothing on fire. Where was she? Who were these people? How could they exist? Her eyes glazed over, rolled up into her head. The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was her mother's voice.

It is a wonderful place. A place that is not a place through a gate that is not a gate. A place where humans

and animals live in peace, a part of one another, each of them helping one another. You belong there with them Aliana. One day I hope to take you home.

* * * *

Drace flew just over the tree line looking for enemies. More of their people were here, helping them drive the bulk of the hired army toward the cliff. They were here, now they must die. Ethical men wouldn't hunt a woman, wishing to hurt her before delivering her into the hands of evil. None of them deserved to live.

Taking a deep breath, he blew fire on another of her father's men, hoping he'd scare the others toward the cliff. He could see Adam Greer and his bond mate Nick Hill among the men who'd come to help. He connected with Griffin. *How did they know to come here?* He felt Griff's thoughts stir in his mind.

My brothers. When they arrived at the cabin, it had been ransacked. One of the men was still there, waiting in ambush for our return. They called in reinforcements. Adam knew the six of them and the two of us could take out a small army so he and Nick came up to help us and my brothers.

Something strange stirred in the vicinity of his heart. It was great to belong somewhere, to have others you could count on to watch your back. He only wished they could convince Ali of that. He'd

hate to see her face a mind-gate. They could be devastating if not done right. They were so dangerous, the council only attempted to work them on completely good humans who found their way to Paradise and couldn't make themselves stay within the misty walls.

He watched as Griffin stalked a man nearing Aliana. He slid silently through the underbrush, waiting for an opening, then pounced on him. His mouth went to the vulnerable throat, cutting off the man's air, suffocating him before he dragged him over to the cliff and threw him over the ledge.

Aliana is unconscious.

Drace dropped lower, heading toward her position. *I wondered how you got her to remain so still.*

She fainted when I found her. It's for the best. She didn't need to see this violence. The bloodshed alone would have driven her away.

Circling above to try to see any danger, Drace could only agree. His exceptional vision picked up another man sneaking through the woods. They could only hide from him if they stayed still. If they moved, his dragon saw them every time. Dropping down, he picked up the man who screamed his horror, spraying bullets at him. A few found their mark, but did nothing to save the man from his fate.

Tudra! The word had Drace heading back to

where he'd last saw his friend. If Griffin was taking on a member of their own trained army, he would be well matched. He circled above them. Trying to figure out which was Griffin and which was not. The two big cats circled one another, their color and movements nearly identical.

It's my cousin, Donald. Griffin sent up the call. *How do I kill a man I played with as a child, Drace? He's family.*

Drace felt his friend's sorrow at the prospect of killing a member of his family. *I'm sorry Griff. Tell me how to help. I can take him if you wish.* The two cats circled each other. With no way to tell who was who, Drace hesitated to make a move.

No. I will do it. I have to do it. He was stalking Aliana. What kind of man am I if I cannot defend our mate?

A movement caught the corner of his eye. Drace dove for the ground, changing as he went. His scales shimmered, turned to fur as the dragon turned to the gold of a cat. Golden fur covered his body. Thicker brown hair formed a dense ring around his neck. Ten feet from the ground, he knew his wings disappeared, replaced by the smooth golden fur on his back. The only thing that remained the same was his eyes. Their eyes never changed.

He unsheathed his claws landing on the back of the cat waiting to kill his best friend. *No you don't,*

you son of a bitch. This is one on one here. Not two on one.

The other cat turned, snarled and laughed. *Wanna bet, you weird all-shifter? No one wants you here. You don't belong.* The mountain lion took a swipe at Drace. Drace didn't even grunt in his larger form. It would take more than one small mountain lion to take him down.

