

A movie poster featuring a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black strapless top and a silver necklace, looking over her shoulder. In the foreground, a leopard is looking towards the camera. Behind the woman are two muscular men with their chests bare, wearing white briefs and blue jeans. The title 'ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE' is at the bottom in large, outlined letters.

Tianna Xander

ANOTHER DAY
IN PARADISE

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ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE

BY

TIANNA SANDER

DEDICATION

For my readers: As always, your requests for more drive me. This one is for you. I hope you like Samantha's story and look forward to her sister's story coming later this year or perhaps the beginning of 2010.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Phyllis R: After all these years and miles, I still consider you one of my best friends in the world. I'd still drive three hours in one direction to get you out of trouble. You were my inspiration. For me, our good times in Charleston are only a memory and laugh away.

By the way, I know you still look Maaahvelous.

CHAPTER ONE

Samantha and Sabrina Hart stood swaying in front of the men. Warm air caressed their skin. A fine sheen of perspiration covered their bodies. The flickering golden light from the propane lanterns gave their caramel skin an ethereal glow.

They put every ounce of magickal ability they had into the song they sang. The sisters sang of living, of dying, of working hard and then, when they were certain they had the men's undivided attention, they sang of sleep. Deep, soul repairing sleep.

Neither of them dared to look away from their audience as they performed. The microphones they had coerced their captors into providing for their performance, carried their words into every nook and cranny in the compound. Every male within hearing distance could hear them. There was no escaping it.

The two women kept their bodies swaying, their torsos moving together in a hypnotizing belly dance. They knew the men wouldn't be able

to resist seeing the dance. These men were so full of themselves that nothing would convince them the women here didn't want them—that they didn't want their incessant pawing and rough sex.

Sabrina was a powerful spellbinder. No matter the situation, her sister could spell her way out of it if she needed to. The only problem was coming up with the spell and being certain all the subjects were close enough to be enthralled by it. That's where the microphones came in. Speakers were everywhere in the compound. Used for various reasons, the outdoor speakers were a necessity for the success of their plan. Every man in the compound had to hear the spell. If only they knew it would work and, if it did, how long the spell would keep these men mesmerized.

After two months of captivity, Sabrina finally came up with a spell they thought would work and, after two months, the men here were conceited enough to believe the sisters were happy with their terrifying arrangement.

The two sisters continued to sing as the men's heads began to nod and their eyes began to close. *"Sleep, good man, sleep. Let the sandman carry you away and dream of laughter and love. Sleep, good man, sleep. Awake only when you've rested. Sleep until you dream, until the sun is overhead. The time has come to sleep. Sleep, good man, sleep."*

Taking a deep breath, Samantha followed her

younger sister's lead and began to hum the tune after the last verse. This was the fifth time they'd sung the song all the way through. It had to have worked, otherwise the men would have complained about their being repetitive.

When no one complained that they weren't singing or dancing anymore, the two girls stopped humming and leapt from the stage. They didn't expect their show to be so late, but they should have known when the men brought the new women in. The night's entertainment always followed the public deflowering of *fresh meat*.

She supposed she couldn't complain. At least no one touched her or her sister tonight because they'd been on the list to perform. Her only complaint was the spell was to have them sleep until light. Dawn was less than an hour away.

Samantha placed a finger to her lips when another woman would have started her own forced act and indicated the sleeping men. She helped the woman down off the stage.

"They're asleep." She waved her arm, feeling a bit giddy. "Look at them. They're *all* asleep. Pass the word to everyone you can. This is our chance to get the hell out of here." She stopped the woman as she turned to run toward the main building. "Don't tell the women in the house. They'll wake them."

The women who lived inside the house

sympathized with the men. Either they'd been brainwashed or they were just plain nuts, but they sided with the men on everything, including the rape and torture of the women they held prisoner in the compound barracks.

"It's better to leave them here. This is where *they* want to be. Tell everyone you know who wants to get the hell out of here that it's now or never." She turned to her sister and grabbed her hand. "Let's get our asses out of this hellhole."

* * * *

"It's not like for Samantha to miss a Tuesday at the library." If there was one thing Aiden Fish Troutman knew about Samantha Hart and her sister, it was that Tuesday was library day. "They love this place." He looked around the main Virginia Beach Library, tempted to check the second floor again, just in case.

"Maybe one of them is ill."

Aiden's gut clenched at the thought. She couldn't be sick. "She never gets sick. Neither of them have ever been ill." Closing his eyes, he pictured Samantha, her long ebony hair hanging halfway to her waist. Her smooth skin, the color of coffee the way he liked it, heavy with cream. Hell, he could still see her here, in this very library, gazing up at him through laughing, dark brown

eyes flecked with amber as she teased him, daring him to read one of the silly romance novels she loved so much. His sixth sense told him something was wrong. "She'd be here if she could."

"Hell, Fish," his companion, Quinn Sadler said, clapping him on the back. "You *have* been gone for several months." He kept his expression blank. "Anything could have happened. She could have gotten tired of waiting for you to come back and moved on."

Aiden fought the urge to punch his friend and triad mate, choosing to glare at him instead. "She told me she had no intention of leaving this town." He'd hoped she'd leave with him...for him. He couldn't retire here as he'd planned. Not anymore. Not since he'd joined the people of Paradise and had a bond with Quinn. He was a shifter now. He couldn't stay here. He'd given his word to help protect and rebuild Paradise.

He ran his fingers through his hair and paced, agitated. "Hell, Quinn, I think she loved me, but said we couldn't be anything more to each other until I found the other part of myself that was missing."

At the time, Aiden had no idea what the hell she meant until he'd followed one of his Army Ranger friends back to the man's hometown and down the proverbial rabbit hole.

A year and a half ago, he had no idea that shape-shifters even existed. Now he *was* one, thanks to the man standing next to him. A year and a half ago, he was just like everyone else. Well...almost. Aside from his telepathic abilities and the fact that he could control his body temperature at will, he'd been completely normal. If you could call *that* normal.

Quinn crossed his arms and leaned back against the high table holding a computer terminal. "Do you think she meant me?" He looked thoughtful. Merging their minds, Quinn examined Aiden's memories of her then sighed. "Nothing in your memories would indicate that she was anything but what she seemed—a very beautiful, sensual, young woman. I do believe she loved you."

"She was clairvoyant." Aiden supplied the bit of information with a slight shrug. "And it was nothing accidental. She was right too often."

"You're right," Quinn finally agreed, after he sifted deeper into his memories. "Something doesn't mesh." He pushed away from the terminal. "If what I feel from examining your memories is any indication, we *have* to find her. I think she may be part shifter and our mate."

Quinn's statement filled Aiden with both elation and dread. He was both glad that he didn't have to end his relationship with the woman he'd grown to love, and scared to death that Quinn was

right and she *was* part shifter and the *Tudra* had her and her sister. "Shit. If she is..." He refused to put voice to his fear. He had to find them. Now. "Let's go."

He headed out of the library and practically ran to their car. They had to go to the girls' apartment and make sure they weren't there. Perhaps she really had moved on like Quinn suggested or, though his heart and mind told him otherwise, perhaps she'd just decided to stay home today after all. Either way, they needed answers. The apartment was as good a place to start as any.

* * * *

Quinn stood with his triad mate outside the door to Samantha Hart's apartment, wondering what the hell to do next. His gut clenched at the thought that someone had taken her. He didn't even know the woman and he felt a sense of loss at her absence. He could only imagine how Fish felt.

"They aren't here."

He spun around, stunned that anyone could sneak up on either of them like that. What he saw surprised him. A little spitfire of a woman who looked about four-ten and ninety pounds soaking wet strode up to them with a scowl on her face. She only had eyes for Fish and they weren't friendly at all.

"It's about friggin' time you showed up, *Ranger*." She said the word with undisguised disdain as she glared at his companion and placed her hands on her hips, her head bobbing back and forth, as she spoke. "If you're going to take a woman off to God knows where, the least you could do is make sure her rent is paid." The woman's whole body shook as she paced and talked, reminding Quinn of a *Jack Russell Terrier*. The woman couldn't stand still. She also looked like a woman who didn't miss much.

Quinn's gut clenched. Jesus. Who told the woman Fish was taking the two sisters somewhere? It definitely wasn't anyone *they* knew.

Fish stepped forward, a frown on his face. "What the hell are you talking about, Elmira? I haven't taken her anywhere."

Emotion swamped him through their mind link. Quinn had needed to keep a leash on his triad mate since he turned him. The other man was going through the shifter equivalent of puberty and he had enough trouble controlling his mood swings. He'd never be able to control the need to shift at inconvenient times without assistance, especially at times of extreme duress.

Fish was worried and with good reason. Everything about this situation reeked of a *Tudra* kidnapping. Gods help the two women if they'd

fallen into enemy hands. The *Tudra* and those who commanded them were *not* easy people. They tortured everyone they believed weren't like them and they believed women were property to be used in any way they deemed fit.

Quinn fisted his hands at his sides. His cat waited impatiently within him, the need to rend and tear uppermost in its mind at the thought of his mate, their mate, in the hands of a ruthless enemy. Every inch of his skin itched as his leopard fought to get out. His teeth and jaw ached as his bones tried to contort, but he held onto his humanity. The last thing he needed was to scare the little old woman before him. If he lost control, so would Fish. The only thing that would get them is some well-meaning citizen on the phone to animal control to get two fugitives from the zoo back under control.

The woman sniffed as though she didn't believe them. "All I know is what she told me." Elmira stopped pacing and faced them with her feet shoulder-width apart, hands still on her hips and glaring up at them like truant children. She obviously thought they lied. But for what purpose?

"What did she tell you?" Quinn needed to know. They both needed to know. Perhaps she'd said something, anything that would give them a clue to where she'd gone. They needed to know

everything she knew if they hoped to catch up with the men who took them.

"Two men came and told the two girls that *you...*" She stopped talking to glare at Fish again. "...sent them to pick Samantha and her sister up. They said something about a surprise and that you and a *friend*," she paused to cast a glare toward Quinn, "would show them the time of their lives." She sniffed and wiped her eyes. The tough old broad was gone, replaced by a woman who obviously cared for the two girls. "I haven't seen hide nor hair of them since."

"How long ago was that?" Fish stepped forward and offered her a clean fast-food napkin from his pocket. Quinn was glad he'd begun to carry them like he suggested. The man never knew when he would have to fight his other half and have to shift. Sometimes the effort gave Fish nosebleeds. It wasn't a common reaction, but apparently, according to Doctor Parker, the only doctor and veterinarian in Paradise, it was merely an inconvenience.

"It was nearly two months ago," Elmira said after she blew her nose rather loudly for someone so small. It seemed, the action gave her the opportunity to pull herself back together. The woman was back to glaring at them again. "If they *are* with you, you can tell them they owe me two month's rent and if they don't pay up in ten days,

I'm renting out their apartment."

She turned around and walked away, muttering something under her breath. Just before she turned the corner at the end of the building, Elmira spun around to face them once more. "If I don't see or hear from at least one of those girls by the end of the week, I'm calling the police and giving them *your* name, Troutman."

The woman disappeared around the corner before they could reply.

"The *Tudra* have her, don't they?" Fish asked as he looked out over the railing of the second floor balcony. He gripped the railing tight, his knuckles white as he stared down into the empty swimming pool.

It was a rhetorical question. There was no doubt in either of their minds that the sadistic *Tudra* had the two women in their clutches.

Quinn stood outside the women's apartment, breathing in the lingering scent of the woman that he was now positive was his mate. Seventy-seven years he'd waited to find her. Seventy-seven lonely years he'd lived, wondering if he would ever get lucky enough to find the one woman he could bond with, have children with. He refused to let the *Tudra* have her. She belonged to them and with them is where he'd make sure she would spend her life.

His stomach rebelled at the thought of the sadistic army of the tainted council touching a hair on her head. Every cell in his body screamed with anguish as his cat snarled and clawed, trying to free itself. It needed to hunt, to track its mate and kill any male who touched her, with the exception of his *Truebond* mate.

Fish's cat was even more difficult to control. Quinn merged his mind deeper within his friend's consciousness to keep his cat from forcing a change in public. The cat didn't care where they were. Its only concern was finding its mate.

Quinn's skin burned. The muscles of his arms and legs prickled and itched, made even more intense with Fish's beast attempting the same, as both of their cats tried to force the change.

"We have to get to the mountains." He bit the words out between clenched teeth. "I don't know how long I can hold them both back." The words came out on a growl. He wouldn't hold them long, if the sound of his voice and the ache in his bones were any indication. He could hold on at least long enough to get them both into the woods far enough that no one would see them change. Quinn knew he didn't have a choice.

* * * *

"Come on. It's now or never."

Samantha gave her sister's hand a tug as she headed through the sleeping crowd. She kept close watch over the men who all lay about the compound rendered unconscious by the spell they'd worked only moments before. With just a little more luck, they would soon be free of the monsters that held them captive for the past two months. In just a few short moments, they would escape, thanks to their grandmother teaching them the old ways of her people.

"They're all asleep." She gazed around with awe, surprised that the spell actually worked. She'd hoped it would, but didn't dare even dream for fear to have her dreams dashed as the men went about their normal routines. "Who knows how long the spell will keep them like this?"

It would last forever if they're lucky, but Samantha was a realist and knew nothing lasted *that* long, especially a spell wrought by two rank amateurs under duress. They didn't have the slightest idea how long it would last. How could they? They'd never used the spell before and they had certainly never spelled an entire compound of shifter males.

Their captors' metabolism was a lot higher than a human male's. The men were all pure blood *Leoparo* shifters or close to it. She and her sister were only one-sixteenth shifter on their mother's side. Still, no matter how thin their blood, it was

still strong enough to fall prey to these animals.

“Come on! It’s our only chance.” Samantha gave her sister’s hand another tug, then looked back when she realized Sabrina wasn’t going to budge. She wanted to scream with frustration. They didn’t have much time. Instead of raising her voice, she knelt down in front of Sabrina who had fallen to her knees, sobbing with fear. Tilting her head back, Samantha met her mahogany gaze.

“What’s the matter with you? You agreed to this when we both decided the only way for us to escape was to spell them.” She couldn’t help but glance around, needing to see that the men still slept.

She looked around the compound at the other women who realized they had this one chance to free themselves, to escape or remain captives of cruel men who wanted nothing from them but sex and offspring. Quietly and carefully, they searched pockets, vehicles, even the men’s shoes, looking for keys or weapons, anything to help them escape.

“Why won’t you move?” Frustration rang out in her voice or perhaps it was desperation. She couldn’t leave without her sister and she wouldn’t stay.

Samantha stared into her sister’s eyes, trying not to feel the familiar rage as she gently ran her fingers over the dark bruises that covered Sabrina

nearly from head to toe. Her baby sister's skin, once a beautiful even caramel, was now mottled with scratches and dark splotches. All of the women had the marks and the marred flesh was proof that the men here didn't deserve any of them.

As gently as she could, Samantha cupped Sabrina's swollen cheek and lifted her sister's bowed head. "We have to go, sweetheart." She glanced around the compound again. "You know as well as I do, they won't sleep forever." No matter how much they both wished they would.

"I'm scared, Sammi." Sabrina's tear-filled eyes refused to meet her sister's gaze. "I'm scared to death that they'll kill us for running away."

Tears tracked down Sabrina's face unchecked and Samantha felt a spurt of impotent rage that she'd been unable to protect her sister from the animals who'd done this to her. Sabrina used to be so adventurous, so much of a brat. Now she was afraid to move, fearing her own shadow as they attempted their escape.

"We're both scared, honey." Samantha paused, staring hard at the ground before she admitted the dark truth, even to herself. "I'm terrified to leave, too, but we can't stay. We can't allow them to keep us here. I'd rather be dead than held here against my will, used like some sex slave for their depraved sexual habits."

Horried was another apt word. Nothing could compare to the complete and utter horror of listening to her sister's screams as these men continually raped her. Nothing.

What the men had done to *her* didn't matter. She couldn't let it matter. Every time they came to her, she drifted away, her consciousness leaving her body. After fighting the first few times, she realized she couldn't keep them from taking what she refused to give, but she could send her mind elsewhere. Sabrina never practiced the art of astral travel, so she couldn't leave her body and travel the ether while the animals who called themselves enlightened, violated it. What they did to her sister was enough to give Samantha nightmares for the rest of her life. She *had* to get Sabrina out of here.

"We both know we can't stay." Samantha indicated her own ravaged face and battered body, ruthlessly drawing her sister's attention to the brutality of this camp. Samantha knew that she had to make her sister realize it wasn't just her they abused, but everyone. All the women held here were prisoners. With the exception of those in the house, they held all the women here against their will for the men's pleasure and their ability to breed.