The thought had barely shimmered in his mind when another cat jumped on his back. There were two on him now. Both of them swatted and bit, their teeth and claws sinking deep. *Take care of our mate, old friend. I will take these two threats down, but it will kill me in the doing.* He would sacrifice himself for Griffin and his mate. *Hear me, all shifters, if I should fail and they kill this form before I kill them, protect my mate. She could carry my child.*

A roar rent the air. Another mountain lion joined the fray attacking the other two who would take the lion down. Deep furrows marred his chest and stomach where the two cats ganged up on him. Blood flowed freely from the deep wounds weakening him. He jumped back, merely missing a blow from the cat he fought, sparing a glance at the other who'd helped him. *Thank you for your help. I must admit to not recognizing you. If you don't mind, I would like to know whom to thank for the service.*

Aliana's gone!

Drace heard Griffin's cry as he watched the

other two fight. The larger cat swiped at the smaller, knocking her from him. He turned, ready to kill. Drace went into his kill, clamping his teeth around the throat of his enemy. He didn't wait for the other to suffocate as he usually would. Instead, he ripped the other's throat out and turned to help the female. *Who brought a female into this fight?*

What female would have the courage to follow her male into battle, saving another at the expense of her own life? He snarled, swiping at the female cat, driving her away from danger before killing the male. When the male was down, he dropped, tired, his blood loss great. He would die here and he wouldn't know if his mate was safe.

He snarled at the female as she approached. A female should know better than to put her life in jeopardy. Yet, this one showed no fear. Dodging his halfhearted swipe, she walked up to him and began to lick his wounds.

I can't find her. I can't find Aliana! Griffin's frantic call reached him.

He wanted to search for her and he wanted to find the mate or father of this wayward female and give them an earful, but he was too tired. Too weak. He looked up into almond shaped green eyes and blinked. *Aliana?*

* * * *

Aliana nuzzled the face of the lion as he lay before her. Covered in blood, he could do little more than pant and bleed. Tears filled her eyes as she changed back into herself and Griffin padded up behind her, changing as he moved.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a shifter?"

"Because I didn't know myself. I don't even know how I did this. I don't know how to change back." Ali looked at Drace, her eyes filling with tears. "I only knew I was angry. I felt a rage unlike anything I'd ever felt before when I saw those two gang up on Drace. I couldn't sit there and watch when I knew he'd come to help me. He didn't have to come back here to help me the way he did. It put him in danger."

I came to help you and you put yourself in harm's way, Drace said, his voice growing weak. I would die to protect you and you throw yourself into the middle of the fight.

"Because I didn't want you to die, you impossible man!"

Drace let his head rest on the ground, obviously no longer able to hold it up on his own. *That is how you were able to pass through the gate.* His voice grew thready, weak.

Griffin laid a hand on his head. "Sleep, old friend. Everything will still be here when you awake. You must save your energy. Sleep."

* * * *

Aliana and Griffin paced outside the doctor's office. "He wouldn't be here if not for me." She bit her thumbnail as she paced the interior parlor of the doctor's home.

The old woman who answered the door and introduced herself as Nettie walked toward them. "Come along now, you two. You won't do Drace any good if you starve yourselves to death." Someone knocked on the door and she hurried to answer it. "My, my. We're having a regular epidemic of injuries here lately," she said when she opened the door on another old woman who carried a chainsaw in one hand and held a boy's ear in the other. The boy grimaced and tried to pull away, he stood half bent over beside the woman who was so much shorter than he.

"That hurts, Mrs. Connor."

"Myrtle Connor, what in the world are you doing here with David Gibson?" She looked at the boy, her hands on her hips. "What's wrong? Who needs the doctor?"

Myrtle snarled. "He's going to need the doctor after I lop off his hand for stealing my sculptures."

"I didn't steal no sculptures. I was just lookin' at it." The boy stared at Nettie, his eyes wide, obviously hoping for help. He dropped his head and stared at the floor. "I like 'em is all. I like to

look at 'em. I'd help her if she'd let me. I want to learn how to do it. She didn't have to grab me by the ear and drag me all over town."

"Bull puckies!" Myrtle snarled. "You know you're the one stealing them. I've seen you staring at every one of them that go missing."

David glanced at her, his eyes sullen. "I look at 'em all. They all don't come up missin'."