"Don't you see? We can't stay now. They'll know someone drugged or spelled them and

they'll beat the truth out of us." Samantha closed her eyes, wishing she were wrong, but knowing she wasn't. It wouldn't take long. The men had no qualms about beating the women until they would sellout their own parents and siblings in an effort to get them to stop.

Grabbing Sabrina's shoulders, she shook her, trying to get her to see reason. "We *can't* be here when they wake." Samantha almost slumped with relief when she saw the resignation in her sister's eyes. She'd finally gotten through to her and made her understand. "Are you ready now?"

Holding out her hand, she waited for Sabrina to take it, then pulled her to her feet. "Come on, we have to hurry." They didn't have much time. They'd have to make their way to the nearest river and follow it down to a town. She knew they couldn't risk travelling on the road. Who could they trust?

Running through the compound to the massive gate was easy, getting through the gate was not. They had to find the guard with the key. With a dozen or more guards, it was a daunting task to consider.

A twelve-foot high stone and concrete wall surrounded them on three sides. The fourth side was a sheer cliff that dropped at least a hundred feet to a raging river below. The recent rains kept the river swollen and angry, affording them no

avenue of escape as it flowed down the mountain.

They knew going into this plan that they must leave by the gate or throw themselves over the cliff. Either way they'd finally be free. After two months of captivity, both sisters knew they'd rather die than live like this. At least they'd felt that way yesterday. Now, faced with death as a last resort, it wasn't quite so appealing.

After a mad dash through the compound, they found, to their utter dismay, that the gate had an electronic lock. There was no key, but only a pass code the guards entered on a keypad. Since the guards never let them near the gate, they had no idea.

Samantha looked up, eyeing the wall, wondering if they each had the strength to scale it. The last few feet of wire at the top was nothing. They could hit a couple of the men over the head while they slept, rip their shirts off, and use them to cushion the wire enough to make their escape.

"What are you waiting for?" another of the captives asked. "They're all unconscious. We have to get out of here."

Samantha reached out to stop the woman. The other woman pulled away quickly, leaving Samantha's fingers barely brushing her arm before she threw herself onto the fence and made her way to the retaining wire at the top.

Sparks arced everywhere when she reached the

retaining wire. The woman screamed as thousands of volts of electrical current grabbed her and held her tight. Her hair smoked, her clothes burst into flame, then the compound went dark. The woman fell from the top of the fence, hitting the ground in front of them with a sick thud.

Sam fought the urge to retch as the horrible stench of burning flesh reached her nostrils. She clutched her stomach with one hand and her sister with the other and ran back the way they came. "This way," she hissed at her sister. "We can't go that way. What if the power comes back on somehow?" Pulling the still shocked girl behind her, Sam headed for the barn.

A few of the men planned to go into town on the paragliders. They were already set up and ready to go. Having been one of the women assigned to laundry duty, she'd often watched them give lessons as they hung the clothes out to dry. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out how to fly one of the things. Not to mention, landing the thing should be a piece of cake with the parachute. They'd just glide down, wouldn't they? She took a deep breath in an attempt to gather her courage. Whatever happened, the aircraft was their last and only hope of escape.

Keeping to the shadows, they sprinted around the barn. Since the men planned to leave at first

light, the three-wheeled craft was set and ready to go. First light crept closer and closer to the horizon. The sky turned a dark rose in the distance, the mountains silhouetted against the dark purple sky.

Samantha pushed Sabrina toward the nearest two-seated trike. "Get in."

"Are you crazy?" Her sister stared at her, mouth opened, eyes wide. "You don't know how to fly that thing."

"What's to know? If I can get it to the cliff, the chute will slow our decent, won't it? Besides, I've watched these animals give each other lessons for weeks. I can do it. I know I can."

"That doesn't mean you know how to fly the thing." Sabrina gave her a skeptical look.

"Come on. Stop being such a baby. Climb in. It's a piece of cake." Samantha looked over the controls. Where the hell was the start switch?

"Are you sure?"

"Just get in, hold on and shut up. I'll figure this out in a minute." She hoped to God she would. If it didn't start, they were dead anyway so the risk was worth it.

CHAPTER TWO

Aiden glanced over at Quinn as the other man drove. Sweat poured off them both, even though the air conditioning was on high and pumping ice-cold air through the vents.

His skin itched as though a million ants crawled all over him. His bones ached and his jaws felt close to shattering from keeping his teeth clamped together. The pain in his gums was excruciating, the agonizing effort of holding their cats at bay was nearly enough to drive him mad. Still, it wasn't anywhere near enough to distract him from the fear and rage he and his beast felt at the thought of their mate and her sister in the hands of their sadistic enemies.

They only had one clue. The elusive scent of a male they picked up just outside the women's apartment. Hell, even his beast knew they were grasping at straws. Two months was too long for any scent to linger unless the guy was stupid and marked the women's building as his territory.

Though from what he'd heard of the arrogance of the *Tudra* and those they answered to, it wouldn't have surprised him to learn the man *had* marked it as his territory. No one ever said that the men in the *Tudra* run by the false council were the sharpest pencils in the box.

Neither he nor Quinn had seen any claw marks near the girls' door, though that didn't mean the man hadn't rubbed himself on it and the building surrounding their home.

The shifters had special glands that secreted a scent unique to each of them. The glands were in their paws, their muzzles and various spots along the sides of their sleek bodies.

His wasn't even a trained nose yet and he could smell the man all over the apartment complex. Aiden also scented the male several times along this lonely stretch of mountain road.

Quinn turned the car down a two-track dirt road and pulled off in the bushes. "I smelled him again. I think it best we change here and track with our beasts. The last thing we need is for me to lose control of them while still driving."

What he didn't say was that controlling both their beasts was an exhausting task. Aiden knew the other man was tired. *He* was wiped. If fighting their other halves wasn't necessary, there was no reason not to let them out to track their mate.

Aiden flung his door open and leaped from the

vehicle. The cat struggling inside him, sensed he was about to get his way and snarled in triumph. He'd barely unbuttoned his shirt before his clothes disappeared and he glanced at Quinn in surprise.

"Don't look at me. It was probably your beast telling you to hurry the hell up." The other man's voice changed while he talked, growing deeper as his cat took over.

They both changed in almost the same instant. Large teeth exploded from jaws too small to accommodate them. Their faces widened and muzzles took shape as fur bristled along their skin, covering their bodies as they shifted.

Bones popped and cracked, muscles grew larger, denser as their legs and bodies shrank, becoming more compact.

In a matter of seconds, two sleek leopards stood in place of the two men. Lifting their muzzles into the air, they sniffed the soft breeze, circling the area until they found the scent they searched for, then were off like a shot.

* * * *

Quinn led the way. Since he'd been a shifter all his life, his nose was better, his tracking abilities more developed. Besides, he was *Leoparo*. His beast was his only beast.

Eleven months ago, he'd shared his blood with

Fish, thinking he was the offspring of a lost member of their clan. He'd been mistaken.

That Fish was part shifter was a correct assumption. He just wasn't *Leoparo*. Fish's dormant shifter genes came to life with the infusion of *his* blood, in a way neither of them expected.

Aiden Troutman was an all-shifter. The leopard was *not* his only alternate form—though it *was* his most dominant one, at least for now.

None of their people knew what an all-shifter's true form was. All they knew was that the form most commonly used was the dominant one. Right now, for Fish, it was his leopard. They'd both thought it best that he choose that form until Fish grew strong enough to control a raging beast on his own.

As long as he needed Quinn's help, Fish's dominant beast had to remain a leopard. After all these years, Quinn knew how to control a pissed off leopard.

The two cats sprinted up the road, following the other's scent. Fish's beast reveled in the knowledge that he was finally free to search for their mate and free to follow the trail of the cat who had stolen her from them.

Hell, Quinn had it bad. He hadn't even met the woman. Having seen her in Fish's mind and caught the memory of her scent, his beast knew

they were mates. That same beast drove him to search for her, to find her. The mate chemistry made him want her, need her, long for her in a way he'd never thought possible before today.

He already felt the *El Calor*, the mating heat, stirring within him. At seventy-seven years old, it was natural for him to feel it when he met his mate, but he hadn't met her. He'd merely gotten her scent, first from his friend's memories, then from her apartment.

At his age, Quinn had expected to feel the heat. What he hadn't expected was to feel it before he even met the woman he would claim as his mate. He prayed he could hold out until he found her, until he could convince her to love him, love the both of them.

If they couldn't convince her, he and Fish would slowly go mad.

The *El Calor* was relentless. It drove shifters to come together with their mates. It demanded they form a bond. It was a sort of madness that drove them to claim their mates or go completely insane.

Scientists in Paradise recently discovered that humans felt the heat, at least human women who were mates of shifters. When the heat struck them, it was more intense, claiming them faster and driving them over the edge like a shifter male.

Female shifters rarely felt the effects of the mating heat. According to the scientists, the more

human genes the woman had, the more intense the heat until they were claimed.

No matter his own discomfort, Quinn could only feel relief that their mate was spared the effects of the *El Calor*—at least until they found her.

* * * *

When Samantha finally saw the pull cord that started the thing, she sighed with relief, then gave the craft a suspicious look when she realized if it stalled, she'd have no way to restart it without an electronic start switch in the trike.

Still, it was the only two-seater she'd seen, and it looked set up and ready to go, the way the chute or as the men called it, the wing, laid on the ground behind it in a slight V-shape. Shrugging, she reached down, grabbed the cord and gave it a yank.

Nothing.

She gave it another yank and the engine sputtered a bit before it fell silent once more.

Sabrina turned in her seat and gave Samantha one of her irritating, know-it-all looks. "See, it won't start. We should take that as a sign to keep our feet firmly on the ground."

Ignoring her sister, Samantha took a deep breath and pulled the cord as fast and as hard as

she could. She practically danced with joy when the thing started and sat idling loudly as though waiting for her to climb in.

"If we're looking for signs, I guess that's a billboard for getting the hell out of here," she told her sister, smug. "Look," she added, raising her voice as she climbed in the pilot's seat. "I know you're scared. I'm scared, too, but we agreed before we spelled them that we were getting out of this place one way or another. We agreed to death or freedom and the end to our abuse."

Samantha finished sliding into her seat at her sister's curt nod. "It doesn't mean I have to greet death smiling." She paused. "Or unafraid."

"No one is going to die. I can do this. I know I can." At least Sabrina felt good enough to complain. A few days ago, she could barely get her sister to speak, not that she could blame her. She didn't like the things either of them had been subjected to over the last few months, but she also knew she couldn't change it.

Life in the foster system after their mother disappeared and before they were given to their maternal grandmother, taught her that there are things in life that just aren't fair, other things you just can't change and still others that were worth fighting for. This was worth fighting for and by God, she would change the situation they were in if it killed her.

"I sure hope you're right." She heard Sabrina shift in her seat. "I think the others have seen us. They're headed our way."

She turned just in time to see that the women on the other side of the compound noticed they were in the craft. It didn't take long for them to start running their way.

Hating to leave them with no way out, Samantha knew they had to get out of there or the others would swamp them, weigh down the glider and make it impossible for any of them to escape. If they could get out, maybe, just maybe they could lead the authorities back here.

Snatching up the wing grips, or whatever it was the trainer called them, she raised her arms a bit and slowly opened the throttle. She knew from listening to the men that she had to start out slow, get a feel for how it moved and to get the large wing straight above her head before she gave it enough gas to get lift. However, she was afraid the women heading their way would climb aboard the craft in an attempt to accompany them in their escape. The craft couldn't carry more than two people. Three maybe, considering how thin and emaciated all of them were, but certainly not the dozen or so headed their way.

Moving her feet, she steered the trike, trying to keep it positioned beneath the wing. It was more difficult than she'd thought it would be. Perhaps if

she wasn't scared to death, or if there wasn't a group of screaming women chasing after them, she could have kept better control. Still, after moving about four-hundred feet, the wing was directly over her head so she lifted her arms, opened the throttle wider and prayed they would leave the ground.

The trike hopped along the ground on its three wheels, unable to get enough lift as she moved her feet and steered toward the cliff's edge. They'd lift five feet off the ground, then drop back down. Several times the trike hopped into the air, only to drop back to the Earth with a thud, the wheels bumping along the uneven path.

As they neared the cliff, Samantha opened the throttle wide and began to chant, "I'd rather die than spend another minute here. I'd rather die..."

The sound of her sister chanting behind her gave her the courage to continue toward the edge.

Sabrina screamed as they went over the cliff and the trike dropped a few inches before the wing caught air and lifted them higher.

About fifteen minutes into the flight, Samantha's inexperienced arms began to ache. She wasn't used to holding them up over her head, nor was she used to having to use them to steer an aircraft, no matter how small. It didn't take much longer before she started looking for a place to

land.

She couldn't see anything close to the river. The forest was too dense to attempt a landing, especially when she really had no idea what she was doing in the first place.

Backing off the throttle a bit, Samantha allowed the paraglider to descend slowly as she eyed the river speculatively. She didn't really want to land in the water with all of the ropes and lines attached to the glider, but it was starting to look like she didn't have much choice.

Without warning, a gust of wind hit them from the side, buffeting the craft and causing it to rock precariously. Sabrina moaned in fear behind her as Samantha used her already exhausted arms to try to steady the craft.

Oh, my God! What did the instructors say about rocking? She'd heard it, had in fact moved slowly closer while she worked so she could hear it, wanting to know as much about flying one of these things as possible, just in case the opportunity to use one to escape presented itself.

Her stomach clenched, doing little somersaults as she tried to remember. It was a good thing they hadn't eaten in over eight hours. They may feel like they were starving, but at least they wouldn't be sick. At least she hoped not.

Samantha strained to remember the lessons she wasn't supposed to hear.

Don't overreact, the man had said. It's easy to lose control. When you feel yourself swaying, the first thing you want to do is use your arms to compensate. Don't! It only makes things worse.

It was difficult, but she managed to stop herself from pulling the wing from one side to the other. Instead, she held her arms in place about shoulder height and prayed the thing would stop rocking from side to side before one of them got sick, regardless of the time of their last meal.

Slowly, the glider began to steady itself and Samantha gave a huge sigh. What would they have done if she hadn't listened to those men? They'd still be back at that godforsaken compound, waiting for the men to wake up and torture the truth from them.

She squeezed her eyes closed briefly, hoping the others would blame her and Sabrina, or even the dead woman. Anything, but holding out and taking on the blame themselves.

If there was one thing she knew and didn't bother to tell her sister, it was that the men wouldn't kill them for what they'd done like Sabrina thought. They were too valuable for that. Although, nothing would stop the men from making them wish they were dead.

When the craft finally settled out, Samantha slumped with relief. Wishing she'd been better prepared for this flight, she rested her hands

against her shoulders, her arms burning with fatigue.

As soon as her hands touched her shoulders, the engine cut out. Apparently, in her infinite stupidity, she'd rested the kill switch against her shoulder. She'd known there was one, but just wasn't sure where it was, though the red button had been an indication. She shook her head. She'd hoped for a nice field to land on. Instead, she'd have to land in the river and risk getting tangled in the rigging.

"What happened? Why isn't the motor running?" Sabrina cried. "Start it back up. There's nowhere to land here."

"Don't you think I know that?" Samantha bit her lip to keep herself from saying something guaranteed to hurt her sister's feelings. "Release your restraints when we get close to the river. I'm not sure you'll have enough time once we get to the water." She tried not to think of herself. She couldn't keep the glider aloft and release her seatbelt at the same time. She had to give them as smooth a landing as possible, at least until Sabrina was out of the trike.

Glancing down at her restraints, Samantha prayed she'd be able to release them in a hurry and get free of the glider before it dragged her down to the bottom of the river. She didn't have much hope. Still, if her sister lived, it would be

enough. The river loomed closer and she clamped her teeth together. She'd soon find out how fast she could release her restraints.

"Get clear of the lines as fast as you can. Don't let them tangle around you." She glanced back at her sister for just a second, hoping her love shone in her eyes. She couldn't say it, couldn't tell her. Sabrina would never jump.

When they were about five feet from the river and it was time, Samantha warned her sister. "Here we go. Get ready." As fast as she could move, Samantha drew her exhausted arms down toward her hips, forcing the wing lower into a landing position and hoped it would drop behind them as they lost their forward momentum. "Jump, now!"

Screaming, Sabrina scrambled from the trike and dove into the river as soon as they touched the water.

Releasing the wing controls, Samantha heard the metal karabiners clang against the frame as she frantically fumbled with her restraints. Sabrina screamed again as the cool water quickly closed over Samantha's head, making the task more difficult.

Samantha pulled and slapped at the belt, trying to get herself free, but it wouldn't budge. The water tugged her and the craft as the wing passed overhead, the force of the current pulling them

downriver until the trike hit a good-sized rock and stopped as though anchored.

Her lungs burned. Her chest ached with the need for oxygen. She knew she was going to die, but knew it didn't matter. Not now. She'd gotten her sister away from those animals and that was all that mattered. If she died, it was worth it.

CHAPTER THREE

Aiden followed Quinn through the dense forest. Still in their leopard form, they made their way through the thick underbrush, sometimes leaping from branch to branch and tree to tree, following the movements of the male who had come before them. The smells of the forest worked to cover the trail of the other male. Rotting leaves and moist earth mixed with the scent of pine and wildlife.

They moved silently through the woods, utilizing the information gathered from all of their senses. The forest was dark, even in the growing light of dawn. He wondered more than once if this was a legitimate trail or if it was a decoy set to lead them away from the women instead of toward them.

Virginia was so far away from Paradise, he had a hard time believing the women were still in the state after two months. What brought the shifters here in the first place, and what did they want with Samantha and her sister? Did they plan to get

to him through them? It seemed unlikely that they would know of their connection.

Shit. His head ached just thinking about it. A little over a year ago, he'd never heard of shape-shifters outside of books and movies. Now, he *was* one and apparently had been at least part shifter his entire life. Just thinking about it was enough to boggle the mind.

He followed Quinn through the forest, silently, effortlessly, as though he'd grown up doing this. When he was in this form, the cat took control. Instincts he never knew he had came to the fore and took over. His personality remained the same though. He would never kill someone in his cat form that he wouldn't kill as a human. He knew that much now.

Dracen Giacomo, the only other known all-shifter in existence, told him he'd soon acquire the skills to block even his scent. However, *soon* in a shifter's life span could still turn out to be years.

Lifting his head, Aiden took a deep breath, scenting the air. His eyes and whiskers also took in information. He scented a rabbit hidden deep in the brush. He heard its heart beating frantically as it sensed the large predators in the area. His sensitive fur brushed along the needles of a young pine as he passed close to the terrorized bunny. It bolted from its hiding place in an attempt to lead him from its young.

There's a river ahead. We'll stop and get a drink. Perhaps, if we're lucky, we'll pick up the scent again. Quinn headed toward the water, keeping his nose in the air. *I don't understand how we lost the trail.*

Aiden gave a mental shrug as he followed the other man. *Maybe he was an all-shifter and covered his scent or turned into something else on the fly. Drace told me it was possible.* Aiden found himself wondering that very thing several times over the last few hours.

Unlikely. Quinn turned to look at him. His cat's eyes were still unsettling. Even though Aiden had lived in Paradise for the last several months, it was still difficult to come to terms with everything he'd learned, everything he'd become sometimes. *We would have scented another animal.*

Not if he chose to cover his scent.

That's only if he can cover his scent. Quinn turned back and headed toward the river.

What now? That was the question, wasn't it? Did they turn around and head back to his car or did they continue toward the river and what they hoped to find on the other side?

Quinn's answer never came. The high-pitched whine and unsteady revving of a motor in the distance drew their attention. *That almost sounds like a chainsaw.*

It did, but as they ran toward the river, it sounded as though it came from above their

heads. *What the hell? It sounds like it's in the air, but it's not like any aircraft I've ever heard before.*

They both put on a burst of speed, sprinting toward the river. Maybe this was the lead they needed. Perhaps the airplane, or whatever it was, would lead them to the men who took the women. It was a long shot, but right now, it was the only shot they had.

The two large cats burst through the underbrush just as what appeared to be a three-wheeled cart with a parachute attached, flew over their heads. It was a paraglider. He'd heard of those. He even knew a few men who got their jollies flying the things. Not him. He'd keep his feet firmly on the ground or have a licensed pilot cart his ass cross country, thank you very much.

The two of them chased after the craft for about a mile before its engine cut out. It was a normal occurrence, from what he'd heard. It wasn't a matter of if you'd have an engine out, but when. For this craft, it was obviously now. There was no coughing, no spitting or sputtering. The thing just shut off as though someone flipped a switch.

We have to reach them in case they land in the river and need help.

Quinn didn't mention it was their only hope of discovering if the person in the small craft could help them find the two women. He knew they couldn't allow whoever it was to die. They had to

find Samantha and her sister.

Aiden loved her more than his life. It felt like he'd always loved her. He was drawn to her in a way he'd never been attracted to another woman. Before his transformation to full shifter, he hadn't known why he felt the inexplicable need to have her by his side. Now he knew. She was his mate. His animal half knew it even while he thought himself fully human. He would find her or die trying.

A woman's scream drew his notice and he turned his attention back to reaching the glider as fast as he could. They broke through the forest, onto the riverbank in time to see a woman jump from the craft just before it hit the water and was sucked down by the greedy river.

Following Quinn, he plunged into the rushing water after the woman. Shifting on the fly, they both magickally dressed themselves in shorts so as not to frighten the woman. At least she was safely away from the tangle of ropes and wires that attached the large sail to the craft.

Reaching out, Quinn grabbed the woman's sleeve and pulled her to safety just as the hulking weight of the trike pulled the large cloth wing under the water.

* * * *

Quinn reached the woman first, her hazel eyes, flecked with gold were hauntingly familiar. She fought him like a she-cat as he tried to pull her to safety.

"My sister," she cried, struggling to get to the spot where the greedy water sucked the parachute out of sight. "You have to get my sister!"

Shit. There was another one?

"Sabrina?"

Fish's surprised reaction came from behind them, and Quinn felt a shiver of foreboding trip down the center of his spine and he handed the girl to Fish. Maybe he could hold her, keep her from diving into the tangle of ropes.

"You're Sabrina Hart?"

She nodded her head, frantically spinning around, trying to see below the water. "You have to save her!"

Fish grabbed her when she would have dove under and she grabbed him by the hair, her fingers digging into his scalp, and raked her nails down his face.

"Let me go!" She began to shiver, whether by shock or the cold, he wasn't sure.

Quinn wasted no time. He dove under, looking for their mate. *His* mate. He'd waited patiently for a mate these last forty years on this earth and refused to lose her now that he was so close. She couldn't die. He wouldn't allow it.

He had worked every muscle toward reaching her. He utilized every magickal shifter gene to find her as quickly as he could. There she was, just a few feet away, struggling with her restraints. Quinn swam to her, grabbing her by the neck, he pressed his lips against hers. Forcing her mouth open with his thumb and forefinger, he applied painful pressure to her jaws and released the air from his lungs, boosting the oxygen content as much as he could with his magick as she continued to fumble with her seatbelt.

Concentrating on shifting just his hand, he swiped his razor sharp claws across the belt, shredding it and releasing her. He pulled her from the seat and dragged her to the surface, knowing what little air he'd given her wasn't enough and she wouldn't be able to surface on her own. His lungs felt like they would burst as he reached the surface and sucked in air, filling his lungs with much-needed oxygen. Samantha lay limp in his arms, her face pale, her lips ringed with a blue tinge. He shoved her into Fish's arms. "Wish us all back to the riverbank."

"What?" Fish gave him a look that told Quinn the other man thought he was nuts.

"Do it!" They couldn't afford more delay. Their mate lay dying in Fish's arms.

The next thing he knew, they were all on the side of the river, soft grass beneath their knees as

Fish lay Samantha on the ground.

Sabrina was screaming over her sister, grabbing her shoulders, shaking her. Fish attempted to pull her off her sister as gently as he could.

Gritting his teeth, Quinn reached out, snatched the distraught woman away from his mate and shook her as gently as he could to get her attention. "We can't save her if you won't let us try."

Fish immediately began the usual water rescue technique of pushing up on her ribcage in an attempt to force the water from her lungs as soon as Sabrina was out of the way.

Sabrina fought, clawing at him, trying to get back to her sister's side as he watched and waited for Fish to perform the miracle Quinn knew he could. As an all-shifter, the other man could will her back as long as she wasn't brain dead.

After a few heart-stopping moments, Samantha began to cough up the river water in her lungs and Fish rolled her gently onto her side to help her rid her body of it.

Only then did Quinn release her sister.

The woman scrambled to Samantha's side and hugged her sister. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd lost you."

Quinn made a face. He quickly grew tired of hearing the words spoken from a woman who did little more to save her sister than scream like a

banshee and claw those attempting to save her. He turned to face the river so the woman wouldn't see his lip curl with contempt. He took a deep breath and listened to the beautiful music of his mate's retching as her body continued to reject the water in her lungs.

His head ached as he kept his mind attached to his mate's. Her pain was his pain and if he could lessen it... Sighing, he rubbed his head. Perhaps he was being too hard on her sister. He massaged the back of his neck and moved his head in a circular motion to stretch the kinks out.

If the men who sided with the old council had held them, they would need to heal more than the women's bodies. Perhaps he should try to cut the girl some slack.

He sighed, a part of him knowing the truth. Another part of him didn't want to face the possibility that members of the *Tudra* violated his mate and her sister while they were unaware. He should have known. He berated himself for not being open-minded enough to realize his mate was in grave danger.

"Aiden?"

The sound of Samantha's voice was like a caress. The effect she had on Quinn's body, just by speaking, should be criminal. No one should have that kind of power over another just by uttering a single word. He frowned and spun around, his

senses on alert as he looked for another man. His beast raged, wanting to attack the unknown male. Who the hell was Aiden?

"It is you," she said on a sigh.

Quinn crouched, ready to do battle with an unknown enemy before his mind registered that it was Fish she held on to, Fish whom she looked at with such love and trust, it made his stomach clench and his heart yearn for a similar look aimed directly at him.

* * * *

"I prayed you'd find us." Samantha looked up, her eyes filled with such trust, such certainty as she reached up with a trembling hand and cupped his jaw. "We were there so long and you didn't come to save us." Her eyelids drifted down, tears squeezing between them to run down her temples and into her hair. "So we saved ourselves."

"Yes, you did, love," Aiden answered, his heart breaking at the sight of her so thin, emaciated, her once luxurious ebony hair now lank and flat, the shine gone. He gazed down at the love of his life and thanked everything that was holy that they'd gotten to her in time. Just in time. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second as the possibilities washed over him and he realized if they'd been a few seconds slower, she'd be laying here on this bank

cold and lifeless.

Bowing his head, he also thanked whatever ancestor of his that made him an all-shifter, someone capable of types of magick mostly unknown to other shifters, for his ability to bring her to the shore so quickly so he could begin pumping the water from her lungs faster.

Opening his eyes, he met her gaze and cupped her cheek, his thumb gently caressing her full lips. Her dark hair framed her too pale face like a halo, reminding him how close to death she'd become and he saw the red killing haze of his shifter heritage. He wanted, needed, the blood of the men who took her from him and ultimately placed her in harm's way on this river.

Letting her hand fall away from his face, Samantha's dark brown eyes filled with tears. "They took us." She turned her head away, pulling her cheek from his hand. "They made us...they forced us..." Her voice broke on a sob as he gathered her in his arms and held her cheek pressed against his heart.

His throat closed as she confirmed his worst fear. His cat raged, wanted to be free to find those who harmed her. Something deep within him stirred, raised its head and growled a sound so low, and so menacing, it scared even him. *That* sound had come from a beast Aiden knew he had no chance to control if it got loose. Whatever it

was, it was pissed and wanted the men who harmed its female. He forced it back by thinking of Samantha, what she needed now. The unknown beast receded, allowing him to care for their mate, but left a bit of itself behind, watching and waiting.

"It's all right, love. You're all right now. Shh..." Aiden held her and rocked her for a few moments as her sister sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, glaring at him. "I'm here now, baby. No one's going to hurt you anymore. Everything will be okay now."

Sabrina's face darkened and her eyes grew stormy. "No, it won't. Quit lying to her, you prick. Nothing is all right. Nothing will be *okay* ever again." The words carried more meaning, more conviction as she whispered them with such venom than they would have if she'd screamed them at him. She sat there glaring at him, shivering in her wet clothes.

She was angry. It was a good sign. If she felt good enough to be angry, it meant she wasn't frightened of them. Aiden knew that much. He also knew that anger was a normal, healthy reaction. It was much better than keeping her temper locked up until she exploded. He could live with Sabrina's anger, even her hatred, just so long as Samantha didn't hate him as well.

Pulling back from Samantha's still trembling

form, he gazed deep into her eyes. He needed to know – had to know if she blamed him. God knew he blamed himself. He wouldn't even be surprised or angry if she blamed him for everything. He just needed to know one way or another so he could figure out a way to go forward from here. "Are you angry with me as well?" He searched her gaze for the truth. "It's okay to be angry."

He could take her anger. He could even understand if she hated him for staying gone so long. However, he found himself hoping, praying, that she didn't.

Tears ran unchecked down her face, mixing with the river water as she shook her head and leaned into him seeking comfort. "I prayed you'd come. I hoped I would see you again. I needed to tell you..." She began to cry again. "I never told you..."

Samantha wrapped her arms around his neck and sobbed against his shoulder. "You were always so kind to us." She sniffed and gave a slight hiccup. "You were always so incredibly gentle. I was scared, afraid you'd go on one of your missions, and I'd never see you again."

Pulling away, she turned to stare blindly toward the river. "All along, I was scared to death that you would leave and something horrible would happen to you, when I should have been worried that something would happen to me

instead.”

She laughed mirthlessly and shook her head. “I’ve wasted so much time being a baby, haven’t I? I have no excuse.” She wrapped her hands around her legs and rested her forehead on her knees. “Someone like you wouldn’t understand my excuse. You’re always so brave, putting your life on the line for someone else.” Samantha raised her head and turned to meet his gaze, her eyes still filled with tears, the little amber flecks growing brighter in the light of the rising sun. Reaching up, she cupped his cheeks.

Sabrina huffed and moved down the river. “Sam, you’re sick if you even think of having anything to do with men again.”

Samantha cleared her throat, watching, her expression troubled as her sister moved away from them. “I was afraid, terrified to admit that what we had was more than a physical thing. I don’t know why. Maybe it was out of fear that if I voiced it, then it would somehow endanger what we had, that it would jinx it somehow and something horrible would happen to you.”

Taking a deep breath through trembling lips, she continued, “It doesn’t matter now. Nothing matters now but telling you the truth, telling you how I really feel.” She thinned her lips for a moment as she turned her gaze back out over the river before looking back at him. “I refuse to be a

coward any longer. These last two months have been hell on Earth and I've given myself the right to voice my feelings."

Closing her eyes, she dropped her hands from his face and bowed her head. "First, I want to thank you..." She glanced toward Quinn for a second. "...And your friend for saving us. I know it's too late, but I have to tell you regardless, for my own peace of mind. I promised myself I would find the courage to say this if I ever saw you again."

* * * *

Aiden wanted to shake her. He wanted to grab her by the arms and make her say whatever it was she was hedging about. He hoped she wasn't going to tell him it was over. It was too late for that now.

His beast had her scent again, knew it was near its mate. He glanced over at Quinn whose every muscle seemed clenched, no doubt from resisting the urge to pull her into his arms and make her his mate.

Quinn was older, much older. The Heat, or as their people called it, the *El Calor* would be upon him soon if not already. The older a shifter was, the faster and more intense it came upon them when they scented their mate for the first time. That bit of information was one of the first things

Quinn taught him after bringing him fully over into the shifter world. If he scented a woman who drove his beast wild, he needed to find her, mate her, make her his in one way or another or he would slowly go mad.

Instead of shaking the words out of her, he waited until she was ready to continue. At least if she told him it was over, he'd have these last few minutes to fantasize about what truly mating her would be like. He prayed she wasn't about to break it off. She couldn't leave him, not now. He loved her. From the moment he first looked into her amazing amber-flecked eyes, he'd loved her — had even told her so at least a hundred times. Nothing could have prepared him for what she said next. He knelt before her, certain she was about to tell him to go to hell.

His heart was already breaking when she said, "I love you."

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. "Hoo! I finally said it." Biting her lip, she cast a glance toward her sister who gaped at her with hazel eyes round as saucers.

Aiden's heart swelled. He'd known she loved him before he left. She'd shown him that in a million different ways. He knew it. He had been patient enough to wait for her to realize it on her own. He'd never guessed she'd admit to it now though.

He didn't dare hope to get such an admission so soon after finding her. Not after all she'd been through over the last few months. He was so shocked he wasn't sure what to say. Words failed him. He merely sat and stared at her for a moment, trying to assimilate it and keep himself from drawing her into his arms and never letting her go.

CHAPTER FOUR

Samantha's heart broke as Aiden just sat staring at her as though she'd just shot him. She knew he didn't want her anymore. His reaction was all the proof she needed. Here she was, sitting in front of him, wet, covered in mud, and no doubt looking like something the cat dragged in. Hell, she couldn't even find it in her to be angry with him. She'd been with other men, no matter how unwillingly. Of course, he was disgusted with her.