Nettie crossed her arms. "He has a point, you know. It's only the ice sculptures that get stolen."

"The wood ones are probably too heavy." She kicked at the boy, her toe not making contact. Letting go of his ear, she stepped forward and wagged her finger in front of his face. "Don't you let me catch you touching one of them, boy, or I'll lop that hand off quicker than spit." Myrtle turned around and stalked down the stairs of the porch.

"Come on in, David." She pulled him with her as she left the room. "Come on, you two, there's no sense in starving yourselves. You won't help Drace a bit." The older woman left, expecting them to follow. Ali glanced at Griffin.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can't hurt to have a cup of tea."

She didn't feel like drinking tea. She felt like curling up in a little ball and crying. How could they sit here acting like nothing happened when Drace was in the other room? What if he was dying?

"Why do you suppose it's only her ice sculptures that come up missing?" The old woman asked David.

He shrugged, looking sullen. "I dunno. I like to look at them, but I'd never steal them."

Nettie patted his hand. "I never said you would, dear." She set a plate with a huge piece of cake on it in front of him.

"Thank you, ma'am." David wasted no time digging into the confection before he stopped, thoughtful. "Maybe she shouldn't mount the lights over them. It can only help who's stealing them." He half smiled. "Makes it easier to see what they're doing."

Aliana sat at the table, her hot tea resting between her hands. She hated this. The not knowing what went on behind the closed doors. Worrying.

Griffin placed his hand over hers. "He'll be all right."

Nettie sniffed, coming to stand between them. "You're mated!" She clapped her hands. "Another *truebond*!"

She looked at Griffin, confused. "True bond? What's that?"

"It's a bond between mates," David answered, his mouth full of cake. "It's when two males bind themselves to a female and they have a threesome." He looked down at his plate, his face

red.

Aliana's face blazed. Could things get any worse? One of her lovers was dying and an old woman ratted her out to a teenager! A noise to her left caught her attention and she looked up.

Doctor Parker stood there, his expression grim, his eyes tired.

Immediately, Ali's eyes filled with tears. The look on the old doctor's face was telling. Standing quickly, she knocked her chair over and ran from the room, looking for Drace. She didn't know how she'd come to care so much for the both of them in only a few days. She'd first awakened in their cabin only two days ago. Had it really only been that long? The room was quiet but for the beeping of the monitors. She walked to the side of the bed and took Drace's hand. "I should have gotten there sooner."

The doctor's son walked in behind her, set his hand on her shoulder. "You got there in plenty of time. He took a few bullets, but it was the gouges in his sides and stomach I was worried about." He winked. "It's a good thing we don't scar. Otherwise your mate would have many."

"I don't care. I only want him to live," she sobbed. "I can't...I can't lose him. I can't lose either of them." She rocked back and forth on her chair. Gasping, she looked up when Drace's fingers curled around hers. "Drace!"

"I'll be fine, Ali. Don't worry about me."

Aliana smiled through her tears. Everything would be all right. It had to be. She'd come here, trying to run away from one fate and finding another. She looked around her, realizing that somehow, she'd come home.

And one day you will find Paradise. It is out there, waiting for your return. A place that is not a place, through a gate that is not a gate. Your family awaits you there. You will learn your place is not here, but there. Find him, Ali. Find the man who can tell you who you are.

Smiling, she squeezed his hand at the memory of her mother's words. After finding out about shifters, she assumed her father was not her father. Perhaps that was why he'd been so quick to sell her like a possession. Now she knew who her mother meant. Somehow Ali had found her way home and found the man who could tell her who she was. Two of them. She was their mate.

About the Author

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel, romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a "happily ever after" of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

Tianna can be reached at this email:

tiannaxander@yahoo.com

Tianna's website is located at:

<http://www.tiannaxander.com>

www.myspace.com/Tianna_xander

and her yahoo group page

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TiannaXander/>

Sign up for Tianna's newsletter by sending an e-mail with 'newsletter' in the subject line to TiannaX@aol.com