She'd known this would happen. In fact, she wasn't surprised in the least. She'd known her news wouldn't please him, but knowing it before seeing the truth of it, didn't make it hurt any less.

Hot tears ran down her face and she began to babble. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop them. I really did. But they were too strong." She pushed herself to her feet and stood before him on wobbly legs, then headed back toward the river, hoping to wash the memory of their touch away in the cold water. She waded out until the water came to her

hips and dropped to her knees. "I don't blame you for not wanting me anymore. I don't blame you for hating me. I hate myself for letting it happen."

It wasn't his fault. She didn't blame him. How could she? She loved him too much for that. If only she would have told him how she felt before he left. Maybe he would have come back sooner. She knew he'd look for her when he found her missing. She had always known that he would come for her sooner or later, had even hoped he'd find her. It was in his nature to protect those weaker than himself. It was what he did.

Her sister didn't follow her into the water as she expected. Instead, she chose to sit on the water's edge, glaring at her. Even her own sister was disgusted with her. How could she blame anyone else for feeling the same?

Samantha picked up a fist of sand and rubbed it over her skin. There was no soap, but she'd found over the last two months nothing could wipe the memory of their touch from her better than the coarse sand. Perhaps, if she were lucky, she'd be able to scrape those layers of skin from her body and finally reach a place the men at the compound never touched.

Splashing behind her warned that someone followed her into the cold water. Samantha didn't even realize she was crying until Aiden turned her into his arms. She held onto him as though he was

the only lifeline to shore and she on a sinking ship while she sobbed onto his shoulder.

It took her a while, but after a few minutes, Samantha realized that he was shaking, too. Looking up, she saw tears in his beautiful green eyes.

"I'm so sorry, love," he said. "I—"

"Don't." She put her fingers over his lips. "Don't blame yourself. Don't ever blame yourself. You did what you thought was right. What you always thought was right. I knew." She stopped to clear her raw throat. "I knew when we met, when you told me what kind of soldier you were, that you would leave on a mission someday." She shook her head when he tried to speak again. "Don't you see? That's part of what I love about you. That you have this sense of right and wrong, that you have your sense of justice."

Pulling back, she turned to look out over the water. "I never blamed you. Not once. Not even when those men..." Her breath left her and she couldn't go on with that part of the conversation. "You're a hero, Aiden." Samantha cupped his cheeks and stared deep into his eyes so he would know she spoke the truth. "Who knows how I would feel about you if you'd have been any different?"

Aiden gripped her upper arms and gave her a look she knew she'd never be able to resist. "Let

us take you both to safety."

"No!" Sabrina practically screamed the words, her expression hard, her face filled with distrust.

She'd never liked Aiden. On some level, Samantha knew her sister was afraid he'd split them up, somehow rip them apart so they wouldn't even have each other anymore. Samantha knew better. She knew that whatever was important to her was also important to Aiden. He showed it in the way he always looked to her for her opinion. It told her that what she thought, what she wanted was important to him.

Her sister stood and stepped ankle deep into the water. "We don't need them." She glanced over her shoulder and pointed to a faraway cliff. "We've gotten this far by ourselves."

"Oh, really?" Quinn stepped forward, sparks practically shooting from his pewter eyes. Standing with his hands on his hips, his feet shoulder-width apart, he gave Sabrina a look had her stepping back a pace.

He pointed to where the trike sat below the surface of the river, the chute long since broken and lying on the shore in a heap where one of the men had pulled it from the rushing water. "That's not what you were screaming while your sister sat on the bottom of the damned river, drowning, a half hour ago."

"Stop it! Just stop it." Thrown into a coughing

fit by her outburst, Samantha held her hand up to indicate she wasn't through with what she had to say. When she finally caught her breath, she turned to her sister and shook her head. "I know you don't want to trust them." She glanced at Aiden. "But I do. We can't do this alone." She waved her hand toward the woods. "Say, for the sake of argument, that we do make it through this forest by ourselves. How do we know we won't run into men from the compound on the road?" She gave her sister an imploring look. "How do we know who else to trust?"

She glanced at Aiden. His face was back to its usual blank mask when he wasn't comforting her, making love to her. "We know Aiden. I trust him." She glanced at his companion. "And his judgment. He won't let anyone hurt us again. I know it." Wrapping her arm around her sister's shoulders, she tried to smile, but coughed instead. "Don't be angry. Be happy that we have some sort of protection from the others."

Sabrina closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "Okay. You win. We'll go with them. For now. At least until we get back to civilization."

The forest grew brighter, the sunlight shone through the thick foliage, throwing shadows over the dense undergrowth. The path they'd originally taken went from an actual path down to little

more than a deer trail. The scent of pine, moist earth, and rotting leaves comforted as well as worried Samantha. What would happen if this trail suddenly disappeared?

Needing to rest, she slowed to a stop and looked around for a place to sit. A few feet off the trail was a slight clearing with a fallen log near a tree covered in choking vines. She hoped it wasn't something poisonous because she'd just found her seat.

"I—I can't walk anymore." Almost regretting her decision to leave this forest under her own steam, she stumbled off the path and toward the clearing. Even the sun shone warm and inviting as she stepped onto the small grassy patch.

"Then let one of *them* carry you," Sabrina sniped. "After all, they're both falling and fawning all over you like you're the last woman on Earth."

"What?" If Samantha didn't know better, she would have guessed that Sabrina was jealous. She knew differently though. The last thing Sabrina wanted was a man's attention. Any man.

God only knew she didn't want any man's attention, but Aiden's. She stole a glance at his friend. What was it about the man that kept her looking his way? She even felt funny when she watched him. It was the same feeling she had when she'd first met Aiden. She bit her lip, trying to figure out why she felt such a strange attraction

to the other man. Hell, she'd never even been attracted to Caucasians before Aiden. Now she was attracted to two, even after all that had happened. What was wrong with her?

Somehow, something that happened back at that twisted camp, warped her mind. Maybe she hadn't even escaped. Maybe this was all playing out in her head as she lay on the hard cot while some sick bastard grunted over her. It wouldn't be the first time she left her body like that. It was the way she managed to keep her sanity. They couldn't touch the real Samantha. She was never home when they came calling.

Still, even with everything that happened, she couldn't help her attraction to this other man and she felt horrible for it. For noticing how his dark brown hair brushed his shoulders. It practically glowed in the bright sunlight that streamed through the open canopy in the clearing.

Clenching her fists at her sides when she would have reached up to smooth a stray lock of that glossy hair off his forehead, she resisted the urge to see if it was as soft as it was shiny.

Samantha shook her head. No way was she going to allow herself to think him attractive. Aiden was her man. No one else could touch her. It would be unbearable.

Still needing to sit, she moved toward the tree and the fallen log. The thick green vines gave her a

trill of apprehension, who knew what it was and whether or not hives would cover her later? Still, she couldn't help herself, she had to sit.

Behind her, she heard one of the men clear their throats. She thought it was Quinn, but she wasn't positive. Their voices, though not identical, were similar, as though they'd both had the same training, the same teachers even. She glanced over her shoulder to see, but they both even wore the same expression.

When she looked back at the tree, the vines were gone, the log was bare with the exception of a thick coating of dried moss. Exhausted, she sat anyway, certain her imagination was playing tricks on her. She must have seen the vines on another tree. Still, her confusion didn't stop her from lowering herself to the moss-covered log. It merely made her more determined to rest. But she could have sworn...

Magick was a part of her and Sabrina's lives, but they'd never been able to just wish something away. That stuff was best left for fairy tales.

* * * *

Aiden watched the two women as they huddled together under the large oak. Something burned inside him, trying to get out. Something within him wanted out, needed to hunt down those who

harm the two sisters. Not only because Samantha was his mate, but also because it was the right thing to do—the only thing.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to look away. The last thing he wanted to do was to frighten the two women. Hell, having to tell Samantha what they were—her mates and shape-shifters—scared the hell out of him, not to mention that it was going to prove difficult enough when she was ready. Right now, neither of them could handle much more.

“Sit here and rest. I’m going for a walk.” He gestured through the woods to the West. “I thought I heard someone chopping wood back that way. Perhaps I can rent a four-wheeler or something to carry you out of here.” He didn’t think the women would buy it, but the exhausted females merely nodded, barely lifting their heads from where they rested against the tree.

He glanced at Quinn, and surreptitiously handed him a piece of paper that he’d conjured up. *Wait here for about fifteen minutes and when I come back, find this note on me somewhere. It says the owner and I will meet you near the car.* Aiden hoped the women bought it. Otherwise, they were in for the shock of their lives.

He walked a ways into the distance, stopped, then spun around in a circle, using his new powers to sense anyone nearby. Convinced he was

finally alone, Aiden concentrated on shifting his shape. As long as the thing he shifted into was made entirely of natural resources, he could make himself a coffee mug if that was what he wanted.

Picturing the last large beast he could bring completely to memory, Aiden changed himself into a draft horse. It was a memory he shared with Samantha. If she recalled their trip to the livestock barn at the state fair, perhaps the animal wouldn't frighten her.

After shifting into the large animal, Aiden used his magick to fashion a crude bridle from natural fiber, then turned and headed back toward the clearing and his injured mate.

What he saw when he entered the clearing made his hackles rise. The unknown beast he'd fought for months struggled to break free as two men and two leopards faced Quinn. His triad mate, clearly outnumbered, refused to budge an inch.

"Give them to us and we'll let you live."

"No one lets me live, you arrogant prick," Quinn answered. He glanced over his shoulder at the women who cowered behind him, their backs pressed against the tree. They brought their legs up to their chests, obviously trying to make themselves as small a target as possible.

"Where's your hero now," Sabrina whispered to her sister, her voice filled with contempt. "You

said he'd keep us safe. If that's so, why did these men show up minutes after he left. He sold us out. Admit it."

Aiden felt a surge of anger at Sabrina along with one of pride as Samantha shook her head.

"Of course he didn't sell us out."

Almost no one noticed the large horse entering the clearing. Only one set of dark, amber-flecked eyes spared it a glance. The expression on Samantha's face surprised him. She looked... relieved.

It wasn't until Aiden raised himself up onto his hind legs and trampled one of the leopards with a loud scream that anyone else even spared him a glance.

His mate sat with her back against the tree and watched wide-eyed and silent as Aiden resigned himself to losing her forever. He feared she'd never believe he wasn't like those who kidnapped and violated her and her sister. He knew nothing could make him harm anyone in this clearing but those who threatened his mates. Changing before their eyes, Aiden shifted shape once more. He let go of his control and inhibitions and allowed the beast he fought for the last several months free rein.

Nothing could have prepared him for Sabrina's terrified scream or the men's moans of horror as the beast within him took control and bellowed

his rage at having so many unattached males near its mate.

He locked his mind with Quinn's. *Call Adam at the first opportunity and tell him to send someone for our car. We aren't driving anywhere.*

"Holy shit, it's an all-shifter!" one of the men exclaimed before he turned and ran off back the way they came, if the stench coming from that direction was any indication.

Aiden couldn't help but smile. However, his grin must have been a horrible sight to behold as another of the intruders screamed, backed up and lost his balance. Tumbling into the grass at the edge of the clearing, he pissed himself, then screamed again before passing out in a dead faint.

The beast wanted to go finish him, but Aiden refrained. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten the women more. When he turned his attention to the last intruder, the leopard glared at him and gave a hiss before slinking off into the forest with a snarl.

Resigned to losing Samantha, Aiden glanced at the two women, his heart breaking. She would never allow him near her now. It surprised him to see her stand on trembling legs, her sister holding onto her arm with a tight grip.

"What are you doing?" Sabrina cried as her grip slipped and she tried to keep hold of her sister's hand.

Samantha shook her off.

"Are you crazy, Sam? That's a—that's a..." Sabrina couldn't seem to put words into what she saw.

"I know what it is, Rina, so stop whining!"

Aiden gave Samantha a sharp glance as her gaze turned to meet his. Not once in the two years he knew her had she ever raised her voice to her sister.

"It is you, isn't it?" She smiled up into his eyes and moved closer. "Sabrina may not remember this, but our mother once told us about people like you."

People like you? Quinn interjected. *Hell, I didn't know about people like you until a few years ago and the Alpha adopted an all-shifter into the clan. What in the hell was their mother?*

Aiden wasn't sure he cared. All he cared about at the moment was the fact that Samantha wasn't running from him. Instead of running away screaming, she stood next to him, so close he could feel the heat of her body, smell her unique scent as she stared up into his eyes.

"Bullshit, Sam. Our mother didn't tell us Jack shit about shape-shifters."

"Then maybe she only told me." Samantha turned to give her sister a glare before reaching out to gently stroke Aiden's side.

He quivered at her touch, not daring to hope

that she could accept him, accept them, as they were. His stomach flip-flopped at the thought that she could agree to stay with him, with them, even knowing what he was, what they both were.

What did your mother tell you? Aiden deliberately spoke into her mind, knowing if she heard, nothing could prove more irrevocably that she was his mate.

Our mate, Quinn amended.

Either she didn't hear him as he'd hoped, or it was as he suspected and she ignored him. Whichever it was, she circled around him as he watched her with the strange red-tinted vision that accompanied this form.

"Mother always said that not all shifters are bad."

"The hell they're not," Sabrina interrupted.

Samantha didn't grace her sister with even the slightest glance. She merely continued her slow circuit around Aiden as he sat cowed by the slip of a woman he couldn't stop himself from loving.

"Mother told me," she stopped to clear her throat and give her sister a narrow-eyed glare. "She told *us* that only a rare breed of shifter and man could change into whatever animal or being they wished. Somehow, the shifter gene chooses good over evil. She also told us that a *Misuzuka*—or all-shifter—was always good. An all-shifter can't be bad and if it seems so, then all is not as it

seems." She frowned and bit her lip. "I have no idea what she meant by that."

Stopping her slow meandering around the beast Aiden had become, she stared up into his eyes. "I would know those beautiful green eyes anywhere, Aiden, and nothing could convince me you were anything but good before. Now, I know my trust wasn't misplaced."

"You can't be serious!" Sabrina's outbursts began again now that it was obvious that Samantha was on his side. That she didn't intend to leave his side.

At that moment, Aiden wished he were evil, just a bit. He'd like nothing better than to send her sister back to the river where they'd found her. However, he denied himself even that small thing. His mate was right about him. It wasn't in him to harm someone weaker than himself and, he looked down at himself, given the circumstances, just about everyone was weaker than he was.

Aiden let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and gray smoke billowed around them. Lowering his shoulder to the ground, he attempted to speak. His magick was powerful in this form and he was sure speaking wasn't beyond this creature's scope of power.

"Get your sister and climb on. We're not going back to the car. I'm taking you both back to Paradise where we can keep you safe." The sound

of his voice was deep, gravelly and surprised even him.

"Paradise?" Samantha turned to her sister and held out her hand. "Come on, Rina," she said when her sister crossed her arms and shook her head. "I told you he'd never let anyone harm us."

"You may trust that...that," Sabrina paused and waved her hand at Aiden. "That...thing, but I don't." She gestured toward Quinn. "And what's his story? You can't tell me you haven't noticed him sniffing around you like some horny junkyard dog."

Closing her eyes, Samantha took a deep breath before again meeting her sister's gaze. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is getting as far away from here as we can." She waved her arm in an arc. "If they were anything like the monsters that kidnapped us, they would have attacked us already."

Aiden saw the acknowledgement of that truth in Sabrina's eyes.

"Oh, all right." She shook her finger in her sister's face. "But don't expect me to like it." She stalked over to join Samantha. "And don't ever expect me to ride another of these...things after this is over either."

"He's not a thing, Rina. This is Aiden. He's the same gentle man who has been coming to our house for dinner for the last two years." She

shrugged. "Right now, he just happens to be a dragon." Samantha smiled, took her sister's hand and led her up Aiden's large wing. "He's also an all-shifter, one of the most noble, trustworthy of beings ever born."

Sabrina snorted. "You mean hatched."

Aiden ignored the rest of their bickering as they climbed upon his back with Quinn following behind to anchor their legs beneath his heavy scales.

"We're ready when you are, Fish," Quinn said after seating and securing himself.

"It's Aiden," Samantha reminded him gently.

Quinn grinned. "Sorry but that's how he was introduced to me. I never knew his real name before today." He made a face, then pushed his hair back off his face. "Speaking of which, I'm Quinn Sadler, by the way. I apologize for not introducing myself before, but things were a little intense back there."

"Whatever, let's go all ready." Sabrina couldn't seem to wait to get her ride over with. Looking down over his shoulder, she groaned, then glared at her sister. "I don't believe I'm doing this. If we die, it's all your fault." She muttered something else beneath her breath, then fell blessedly silent.

Aiden turned his head away from them, looked up through the opening in the trees and prayed for a moment before using his powerful legs to

leap straight into the air. About fifteen feet above the tree line, he flapped his powerful wings a few times and they were off like a shot, headed northwest toward Paradise.

* * * *

Quinn sat directly behind Samantha as they skimmed over the treetops. The early morning turned to afternoon and Aiden, forced to the ground, shifted back into the big Belgian draft horse he'd been when he first entered the clearing and saved them from the shifters that tried to kidnap her and her sister again.

Now, mounted on Aiden's back, the other man still sat behind her, his warmth and scent seeping into her bones. Nothing she did reduced her awareness of him. Nothing she could say would change their positions. He wasn't an all-shifter. He, like those who violated her and Sabrina, was a leopard shifter. However, according to *his* opinion, that was where the similarities ended.

By her estimation, it was near four in the afternoon when Aiden finally found a town and stopped to rest.

Aiden, having carried them every one of the fifty or so miles they traveled, was covered in thick lather, his breathing heavy as he stopped and they dismounted. He shifted back to his

human form with obvious effort, then fell to his knees, exhausted.

"We need to get a room here." At a shake of Aiden's head, Samantha added, "I don't think I can go on." She shivered, rubbing her arms. "I need to shower, to eat, and to get some sleep. In that order." She knew Aiden and he would never consent to stop and rest for himself so she made him stop for her.

"We'll need a room." Aiden glanced up at Quinn for a moment before lowering his gaze back to the ground. It was almost as though it was too much effort for him to hold his head up.

"And another car."

When Aiden would have protested, Samantha moved in front of him, put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Look at you." She pushed gently at his shoulder. "You're so tired, you can't even hold your head up. How do you expect to fend off another attack if you're exhausted? You can't keep carrying us everywhere, regardless of what shape you take." Kneeling in front of him, she placed her hand on his shoulder and leaned down to meet his gaze. "You need rest more than we do. And goodness knows, I need something to eat." She bit her lip, then finally admitted, "I don't remember the last time we ate."

An hour later, Samantha and Sabrina were in

connecting rooms at the closest hotel.

"I don't know why we have to share rooms with those two. No one knows where we are." Livid, Sabrina paced the room where Samantha joined her when the men left to get them something to eat.

Samantha didn't believe for a second that they would harm either of them or that they would force themselves on her sister or herself. She believed the two men meant what they said when they informed Sabrina and her that they would sleep on the floor. They merely wanted to be close to protect them from further harm. "I trust them, Rina."

Her sister made a face. "Like you trusted the man who kidnapped us?"

"If you recall, we both trusted him." Samantha fixed her sister with a level stare. "Don't blame that on me. Besides, that was different," she insisted. "I trusted him because he said he was a friend of Aiden's. How were we to know he was lying to us? We had no reason to believe anyone wanted to harm us."

Sabrina stopped pacing. "Who's to say he wasn't? Your precious Aiden could be behind the whole thing. How do we know this Paradise they're taking us to isn't another prison?"

They didn't. All Samantha had left was her trust of the man she loved and she refused to

believe he was anything other than what he seemed. She held on to the story their mother told them before she disappeared and the state left them with their grandmother. "Listen, Sabrina Marie, I've put up with your distrust of Aiden and your downright meanness to the man I love for the last two years. Do not, I repeat, do *not* make me choose between you."

Sabrina slid down into the chair in front of the desk that sat near the window. "I—I don't mean to be so nasty, Sam." Hanging her head, she wrung her hands in her lap. "I really don't. I just can't help but think he's driving us apart."

It wasn't Aiden driving them apart, it was her sister's fear of being left alone, her desire to remain as they were with nothing changing. She had to realize they couldn't continue like this forever. They both needed change. They both needed to follow their dreams of having men and families of their own. Samantha knew she couldn't let what happened make her lose sight of that. If she did, those men, those monsters, won. They would have managed to ruin everything she wanted, everything she had worked for, dreamed of for her entire life. She couldn't, wouldn't, let that happen.

Kneeling in front of her sister, she looked into her sister's hazel eyes that were so much like their mother's she wanted to cry. "Don't you see,

honey? It's you who is tearing us apart—your distrust, your anger, your hatred. Don't make me choose between you, because no matter what my choice is, I'll never forgive you for it."

Burying her head in her hands, Sabrina began to weep. "I'm sorry, Sammi." She used the childish nickname, making Samantha realize how upset she really was. "I'm so sorry, but I don't know that I can trust a man, any man, ever again."

"Shh, baby sister. I know. If I didn't love Aiden so much, I might feel the same." Samantha knew it was a miracle that she didn't feel the same. She may never recover from her ordeal at that godforsaken compound. Hell, she wasn't even sure she'd ever be able to stand Aiden's sexual advances when he eventually made them. But she wanted to. She didn't want those monsters to control what she did for the rest of her life, to steal her dream of children of her own from her.

Steeling her resolve, Samantha determined that she would overcome her fears one way or another.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Quinn opened the door to the room, the first thing he noticed was that both women had scrubbed themselves until their caramel skin glowed with a pink undertone. He'd left with Aiden nearly an hour ago, letting the women believe they were both going for food. Aiden stayed behind to protect them with his unique abilities while he went in search of sustenance.

Aiden and he would eat after the women ate their fill. It wouldn't kill either of them to miss another meal. However, the women were nearly emaciated. Their bones showed through their paper-thin skin. He wanted nothing more than to hunt the men down and put them out of everyone's misery. No one, no one, deserved treatment like that.

The two women sat on the bed, huddled together beneath the blankets. Sabrina clutched the TV remote in her hand as though it was a lifeline while they both slept.

Quinn may have let them sleep if it weren't for the fact that it had been so long since their last meal that neither of them could remember when that had been.

Letting the door slam shut behind him, it served the purpose of waking the two women without physical contact, something he knew they would both appreciate. Besides, he was sure it would only have caused more discomfort.

"You're back." Samantha stretched, then reached down to straighten the robe she wore, a blush darkening her cheeks.

Her sister wore the clothes they'd found her in, obviously refusing to wear the robe for fear it would make things easier should he and Aiden decide to force themselves upon them.

"Of course. We didn't go far." Aiden neglected to mention that he'd stayed in the hall outside the rooms, resting between the two doors. He set the large sack he carried onto the desk in the corner. "We just went to get you something to eat. I hope burgers and fries are okay."

"It sounds more than okay. It sounds heavenly."

Grinning, Quinn looked at his mate. "Now I *know* you're starving if hamburgers and fries sound *that* good." He reached out to stroke her cheek and caught himself just as she flinched away. Holding his hand up, palm out, he

grimaced. "Sorry."

Swallowing, Samantha looked away and nodded. "It's—it's okay. I-I know it's not your fault. I just..." Tears filled her eyes.

Quinn fisted his hand and hid it behind his back. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to find the men who did this to her and squeeze the life from them with his bare hands. He didn't want his cat handling the matter. Quinn realized just then how much of a hold the *El Calor* had on him. Everything within him wanted to find them and take pleasure in killing the men who violated his mate.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to keep up a calm front so as to not frighten the women. If she didn't come to him as his mate soon, the *El Calor* would drive him to madness. When that happened, he'd have no choice but to end his existence or become like those who attacked Samantha and her sister—those who violated women and killed men for pleasure.

Long ago, before he ever dreamed he would find his mate, Quinn made a vow to himself. He would die before he became anything like his father before him. *If she cannot accept me before the El Calor drives me mad, you must kill me, Aiden. You must promise me this.*

Aiden gave him a slight nod of his head. *I would consider it my duty to protect both of my mates from*

the wrath of The Heat.

He turned to give the other man a long look. *Meaning you will do as I ask?*

Giving another short nod, Aiden replied, *if I must.*

Quinn let out the breath he'd been holding and relaxed a bit. It was difficult to do anything but remain tense, considering his entire body felt as though someone was using a blowtorch on his innards. He didn't have much time. Three days, a week if he was lucky and he'd not have the strength to keep the effects of the heat at bay.

Their scientists still hadn't figured out why the heat affected some more than others. A few of them thought it had something to do with age, but with more of their people either dead or in hiding, and their archives hidden or destroyed, there was precious little information on the subject. Some felt it and others did not. For now, that was the way of things.

The two men watched as the sisters each grabbed a burger and box of fries, then sat back down on the bed to eat. He wasn't hungry. Not after coming in and seeing just how thin his beautiful mate was beneath her clothing. He would give her all the food in this town if he thought she could eat it.

Besides, it was difficult to maintain an appetite with the *El Calor* bearing down on him as it was.

Each time a new wave came, it was longer, more intense than the last. He couldn't help but wonder how long it would take for the waves to come faster and so close together that it felt like one endless wave of heat and pain battering his insides.

Closing his eyes, he breathed through the pain, wondering absently if he could compare what he felt with the labor a woman experienced during childbirth. If what a mother felt delivering her child was even one tenth of this agony, it was a wonder humans weren't extinct. Then again, he thought as he looked at the two women sitting on the bed devouring their supper, women didn't always have a choice.

Reaching out with his mind, he connected with Aiden. *I don't think I have much time, Fish.* He closed his eyes and continued to speak through their mind link. *If we can't convince her to accept us both as her mates, you'll have to kill me quick. I have a feeling I won't care much about hurting either of you once The Heat has me in its thrall.*

Aiden's gaze shifted briefly to the women, then back to meet Quinn's. *Tonight is too soon, but I will try to get her used to my touch again. She will accept you. Her heart is big enough to love us both.*

Another wave of heat seared Quinn's insides with one last blast before it finally subsided and he relaxed. Leaning against the wall, he slid down

to the floor, his body spent, his strength depleted.
I hope so, my friend. I truly hope so.

* * * *

Aiden sighed as he watched his triad mate fall into an exhausted sleep. He knew he should be tired as well, especially after carrying them all so many miles through the woods. Still, he had no idea why he wasn't. Whatever it was, it gave him the strength to see to his mate's needs, and right now, that was the only thing that mattered.

Whatever it was that kept him awake while everyone else slept, made him feel alive, more alive than he ever had. He glanced over at Samantha who slept on the bed, her half-eaten hamburger sliding from her grip. Languorous warmth stole over him as he took his time staring at the woman he loved while she slept.

Standing, he moved to the bed and gently relieved the two sisters of their half-eaten supper. They'd been starved, literally, and could no longer eat as much as they needed. It would take time, but hopefully, they would soon blossom into the curvy and beautiful women he remembered from the warm days they spent on Virginia's sandy beaches.

Setting the food on the desk, he returned to the bed and, gently as he could, pulled the covers over

Sabrina as she slept. He knew it was proof of her exhaustion that she could sleep with two men in the same room with her. Walking around to the other side, he picked Samantha up, cradled her to his chest, and carried her into the other room.

Aiden stopped at the door, turned back and sighed at his triad mate in an exhausted sleep on the floor. He should be tired as well and couldn't figure out why, of all of them, he was the one still going strong. Perhaps it was adrenaline or a second wind, or just maybe...there was some other perk of being an all-shifter no one told him about.

Whatever it was, he felt alive, more alive than he ever had. The warmth that continued to move through his blood had him looking down at the woman he held in his arms. He took his time quietly closing the door between the two rooms as he leaned back against the closed door and inhaled deeply.

God she smelled good. She always had. Even fresh from a shower, with nothing on but a smile, she'd always smelled delicious. Now that he was full shifter, instead of the mutt he had been all his life, her scent was even more appealing, more alluring. The word intoxicating came to mind.

The warmth made a slow circuit of his body, his blood thickened, ebbing slowly through his veins. His entire being warmed as he stood

holding his mate in his arms. Before, he'd always attributed that heat with desire. Now he wondered if it wasn't some diluted version of the *El Calor*.

Not once had he ever felt that curious heat with another woman. He'd only felt it with Samantha. He'd thought, hoped, it meant she was the one with which he should spend the rest of his life. Now that he was full shifter, the heat was different...more.

Pushing away from the door, Aiden carried Samantha to the king-sized bed. Using his magick, he pulled the blankets back and gently laid her down on the clean sheets. After straightening, he took the time to look at her, really look at her for the first time since they found her.

Dark circles beneath her eyes marred her dark caramel complexion. Purple and black bruises mottled skin on her chest and the gentle curve of her breast where the robe fell open. He had seen the discoloring of her arms earlier, but these...these were an abomination.

Aiden clenched his teeth and took slow, steady breaths to keep control of his beast. The ferocious dragon, the beast he'd battled for months, finally allowed some freedom, wanted more. It wanted free rein. Now, a different kind of heat flowed through his veins as he imagined, burning alive, those who abused his mate with the fire buried so

deep within him.

Even knowing the rage it caused, Aiden couldn't stop himself from looking. Even knowing she wouldn't want him to see, to touch her, he couldn't stop himself from opening her robe and seeing it all.

His only thought was to inspect. To heal. Sex was the last thing on his mind. The beast was in full control and at that moment, it wanted nothing more than to heal its mate.

Dropping to his knees next to the bed, Aiden picked up her leg. Starting at her feet, he closed his eyes, using his magick and the healing agent in their saliva Draven told him about, to heal her wounds. He gently tended cuts and scratches that marred her skin. He made sure not to ignore even the bruises as he continued to heal her.

Stopping, he looked up at her as she slept. Her expression was softer now. She looked more comfortable, just from the little he had already accomplished. She probably was. Concentrating, Aiden used his telepathic abilities to dip gently inside her mind.

What he saw would have brought him to his knees had he not already been there. The things she'd suffered at the hands of those monsters over the last few weeks made his dragon roar with pain and sorrow, anger and despair. *Never again.*

Using the magick, he softened her memories,

aged them. He took the pain from them and did his best to heal her mind as well as her body. There was time enough for bonding later. This was the time to heal.

* * * *

Samantha stretched languorously. She knew she was dreaming. Just one day without a *visitor* wouldn't allow her to heal sufficiently so that she'd not feel the usual pain on awakening. The bruises, bite marks and welts from her numerous beatings could never go away so quickly, no matter how much she wished they would.

Rolling over, she stiffened when she felt a body next to hers. It was too big to be Sabrina. Her only comfort was that, whoever it was, he remained fully clothed. Not wanting him to know she was awake, she cracked an eye open and hoped that whoever it was, was sleeping so she could slip from the bed unnoticed. She gasped when she saw who it was. Sitting up, she let the sheet fall away, exposing her bare breasts.

When she looked down at herself, Samantha couldn't help but notice that her bruises were gone, her cuts, scrapes and welts were also healed. Reaching up, she pushed her hair from her face with a trembling hand.

"Now I know I'm dreaming." Tears filled her

eyes and slid down her cheeks as she sat next to the man she loved and looked down at her body, no longer marred with the visual reminder of her time at that hellish camp.

"I do wish this wasn't a dream," she whispered. Pulling her robe tight, she lay back down next to Aiden, determined to enjoy the comfort of his presence while it lasted, even if it *was* only a figment of her imagination.

"You aren't dreaming, baby," Aiden said, his voice heavy with sleep. He wrapped his arm around her and squeezed gently. "You're in a hotel somewhere in West Virginia. Sabrina is in the adjoining room. Most importantly, you're both safe."

"It's a dream." She shook her head. "You're not real. This isn't real. It can't be. I had..." Swallowing thickly, she cleared her throat. "There were..."

"Cuts, bruises, welts from where they beat you?" he asked gently, then shook his head. "They're all gone, all healed. There's nothing left of them but your bad memories and even those I did my best to heal."

Samantha inhaled sharply and examined her memories. He was right. Even the worst of them seemed softened somehow. It was as though a lot of time had passed—a year, maybe two. She felt...healed. Inside and out. "Can you...do this

for Sabrina?"

"I don't think so. I don't know if I can get into her mind. If I can, I can heal her mind if she'll let me in." He shrugged. "However, you wanted me in your mind. You reached for my touch as I entered your thoughts." Rolling onto his side to face her, he gave her a crooked grin. "Somehow, I just don't think your sister is going to appreciate my help."

"Then heal her wounds."

His smile faded. "I can't."

"You can't or you won't," she asked, then thinned her lips. It was no secret that there was no love lost between the two of them, but she never thought he would let her sister suffer if it was in his power to stop it. She didn't want to think him so petty as to hold a grudge like that, but why else would he refuse to do it?

"Okay then. I *won't* do it." He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and sat with his back to her. "For one thing, neither of you would allow it."

"Bull chips! I just asked you to." Standing, she clenched her fist so hard it hurt. Never had she ever been so mad at him. Circling the foot of the bed, she moved to face him. He wasn't escaping this so easily. If it killed her, he *would* look at her and tell her why he wouldn't help her sister.

He shook his head. "Neither of you will like

how it's done. Especially her."

Samantha opened her clenched fist and showed him the red crescents on her palm. Blood slowly seeped from the new wounds where her nails dug into her tender flesh. She shoved her hand into his face. "Then show me how it's done and let me decide." Never had she thought him capable of refusing to help someone who needed it before today. He'd always helped everyone he could as long as it was within his power to do so. But not today. Why?

"Fine," he bit the word out between clenched teeth.

A muscle popped in his jaw and his emerald gaze shot green fire at her. The glint in his eyes told her that maybe, just maybe, she should have left well enough alone.

"Put your hand in mine. Later, you aren't going to deny that you asked me to do this."

Samantha rested her hand in his. Two years of trusting this man made it easy to decide to keep doing so.

Circling her wrist with his fingers, Aiden bent over her hand, turned it over, and pressed a very long, very wet, and intimate kiss against her palm. Warmth swirled through her hand and up her arm as his tongue moved slowly over her palm.

Liquid heat pooled low in her middle. Her body's cream slid sinuously from her channel to

coat her upper thighs. She had never thought to feel this way again. Not once since her capture had she dared to dream that she could feel this way again. Even for Aiden.

When her legs would have given way, he wrapped his arm around her as his mouth continued to feast at her wound. Everything fell away as some part of her remembered his healing from the night before. His mouth and tongue on her damaged flesh, giving instead of taking, healing instead of harming.

This was what Aiden was deep inside. He wasn't a man, a shifter, but rather, her salvation, her healer...her lover. He was the gentle man who always gave more than he'd ever taken for himself.

Slowly, he pulled away, looked up into her eyes, his own a deep, emerald green. "Look at your hand, baby."

He held it up for her to see.

"That's how I healed you last night. Do you still want me to heal your sister?" He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, his breath sending tendrils of desire coursing through her blood. "Do you really want my mouth on her skin? Does she have bite marks on the tips of her breasts as you did? Will you want me to suckle them as I did yours?"

Samantha's nipples grew to hard peaks and she groaned. Just thinking about his lips on her flesh

last night made her wet. She leaned against him and began to pant.

Reaching up, Aiden pushed the robe aside and cupped her breast, his lips settling over the hard nub. For a moment, he suckled gently, then stopped and looked up into her eyes. "Tell me you want me to do this to your sister."

Samantha shook her head. She wanted her sister healed, but, God help her, she couldn't bear the thought of Aiden touching any other woman but her this way.

This was right. What she did with Aiden was something beautiful, even spiritual. Nothing could convince her otherwise. Wrapping her arms around his head, she held him to her. She hoped, even prayed that he was right and this wasn't a dream.

Her head dropped back onto her shoulders as he continued to suckle her breast. She couldn't think, could barely breathe as his gentle mouth and tongue took her to the edge of a familiar precipice she hadn't dared hope to visit again.

* * * *

Lifting her, Aiden turned her toward the bed, laying her across the wide expanse. When her robe fell open, exposing every delicious inch of her dark-tipped breasts and every dark secret between

her legs, Aiden groaned with the need to bury his cock deep inside her and finally claim her as his mate.

Sitting back, he allowed himself a few precious moments for his eyes to feast on her succulent flesh. The dark triangle at the apex of her thighs was gone, shaved or waxed smooth. No doubt, it was an attempt to humiliate her and those like her.

Aiden missed the dark patch of downy soft hair, but refused to dwell on it, to draw attention to it. She had enough to feel self-conscious about. He refused to add to her burden. Leaning forward, he kissed her once slightly rounded belly, his tongue delving into the dark recesses of her navel.

Moaning, Samantha reached down and grasped his hair, her fingers pulling it, sending darts of sensual pain through his bloodstream and straight to his crotch.

Gently parting her legs, Aiden moved between her thighs. Now he would heal this last part of her and, hopefully, wash away the memory of another's touch while giving her the heart-stopping pleasure she deserved.

Samantha groaned as he flicked her clit with his tongue. He suckled the bare, dark folds of her labia into his mouth.

Before he was done, she wouldn't think of the others, she would think only of him. She would

have no choice but to scream out her pleasure, her need as he ate at her nether flesh, his tongue fucking into her tight channel.

He wanted everyone within hearing distance to hear her screams of pleasure. His beast needed to know others knew she belonged with him, to him and that she was forever out of their reach.

His dragon wanted her to reach for him, to beg him to take her. This was what she brought out in him. The dragon who would avenge her, the beast who would take nothing less than her complete surrender as he continued to eat at her flesh and lap the sweet cream from between her spread thighs. This was the uncivilized beast borne of need and frustration, anger and heat. The blood-thirsty dragon that would kill anyone, anything to protect its mate.

He flicked the tip of his tongue over her clit and she groaned, her hips jerking, her hands fisting in the sheets. Circling the hardened nub, he thrust first one finger, then another into her tight channel. Sweet cream gushed from the tight hole and he lapped it up greedily. Her thighs tensed as she tried to raise her hips and thrust herself more firmly against his face.

"Please," she begged as he continued to thrust his fingers deep into her flesh before pulling them out to thrust them into his waiting mouth. "Don't stop."

He felt how much that cost her. Those two words meant a lot, especially now. "I don't want to hurt you." He didn't, but God only knew how much longer he could keep this up without taking her. He wanted her, needed her with a desire he'd never thought possible before now. Whatever happened here today, nothing would ever be the same between them again.

"I know what you want, Aiden." Her voice broke, her breath coming in short pants. "Grandma told me what you would need."

Threading her fingers through his hair, she pulled gently until he crawled up her body, taking his time to stop and pay homage to her dark nipples before looking deep into her eyes.

"It was Mama's and her greatest wish that both Sabrina and I find an all-shifter to mate with." She wriggled her hips. "I'd long ago resigned myself to disappointing them because I wanted you." She cupped his cheeks with both hands. "Since the moment we met, I've wanted you. Only you."

Aiden rested his head on her chest. He knew he shouldn't go on without telling her about Quinn, yet he was unable to keep himself from doing just that. He brushed her hair back from her face and looked into her dark chocolate eyes. Eyes that could make him die a happy man if only she allowed him to gaze into their dark depths as he expired. The little amber flecks shone with new

light at she looked upon him with something akin to hero worship. His throat grew tight and he closed his eyes. He didn't deserve her. He never had, but nothing would stop him from claiming her as his own.

There was nothing he wouldn't do for her, nowhere he could ever go to get her out of his mind—not that he wanted to. Above all else, there was no male in existence, other than his triad mate, who would ever touch this woman and live.

Samantha mewled in protest as he pulled away. Fumbling like a schoolboy with his first encounter, Aiden fisted his cock and began to guide it toward the wet, waiting entrance to her empty channel. Lunging forward, Aiden pushed his cock deep inside her waiting sheath. The slickness of her channel made it easy to push his hard length inside her.

"Yes," she cried, her head thrashing on the pillow.

Nothing could have stopped him at that point. There was nothing on this earth strong enough to make him give her up. Not now. Not ever.

He covered her as she lay back on the bed, her legs spread, her head thrown back in ecstasy. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, it was the trigger to his loss of control.

Rising up onto his knees, he planted his hands on each side of her head and drove into her with

abandon, reveling in the feel of her tight sheathe gripping his cock, milking his seed from his very soul.

* * * *

Samantha didn't realize how far gone she was until she wrapped her legs around his waist. When he drove into her harder, faster, that was when she knew there was nothing left but to give as well as she got. This was Aiden. He wasn't some nameless, faceless male who forced her to do unspeakable things. This was the man she loved making love to her, helping her erase the memories of an animal's touch.

His hard length stretched her more than she could have guessed it would, more than she remembered. What was different? Was it because he'd somehow changed, became the all-shifter her mother told her about, dreamed about, wished for her to marry?

"Tell me if I'm hurting you." The words came out on a fierce groan. "I don't want... You're so tight. I don't want it to hurt."

"No." She groaned when he slowed, misunderstanding her. "Please. Don't... Don't stop." God she didn't want to beg. Not after everything that happened over the last two months, but there was something deep within her

that wouldn't allow her the luxury of modesty.

His hands tangled in her hair as his mouth covered hers in a fierce kiss. She reveled in the press of his lips against hers, his tongue dueling, mating with her own. It was another thing she never thought to feel ever again – another of God's gifts she thought lost to her forever.

Aiden thrust forward again and again. They came together so forcefully the bed shook and actually hit against the wall. An intense orgasm slammed into her as he repeatedly came into her with quick, deep strokes, driving her over the precipice again. After a few more strokes, he stiffened above her, shuddered, and roared his release.

Rolling off her, Aiden pulled her into his arms, pressed his lips to her temple and whispered, "Sleep now, baby. When you wake up, everything will be all right. I'm here now."

Samantha woke with a start as Quinn stumbled into the room. She felt her face heat as Aiden pulled the covers over her to protect her modesty, but it wasn't before his friend got an eyeful.

"What is it?"

"Sabrina is gone." He thrust a sheet of the hotel's stationery at them. "She left a note." He pressed his lips together. "You aren't going to like it."

Aiden pulled her tight against him, shielding her body with his own. It still didn't detract from the embarrassment of being caught together like a couple of delinquents in the backseat of a car.

"Read it."

Quinn looked at her and nodded.

Dear Samantha,

It's clear to me you've made the choice you asked me not to require of you. I can't stay here with you, with them. I refuse to allow anyone to take me to a place where I have no freedom.

I could tell you're happy now. Aiden seems to love you. Make him take care of you and, since I have no one, I'll take care of myself.

"That's it?" Samantha sat up. Dragging the sheet with her, she frantically searched the room for her clothes. "How long has she been gone?"

"Not long. I went out after her, but realized even if I do find her I'll never convince her to come back. That's something you'll have to do. God, that was so stupid."

Samantha grabbed her clothes and ran to the bathroom door. Turning, she looked at Quinn with tears in her eyes. "She's not stupid. She's planning to make them kill her. She's not so stupid she's going to get herself killed. It's what she wants. She thinks that she has no chance for a

life anymore. Who would want her? In her mind she's used goods."

Men could be so dense sometimes. She ran into the bathroom and dressed as quickly as she could. When she emerged from the little room, Aiden stood at the door, dressed and waiting.

"Ready?"

She nodded and headed through the door. "We have to find her before those animals catch up to her."

Quinn stopped just outside of town. "This is where I stopped and went back to the hotel." He pointed to the south. "Her scent goes in that direction." He then pointed to the north. "And that direction. We're going to have to split up."

"We're not splitting up." Aiden pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "I have Merrick on speed dial. I'll call him and have him send some people out here. We'll have to rent the room you stayed in for a few more days just to be sure that no one goes in and changes the sheets."

"We need some help. Our...my mate's sister has gone missing and we have two trails to follow." He nodded and glanced in both directions. "We could, but they've just barely escaped the *Tudra* if I've guessed correctly. I don't want to split up." He looked at his friend, his face unreadable. "Quinn may have an issue with the

heat down here."

The heat? Samantha frowned. It was warm, but it wasn't that warm. She moved over to where Quinn knelt in the dirt, looking at tracks. "Do you have asthma or something? I didn't think —"

"Hey, Quinn," Aiden interrupted before the other man could answer. "Merrick wants to talk to you about something." He handed the phone off, then moved to stand beside Samantha. "Quinn has a condition that he'd rather not talk about." He gave her a meaningful look. "A shifter condition."

"Oh." So that was it. He was ashamed of some strange birth anomaly or something. "He didn't strike me as the type to be embarrassed about anything."

Aiden shrugged. "I wouldn't say he was embarrassed about it. Just that he's not ready to talk about it. He'll tell you," he stopped to clear his throat. "He'll tell us when he feels the time is right."

CHAPTER SIX

Quinn closed the phone and tossed it back to Aiden. "We won't lose any time. Merrick said the Alpha sent men out to investigate rumors of a *Tudra* camp in this region. There are six men closing on our position now. We've been ordered back to Paradise to protect our..." he stopped to clear his throat. "To protect your mate."

"I'm going to find my sister."

Stepping forward, Quinn used his size to intimidate her. The less fight she put up now, the better. "You are going to Paradise. You'll see it is no prison. It's a town like any other."

"Except it's filled with shifters."

"There are humans there as well and none of them are prisoners. You'll see." Quinn took her arm in an unyielding grip.

Aiden stood, frowning out over the two trails, obviously wondering which they should follow.

"If you won't force your mate's compliance, Aiden, I will, and we both know what kind of

repercussions than can have." Quinn hoped to remind Aiden that asserting any type of control over an unmated female would only bring him closer to the madness.

"He's right, baby." Aiden finally agreed and moved back toward town. "Will they have a car?"

"Yes. Merrick said he just got off the phone with them and they're about a half hour from here. Two will stay with us and the car, the other four will take off after Sabrina."

Samantha was becoming agitated. She tried to yank her arm from Quinn's grip, but failed. "Sabrina won't trust any of them. I have to go."

"Honey," Aiden stepped forward, wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. "Considering she left while we slept, she doesn't trust you anymore either. Let me take you where it's safe." He glanced at Quinn. "We need to see you safe. And we have to tell you something best said in Paradise."

Yeah. Best said, where she could see the women in Paradise weren't prisoners. Where she could see they mated with more than one man. Hell, sometimes they mated with three and were the happier for it.

* * * *

Samantha alternated from looking at one to the

other. "What the hell is going on here?" She fisted her hands on her hips, looking from Aiden's tall golden good looks to Quinn's equally handsome, but darker visage. "I have a right to know whatever it is you're keeping from me and I want to know now."

Quinn tossed Aiden a glance that almost said *you opened that can of worms, so you take care of it*. Then he stepped forward and waved toward the hotel.

"Can we at least return to the room where someone can't overhear us so easily?"

With a short nod of her head and one last glance at the spot where her sister last stood in this town, she turned and headed back the way they came. Whatever it was they had to say, it was apparently serious business. The last thing she wanted was for some well-meaning bumpkin to come along and shoot them for the strangers they were. Nothing came stranger than shape-shifters and their mates, in her opinion.

Five minutes later, they were sequestered in their rooms with *do not disturb* signs on the doors.

"Okay. Just what is it you two have to tell me?" It couldn't be that bad. The worst was over. Aiden and his friend were shape-shifters and her sister was missing. The thought made her want to cry. Instead, she looked up at Quinn because

something told her this was his story to tell. "Well?"

"Aiden is your mate."

"Um...I knew that." She tilted her head and looked at him. "Is that all you had to say?" Moving to the desk, she picked up a warm can of cola and popped the top. She glanced at Aiden and his expression told her it wasn't. "What else?" Tipping the can back, she took a long drink.

"I'm your mate, too."

Cola went everywhere as she choked, spitting and coughing as the mess foamed up and shot through her nose. "What...did you just say?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This is why we wanted you to wait until we got to Paradise. There are other women there who have two, sometimes even three mates. We'd hoped you would take it better if you could see them, see how normal it is for them."

"Normal?" Samantha coughed. "What's normal about having two husbands?" She heard her voice rising, becoming shrill. The last thing she wanted was to sound like some sort of banshee.

"It's not normal here, or even in Virginia, but it *is* normal in Paradise." Quinn sighed, then turned away. "It's okay, Samantha. No one is saying you have to accept us both." He turned to Aiden. "I expect you to keep your promise to me. Do it tonight."

"Do what tonight?" Samantha was almost at the end of her rope with these two and their damned secrets. "Don't you dare leave me out of the loop again." She glared at Aiden, her hands on her hips, the anger causing her to lose control. "Tell me what the hell is going on, 'cause you are *not* keeping anything from me again."

"He expects me to kill him tonight."

"What?"

"You heard him. Leave him to it."

"And just why are you supposed to kill him?" She addressed Aiden as though he were some recalcitrant child.

"The madness, The Heat...the *El Calor*."

"The AI – what?"

"The *El Calor*...the mating heat. If he doesn't mate with you...soon, he'll go mad. He'll force you and try to kill me. Either way I'll have to kill him. Better to do it now while he still has some self-respect."

"Why?"

"Because The Heat drives us to mate. It guarantees procreation. If we don't mate with our *Truebond* mates, it forces us to breed with others."

"Like those men who kidnapped us?"

"Just like those men. They either were exposed to their mates and didn't act on it or they didn't realize it. Maybe it's just because they're old or have psychotic tendencies anyway. No one really

knows for sure. The only thing we *do* know is that if we mate with the women we're meant to, we form a *Truebond* and we are safe."

"Safe is a relative term," Samantha said absently.

Aiden took the can of cola from her when she would have dropped it. Sitting on the chair in front of the desk, she stared at her feet, not really seeing them, not really seeing anything.

"I don't think I can." She shook her head. "When I was younger I probably would have jumped at the chance." Looking up, she smiled wanly. "Hell, you're a damn good looking and I expect you know that. I can't say I've never dreamed of having two gorgeous white boys in my bed, pleasuring me." Samantha wrung her hands in her lap. "I just don't know if I can. Not after..."

"It's okay, baby." Aiden glanced up at the other man. "Quinn has a bit of time yet. You don't have to make up your mind now."

"Make up my mind?" What was wrong with these two? Didn't they understand the choice they were forcing her to make? "Make up my mind? I don't believe you two." Standing, she began to pace. "Do either of you even realize you expect me to make a life or death decision for someone? What the hell kind of choice is that?"

"It isn't a choice, Samantha." Quinn stepped

forward, his expression grim. "None of us asked for this. We didn't expect you to be our mate. Hell, we'd only come to see you so Aiden could —"

"Don't, Quinn." Aiden's look was unreadable.

"So Aiden could what?" Samantha turned her too-perceptive gaze on him. "So you could do what, Aiden?" She pressed her lips together. "So you could break it off with the little human? Too bad I turned out to be more than you bargained for. Now you're stuck with me. Is that it?"

"Jesus, Sam, it's not like that."

"Then why don't you tell me how it is." God her chest ached, her throat was clogged. She wanted nothing more than to curl up into a little ball and die. Nothing was as it seemed. Sabrina was right. She shouldn't have trusted either of them.

"Don't, baby."

"Don't you *don't, baby* me. You don't really care about me. All you care about is whether or not I can stop you from turning into some kind of sick monster." She picked up one of the burgers left over from the night before and threw it at him.

Aiden ducked, letting the burger sail over his head to hit the wall behind him. "That's not true. I love you. I've always loved you. I thought I showed you that earlier this morning."

"Don't you bring up *this morning*, you bastard. You never told me you loved me. You fucked me.

That was all."

Aiden shook his head. "I made love to you." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Hell, baby, if all I wanted was a piece of ass I would have taken you up on your offer to heal your sister."

"Ha! She wouldn't have your skanky ass."

He shook his head. "No, she wouldn't. Now ask yourself, would knowing that stop a true horn-dog?" He continued when she paused. "Of course it wouldn't. If all I wanted was to get laid, any woman would do." He shook his head. "But that's not what I want. It's not what either of us wants." He gestured to Quinn. "Look at him, Samantha. Really look at him. He as well as I would rather die than to go to another woman. Another woman will never do for us. Ever."

Samantha really looked at them for a moment. She had no idea if they were telling her the truth or not. Hell, she'd really gotten herself into a mess this time. Her sister was gone, God only knew where, and here she was, sitting in a hotel room with two men who claimed they wanted to share her.

A few years ago, the idea would have thrilled her. Today, it just scared her stupid.

* * * *

Hell, Quinn thought as he watched her sitting on

the bed, her hands in her lap, her fingers clasped. They'd really botched things up good. They couldn't even manage to get two half-starved females to safety without calamity befalling them. "Don't feel pressured." He took a deep breath. "I have a few days left. Maybe a week for you to make up your mind."

"Oh, my God. You really don't understand, do you?" She gave him an incredulous look. "I don't want that responsibility."

"It doesn't matter what you want, *baby*. All that matters is what our bodies tell us. My body tells me you're my mate. It also tells me that after seventy-seven years, it's tired of living without its mate. You don't have anything to worry about. As long as you keep from making too much physical contact with me, you shouldn't be that affected. Just keep your distance, lady, and you won't have anything to worry about."

He stalked out of the room and into the one where she'd spent the night with Aiden. Her scent slammed into him like a brick wall. He'd left the other room because he wanted to get away from the temptation of her scent and walked right into the only room in hundreds of miles that made it worse.

Her scent surrounded him, the smell of her arousal and sex. Deep, soul-stirring sex. Aiden hadn't lied to her when he said he'd made love to

her earlier. The smell of it was in everything. The other man had given their mate everything he had, everything he was earlier today. He was, no doubt, attempting to prepare her for the conversation that had just went so badly.

Moving to the window, he opened the curtains and looked out over the parking lot. It was early afternoon and the lot was nearly empty. He wondered absently how many others here didn't have a vehicle. He didn't know how long he stood there, looking out over the sun-drenched lot.

He didn't feel sorry for himself, he wasn't angry. Somehow, he never expected to feel this...nothingness when faced with his death. After all these years, he had never expected to find his mate, had even resigned himself to living his life alone until he went willingly to his goodnight. Then he'd seen her, smelled her in Aiden's memory and knew she was his mate. He shoved his hands in his pockets. It was for the best. The woman had been through hell these last few months. Perhaps she was meant for Aiden alone.

"I—I'm sorry."

Quinn spun around to see Samantha in the doorway, her ebony hair falling gently over her shoulders, hiding her high breasts beneath the thin top she wore.

"There's no need." He shook his head. "I understand. It's a lot to take in, especially..."

"You can say it," she said with a sigh. "After I was kidnapped, violated...raped. If I can say it, you certainly can." she paused, then leaned against the wall, her hands tucked behind her back. "I'm willing to think about it." She nodded toward the door. "Your friends are here."

Quinn had no idea who to thank for his good fortune. That she'd even think about it was something he hadn't even hoped for. He realized when he walked into the other room he should have known who would come this way to help.

"Quinn." Dracen Giacomo stepped forward and offered his hand. He gave him a knowing look, then nodded. "How are you feeling?"

"Hot."

"The Heat." Dracen nodded. He moved out of the way and his mate, a small, beautiful blonde woman stepped forward.

"We...heard about your difficulty." She glanced at Samantha and smiled. "If I can be of any help at all..." She let her words trail off as her other mate, Griffin Bedard, stepped forward and took his hand.

"Sadler."

Quinn nodded. "Bedard." He glanced toward Aliana. "I hope you've been taking good care of your mate."

Aliana stepped forward and laughed. "Of course they have." She rubbed the small bump

forming on her mid-drift. "Especially, now that junior miss has come along."

"She's bound and determined to have a girl," Dracen said with a smile. "Personally, I don't care what it is as long as it's healthy." The other man didn't say anything about using his magick to find out the sex of the child.

Aliana cast a glance toward Samantha. "There's nothing to fear, really." She sighed. "I know you don't have any reason to trust me. Hell, who am I? All I can say is, these two men with me saved my life and gave me a new one." She glanced at Aiden and Quinn. "These two will do the same for you if you'll let them."

"Where are the others?" Quinn finally thought to ask. "There are too many people in here. We're spoiling the scent."

"Not hardly." Aliana snorted. "The others have already come and gone. They've got the other woman's scent and are probably close on her heels as we speak."

"If we could only be so lucky," Aiden said under his breath.

Samantha narrowed her eyes. "What did you say?"

"Uh...nothing."

Coward, Quinn laughed into the other man's mind.

Better that than single.

Quinn nodded, a smile on his face. That was true enough.

* * * *

Several hours later, they were getting ready to stop at another hotel. Aliana couldn't travel too long without stopping and Samantha wondered if they hadn't used her as an excuse to get their woman back to Paradise where she could rest.

Aliana didn't look well. The longer they traveled, the more tired the other woman appeared. They rented two rooms again, but they weren't connected. In fact, they weren't even close to each other. Each of them took a suite with a battery of rooms between them. For privacy, no doubt. The other triad didn't leave anything to the imagination when they all went into their suite, kissing each other like oversexed teenagers.

Well, they didn't get that baby playing croquet.

She wandered through their rooms, wondering where they were going to sleep. There were two bedrooms and three bathrooms. If she played her cards right, maybe she could lose them in here somewhere and spend the night alone.

Sighing, she plopped down on the nearest bed. She was too exhausted for games. She wanted a shower and something to eat. They'd just fed her not two hours ago, but her stomach didn't hold

enough to keep a mouse alive anymore. Her stomach grumbled at her and she looked up, her face hot as Aiden chuckled.

"I'll go down and see if I can find a restaurant." He glanced over his shoulder at Quinn. "Why don't you two take the time to get to know each other?"

Get to know each other or have sex? She wanted to ask him which he meant, but he was gone before she could gather the courage to put her thoughts to words. "So," she stood and began to pace. "What now?" She definitely hadn't wanted to ask that question while sitting on the bed. She wasn't the wanton woman the men at the compound constantly told her she was. It was always their reasoning behind their violent attacks.

She wanted it. She asked for it. She deserved it.

Stop it!

Would she ever get them out of her head?

She looked over at Quinn. He sat on the sofa in the sitting room, his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. Not once had he made a pass at her. Never did he treat her with anything but respect and how did she repay him? How could she continue to ignore him, to pretend he didn't exist? At least now, while they were alone, she should attempt to make conversation. "Are you feeling it again?"

"Again?" He barked a laugh. "Don't you mean

still?" He shook his head. "I thought I had a week, even days, but I don't." He looked away. "I'm not saying this to influence you."

"I didn't think you were." She reached out and brushed the damp hair from his forehead.

"Don't!"

She jumped back as though burned. "What'd I do?"

"You can't..." He took a deep breath. "You can't come in contact with me. With any of my bodily fluids. No one knows what triggers the *El Calor* in females."

"Um...I can get it?" She backed up a step. "You never said it was contagious."

"Contagious. That's a word for it." He laughed mirthlessly, then shook his head again. "It's not like the flu that can be passed to anyone. It's..." He paused, obviously searching for the right words. "Only a mate can feel it."

"Then why stop me if you insist I'm your mate."

"To protect you, of course. If you feel it, the choice is no longer yours. Your body makes it for you."

Samantha stared at him for a moment, hardly daring to believe what he said. "You mean you haven't touched me because you know if you did, it would take the choice from me?"

He nodded, then inhaled deeply. Sweat dotted

his brow as the pain of the heat doubled him over. "Get away from me. Go into one of the bedrooms and lock the door. Don't let anyone in but Aiden."

His eyes turned to that of his leopard and Samantha stepped back a pace.

"Go! I don't want to take the choice from you."

"You haven't." Sighing at what she was about to do, Samantha knelt in front of him, took his face in her hands and kissed him. "My mate, my choice. If the heat takes me now..." She took a deep breath. "If you take me now, it was my choice. You can't force the willing."

Gathering her courage, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. If the things he said were the truth, it soon wouldn't matter that she was nervous, that she wasn't sure about all of this. If what he and Aiden said was true, she would soon want this man at least as much as she wanted Aiden and that was quite a bit.

Quinn kept his lips closed. He wasn't making things easy for her, that was for sure.

"Is it so hard to accept the fact that I want this? That I want this choice taken out of my hands? Can't I make the conscious choice to have it taken irrevocably out of my hands?"

With a growl, Quinn grasped her upper arms and pulled her to him, mashing his lips against hers. His tongue thrust between her teeth, forcing her mouth open and mixing their saliva.

Heat seared through her blood, white hot, blinding heat that Samantha had no idea how to control. This was it. The *El Calor*. It was upon them both and, God help her, she wanted this with everything in her.

* * * *

For a moment, Quinn thought he would lose his mind. For one infinitesimal second, one blissful moment in time, he thought he could have her, take her gently the way she deserved. But it wasn't meant to happen that way. He caught her by the elbows, lifted her onto his lap, and practically ripped the clothing from her body. After all she'd been through, he'd expected a fight, screams. God help him if she did because no one else would and Aiden would kill him. It was only right.

Instead of her screams, she latched onto his hair and pulled him to her. "Kiss me, dammit!" Her tongue snaked into his mouth, dueled with his.

Standing, he carried her across the room and dropped her on the bed before falling over her with mindless need. "I'm starving for you, Samantha." He leaned down, lengthening his claws, he tore the remaining underclothes from her body, revealing her perfect form to his hungry gaze.

"Gods you're beautiful with your face flushed with desire, your breasts heavy with need, your nipples like diamond hard peaks." Leaning down, he covered one dark bud with his mouth, laved it, and bit it gently. "Tell me you want me. Tell me you need this at least as much as I do."

She nodded, her breath coming in short bursts. "I need you, I need this."

Her hair stuck to her damp forehead as he moved down over her, kissing her breasts, her belly, the crease of her thigh.

"Please," she begged as he stopped at her delicate mound, the smooth, hairless skin revealing everything and nothing.

Her clit peeked out between her damp folds, glistening with the dew from her body, hardened with need. Moving between her legs, he parted her damp folds and leaned down to flick her clit with the tip of his tongue. "I love the way you taste." He swiped his tongue along her wet slit. "You're so sweet, so hot." He stopped for a moment, rested his chin on her pelvic bone and looked up into her face. "Do you trust me?"

"I-I want to," was her hesitant reply.

"Wrong answer, baby." He reached out with his tongue and flicked her clit. "Again. Do you trust me?"

She nodded.

Dipping his head between her thighs, he

suckled her clit into his mouth, raking his teeth across the tight bud. Thrusting his fingers into her tight sheathe, he pressed up against the underside of her belly, rubbing the spot he knew would carry her over the edge to oblivion.

Samantha screamed her release. Her back bowed, her hips jerked as she came so violently she almost threw them both to the floor. When her body shuddered with aftershocks, Quinn slid up her body and came over her, resting himself on his elbows.

"Tell me again."

"I want this. I want you," she panted. She lay beneath him, her body spread out, waiting for his possession.

Still, he needed to know. Had to know this was her choice. "Tell me."

"I want you. God, Quinn. I can't stand this heat anymore. I need you. Pleasse!"

Reaching up, he cupped her jaw. "Open your eyes, baby." When she looked up at him, tears filled her eyes and he pulled back. "Have I hurt you?"

She shook her head.

He swiped an errant tear from her cheek. "Then why these?"

"Be-because... if you don't fuck me soon, I'll go mad. I don't know what's wrong with me. Something's making me different. It's making me

change. Make it stop, Quinn. Please, make it stop."

It was almost as though her plea broke the last vestiges of his control. Coming over her, he lifted her legs over his elbows, opening her up to him as he pressed forward, pushing his hard length deep into her claspings vagina.

Samantha screamed out another release as he continued his measured thrusts. They came together almost violently, each of them straining against the other. The mating heat driving them both to a peak neither of them expected, neither of them thought possible.

Over and over, he drove his cock into her, his shaft growing larger, thicker. He labored above her, working his cock deep inside her, thrusting repeatedly with deep, hard strokes.

It wasn't long before the familiar tingling moved down his spine and clasped his balls, squeezing them until his thrusts became jerky and finally, he went rigid with his own climax.

Dropping down onto the bed, he pulled her into his arms, kissed her on the top of the head and tucked the blankets around her. "You won't regret this. I promise you that."

Samantha snuggled closer and smiled. "I'd better not, white boy, cause I can be a real bitch when I'm mad."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I still don’t see why we can’t let them go home and help the others find my sister.” Samantha was pissed. There was no reason they couldn’t help in the search. In her opinion, the more people they had looking for Sabrina, the better.

“Because others are looking for you.” Quinn was adamant that they follow the Alpha’s orders and get her to Paradise. Wherever that was. “As long as you’re out there, there’s a danger that they could capture you. How much will dividing our attention help your sister?” He walked over to the counter where the tiny coffee pot sat and poured a cup of the fresh brew. “Would you like one?”

Shaking her head, Samantha sighed. “No thank you.” Part of her knew he was right. Still another part of her wanted to help them search for her sister. She couldn’t just sit back and let those monsters take Sabrina back to their camp again.

There was also the question of how Sabrina was able to make two different trails. According to the

men, her scent moved equally through the air. The scent heading in one direction wasn't stronger than the other. How did she do that?

Something niggled at the back of her mind, making her wonder if there was something Sabrina remembered about their grandmother's teachings that she'd forgotten. Memaw always told them their memories and their powers were all they had to protect them. What had she meant by that other than the obvious? Biting her lip, Samantha searched her memory, trying to recall anything they'd learned about hiding their scent or laying a false trail, but could recall nothing.

"I can't help but wonder if Sabrina knows something I don't. Our grandmother used to teach us together, mostly. But there *were* times when she taught us things separately. I never really questioned why." Though now she couldn't help but wonder if it was because they each had powers the other lacked.

"Did you ever talk about your private lessons?"

She leaned against the desk, resting her backside against the hard faux wood. "Sometimes," Samantha said with a shrug. "Most times we were just glad the lessons were over and we finally had the time to listen to the radio or watch TV." Tears filled her eyes and she bowed her head. "We should have paid more attention to her. We should have been grateful for the time we

had with her. Instead, we were spoiled children who resented every moment she spent teaching us her ways."

Had they paid a little more attention, perhaps they could have escaped the compound sooner. Perhaps their powers would have been more of a match for the men who held them prisoner.

Instead of having the magickal strength to take the men on as equals, they had to wait until they could take them off guard, until the men were tired and sitting in the compound bloated with their power and sense of entitlement. Only then had they been able to lull them into the false sleep that helped them to escape.

"What about the other women?" She frowned, thinking of those who may not have been able to escape. "Has anyone found the compound where they held us yet?"

Aiden nodded. "The Alpha has sent men out to guard the compound. Soon we'll have enough manpower in place to take it and return the women to their families or take them to Paradise."

"They'll get a choice?"

"Of course. What do you think we are? If we forced them to go to Paradise against their will, we'd be no better than those who kidnapped them."

Crossing her arms, Samantha raised a brow and smirked. "And I have to go to Paradise...why?"

She pushed away from the desk to walk to the center of the room. The last thing she wanted was to feel cornered right now.

At least the two men had the grace to blush. "We wanted to keep you safe from recapture. Paradise is the best fortified town in the United States."

"Yeah, right." She snorted and crossed her arms. "That's why it's so well known, huh?"

Quinn shook his head. "I'm not doing this with you. You're just looking for an argument, woman." He narrowed his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he took in her scent.

Stepping back, Samantha raised her hand, palm out. "Oh, no you don't." She giggled as he took a step forward and she a step back. "There isn't time for that, mister."

"There's always time for making love, baby. Always." Aiden came in from the other room with a smile. "I see you two have hit it off." His gaze shifted between them, his smile growing larger. "More than hit it off if I don't miss my guess."

"You don't." Quinn grinned and took another gulp of his coffee. The oinker.

Samantha made a face and tried to come up with an excuse as to why they couldn't all hop into the sack together. She'd tell them she wasn't ready, but with the kind of sense of smell these two had, she knew she'd never get away with *that*

whopper of a lie.

Even *she* knew they could smell her arousal.

Thank goodness someone knocked on the door. Samantha didn't know what she might have said or done otherwise. She may be physically ready to accept them both at the same time, but she wasn't sure she was mentally ready for it.

"Ready to go?" Aliana poked her head in the door as Quinn opened it, then frowned. "Why don't you two get this poor woman some clean clothes?" She gave Samantha a critical look. "Come on over to our room. I think you'll fit into some of my stuff. I haven't gotten too big yet." She flicked a narrow-eyed look to the men. "Really. How do you two expect a woman to be at her best when she feels like she's at her worst?"

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in a set of Aliana's new clothes, they sat at a local restaurant, planning their trip.

"So you see," Aliana said pointing at a red dot on the map. "If we can get here quickly, we can head off whoever went to the north." She took a sip of her chocolate milk. "That's providing they go that far without changing directions *and* if they're still on foot."

"We're not chasing after a bunch of *Tudra* assholes with our pregnant mate," Dracen practically growled.

"He's right, Ali, baby." Griffin sided with the other male. "We have no idea if they're setting a trap or not. The last thing we need is for them to get their claws sunk into your succulent flesh." He picked up her hand and pressed an opened mouth kiss to her palm.

"Pfft." She yanked her hand away from him. "I'm not some poor defenseless human female anymore."

"What?" Samantha nearly choked on her coffee. "You were human?" She glanced around at the tables nearby. At Aliana's nod, she lowered her voice and asked, "What do you mean you *were* human?"

Aliana glared at her mates before turning her displeased look onto Aiden and Quinn. "What is it with you guys anyway? Don't you think we have the right to know before you mate us?"

It was too late for Samantha...she knew. Quinn and Aiden had already mated her. However, it wasn't too late for her sister. She'd let Sabrina in on the secret as soon as she could.

Aliana must have read Samantha's expression. "You aren't mated yet, honey. We would know." She raised her brow and looked at the men who couldn't seem to look up from their plates. "Awful interesting stuff you're finding in those empty dishes, boys." Shaking her head, she reached across the table and took Samantha's hand.

"You're not mated to either of them until they take you together. After that, you'll have a *Truebond* with them. If one of them dies, you'll still live because of your bond with the other." She canted her head to the side and bit her lip. "If they both die, you die with them. That's probably why only one male of a *Truebond* ever puts himself in danger. The other usually stays put with their female."

I'm not mated to them yet? Samantha sat back in her seat and muddled over that thought, wondering if Quinn or Aiden ever considered telling her that. Probably not. She could still change her mind. "What about mating heat?"

Aliana shrugged. "I don't know too much about that. I didn't suffer through it with my mates." She gave each of their hands a squeeze and smiled. "The nearest we can figure out is it's because they're not that old." She glanced at Dracen. "At least we don't *think* Dracen is that old. It's hard to tell with an all-shifter. They aren't quite like the rest of them."

Samantha was learning so much, she was almost sorry to see their breakfast end. "Thank you for telling me all of this." She glared at her two men. "Goodness only knows when they would have saw fit to tell me any of it."

Aliana giggled. "They probably would have waited until after you mate with them."

If she had to take them both at the same time, Samantha wasn't sure she *would* mate with them. She wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

"I don't believe I let you talk me into this," Samantha grouched three days later as they drove through the barrier surrounding Paradise.

Pain and anguish filled her mind as they drove along the long dirt track that led them into town. Apparently, it was some sort of shield that kept the curious from entering the town unannounced. The way Aliana explained it, the shield was some magickal bubble that surrounded the town and outlying farms from the local human population.

"It's not much further, then it will be over. You'll see." Aliana reached over and patted her hand as they sat beside each other in the middle seat of the SUV. "It won't seem so bad once they bring you over."

She meant once she had sex with the two men at the same time. Sometimes, Samantha wasn't sure she'd ever be ready for something like that. Then there were times when she looked at her two gorgeous men and wondered if she would ever be able to stop herself from jumping their delectable bones once they were truly alone.

Her first glimpse of Paradise reminded her of some storybook village. Square fields and dirt roads gave way to paved small town streets. Well-

manicured lawns and fountains graced the streets. There were even some beautifully carved chainsaw sculptures in a few front yards. They were large cats, leopards mostly with a few bears and one dragon. Samantha couldn't help but wonder if the dragon sculpture was in Aliana's front yard. After all, all-shifters weren't very common.

They pulled up in front of a large lodge. Apparently, this was where they would stay over the next few days while the two men waited for their Alpha to give them the go ahead to take her on the search for her sister.

She wanted to go regardless, but, unlike her sister, Samantha knew she was no match for a group of shifter males, or any males for that matter, on her own. Maybe after she mated with Aiden and Quinn her powers would increase, but for now, she would remain by their sides. It was the smart thing to do.

Three hours later, Samantha was in bed, waiting for her men. Her decision made, she'd eaten, showered and stayed, waiting for their return. There was no other choice. She must mate with them. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that their Alpha would allow them to go anywhere with a woman who couldn't protect herself. Even pregnant women could leave

Paradise as long as they were shifter women.

Dinner in the dining room was a strange experience. The meal was delicious, the company was just downright weird. One woman's parents lived at the lodge. Though human, their daughter mated with two of the shifter men here. The chairs around the table were filled with men Aiden called brothers. Not blood brothers, but men he served with in the Army. All of them were like him. Part shifter, but mostly human. One or two of them had already formed some sort of blood bond with other men in the town.

For the most part, the men were like any others, polite, a bit on the arrogant side, but mostly pleasant. They weren't anything like the men at the compound. None of them had that strange sense of entitlement, nor did they abuse women.

For the first time in months, Samantha felt comfortable in her own skin. It was that discovery and the fact that she realized Adam Greer would never allow his men to take a human woman into a *Leoparo* fight that helped her make up her mind.

Tonight was the night that she would end all of their torment. The Heat, as they called it, subsided for only a few days after her night with Quinn. It didn't take long for the burning to return, to singe their insides, because they didn't complete their bond. Ready or not, Samantha decided it was time they finished it.

* * * *

Aiden swallowed thickly when they walked into the room. Candles sat on every horizontal surface, their glow making everything appear softer somehow. It took but one look at Samantha and he nearly fell to his knees. His lungs labored to draw breath as he stared at her as she laid waiting, draped over the bed, wearing nothing but a red lace teddy and a nervous smile.

He swallowed thickly and turned to glance at Quinn who stood next to him, silent as a church, his body rigid and his mouth hanging open. Aiden watched the other man's Adam's apple bob in his throat as Samantha got to her knees, flashing them with a glimpse of her almost bare ass and mound.

Reaching down, he rubbed his hand over his already hard cock, his heart slamming erratically in his chest as he watched his mate move forward on her hands and knees, crawling sinuously across the large bed.

His cock jerked, throbbed, beneath the zipper of his jeans. His balls ached with the need for release. Nothing could ever have prepared him for this sight when he walked into this room.

Samantha stayed on the bed, staring at them through hooded eyes. Her full, ruby red lips, painted to match the teddy, parted and she licked

her lips slowly. The action almost made him pant. She had to know what that did to a man.

She didn't say a word, just stayed there on the bed, giving them a come-hither look he knew he'd never be able—or want—to ignore.

His stomach clenched, his muscles quivered as they repeatedly tensed and released. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and opened them again, certain he couldn't be seeing what he thought. Yet, when he opened his eyes, she was still there, waiting and watching with those dark, amber-filled eyes.

Nothing could have prepared him for this, for her, sitting on the bed waiting for them, offering herself to them. Gods, he hoped she knew what she was doing. He wasn't sure he'd survive the disappointment if she didn't.

"It's about time you two got here."

Her movements were slow, sensuous, almost like a cat. Aiden tried not to dwell on how fitting the image seemed.

"I've been waiting forever." She pouted, her mouth shaped into a moue of disappointment. "Aren't you going to come here?"

Cupping her breasts, she rose up onto her knees, arched her back, and offered herself to them like a feast at a banquet. He and Quinn were powerless to do anything but oblige.

Moving closer, Aiden wished his and Quinn's

clothes to oblivion.

"That's it, baby," she crooned, smiling at her use of his pet name for her. "Who needs clothes?" She looked down at herself, then looked up and cocked a brow. "But why am I still wearing some?" Shaking her head, she moved back against the headboard and sighed. "I hope this isn't the beginning of a double standard here."

Aiden wasn't sure, but he didn't think she looked too disappointed.

They moved toward the bed, their movements slow. *Do you even believe this?* He reached out to Quinn more because he was shocked than anything else.

I don't know, but my grandma told me to never look a gift horse in the mouth.

Aiden's lips cocked up in a half-smile. *Don't let her hear you call her a horse. She's got one hell of a temper.*

And I love it. Quinn grinned. *One of these days, I'm going to piss her off just so I can watch her yell at me. I love the way her head moves when she's feeling righteous.* He reached down with his right hand, his fingers circling his cock.

"Uh-uh," Samantha said, wagging her finger at them. "That's cheating. There's no cheating in this bedroom." She feigned another pout.

Aiden watched as she stretched her arms over her head. The action lifted her breasts, drawing

attention to how full and ripe they appeared in the lacy garment. God, he loved that woman, attitude and all. Hell, he was glad she still had an attitude. At least it meant the men who abused her hadn't broken her. It was all he could do not to rush over to the bed, pull her into his arms and drive his hard cock so deep inside her it came out of her throat.

Intense heat welled up inside him, the feeling bordering on discomfort. Wave after wave of warmth radiated from his middle out to his extremities. The feeling intensified with every breath he took. Every inhalation carried more of the scent of Samantha's arousal deep into his lungs. His body absorbed it, processed it, and turned it into a conflagration of feeling so intense, it was a wonder it wasn't deadly...perhaps it was.

A flush darkened her cheeks. Her entire body grew darker with desire as she watched them both with that hooded gaze.

Nothing ever made him feel the way he felt with her. No one ever made him forget everything but sensation as he worked his cock in and out of a willing woman. No one but her. All his life he'd always been a loner until he met this woman, this angel who drew him out of a hell of his own making.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Asking that had taken every ounce of strength left in him.

There was nothing left. If she answered his questions in the affirmative, she would seal her fate...their fates.

Her gaze never left them as she nodded slowly.

"You realize if we do this you're bound to us, and being bound to us also means staying here in Paradise? There is still a lot of work to do to bring it back to its former glory."

Hell, he didn't even know what its former glory was. All he knew was that it was once a thriving town with hundreds of inhabitants. Right now, the bulk of Paradise's citizens could live at the lodge if they had a mind to.

Disappointment surged at the hesitance in her expression, then it cleared and she smiled again. "Honey, don't you know? I love you. Home is where you are."

* * * *

Quinn watched Samantha smile as the heat flared into Aiden's eyes at her words. Nothing could have convinced him more that she was sure. She swallowed thickly at the other man's low growl. His beast was close, most likely riding him to take his mate.

Aiden was on the bed in a second, his lips pressed against hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth.

On the other hand, Quinn took it a bit slower. He moved onto the bed and watched them for a moment, his expression pained, as though it hurt to just watch.

She held out her hand.

Quinn took it in his, brought it to his crotch and groaned when her fingers managed a tight grip on his shaft. His hips flexed forward, seemingly of their own accord as he knelt next to her on the bed, his eyes closed, his head lolled back on his shoulders.

Nothing could have prepared him for the feel of her hand fisting his cock. No one could have warned him that one woman would ever be the be all and end all of his existence. What had he ever done to deserve her? What good deed had he committed that left him here to find her, to have her as his mate?

The Heat raged through him. Picking that moment to remind him that they needed to tie her to them and quickly. She'd made her choice. Whatever her reasons, she had finally decided to accept them both. It was time.

Quinn reached for her. "My turn," he growled as he pulled her from Aiden's embrace, wrapped his arms around her, and took possession of her succulent mouth. Full, ripe lips pressed against his. Her flat belly pressed against his hard cock as Aiden moved behind her to knead her perfectly

rounded ass.

She opened her mouth as he nipped her lips. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, claiming her as Aiden skimmed his hands up and down her responsive body.

He'd waited a lifetime, two lifetimes for this woman. The waiting was almost too much to bear. He took what was his, demanded she give it to him, her head falling back as he continued to kiss her with such abandon.

Ripping his mouth away, he pulled back to look into her eyes before he rested his forehead against hers. "If you like that thing—" he indicated the teddy— "take it off. Otherwise one of us will rip it from you." The words came out a half-growl as he struggled to regain control.

Samantha's gaze remained riveted on his cock. She didn't move. Hell, she barely breathed.

"Take it off." Raising his hand, he showed her his unsheathed claws and she shook her head.

"It's crotchless, Quinn," Aiden informed from behind her.

God only knew what delights of which *he* was on the receiving end.

"Get on your hands and knees, baby."

Quinn's cock bucked as she did as Aiden told her.

"Now suck Quinn's cock while I bury my cock in your tight hole."

Leaning forward, Samantha took Quinn's cock into her mouth. He reached down and gripped her hair, holding her still as Aiden entered her from behind.

Quinn closed his eyes for a split second and reveled in the feel of her hot lips sliding over his hard shaft, working his cock as he pumped himself into the warmth of her mouth.

It didn't take long before they both worked out a rhythm, each of them thrusting their hard cocks into her welcoming body over and over until, seized by the need to sink their teeth into her while she took a part of them into her body as well.

With a harsh groan, Quinn leaned down and nipped the rise of her buttock while Aiden bit the back of her shoulder and still that didn't stop the frenzied thrust of her hips or the suckling of her mouth.

After a long moment of pure bliss as they both emptied themselves in her welcoming flesh, Quinn pulled from her mouth as Aiden also pulled away from her. Each of them ripped their wrist open and pressed them to her mouth to complete their bond.

Now they would always know where their mates were, like it or not. Quinn dropped to the bed next to his mates. Now, nothing could rip them apart.

ÉPILOGUE

Samantha watched her two mates as they argued over who would get her door. She shook her head. Really, you'd think that two normal men could carry on a normal conversation without fighting. Geeze.

She looked out over the mountain and wondered if her sister was really up there. After several months of searching, they finally had a lead. A few of the men found a woman fitting Sabrina's description, only she wasn't alone when they found her. She'd had two men and two human boys with her. All of them had apparently been living on this mountain in some secluded cabin.

Closing her eyes, she prayed that if it was her sister that she was here of her own accord. Samantha didn't think she could handle it if she found out that someone, once again held her sister captive for their own carnal needs.

"Are you ready?"

Taking a deep breath, she gave Aiden a curt nod. "As ready as I'll ever be." Looking back at her mates, she offered each of them a hand. "Take me to my sister, my mates. I've a need to bring her home."

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.

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