



Mated by Anna Leigh Keaton

Woodland Magic:

Mated

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

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Chapter One

Sheridan rocked her sister, Tina, as if she were a child. The sun had set a few minutes earlier, and the temperature was falling, but Tina wouldn't let Sheridan take her inside.

Sheridan knew this was it. Her sister would be gone by morning. Tina's body was slowly shutting down from the cancer eating through her organs. She could barely breathe now, and Sheridan's heart tore in two.

"It's getting cold, sis," Sheridan said as she held the oxygen mask up for Tina to take another breath, doing everything she could to keep her voice strong and steady, to not let her sister hear the fear and pain inside of her.

Tina inhaled. What should have been a deep breath was wheezy and shallow, and she tried to stifle a cough. "I know," she croaked. "I want to stay a while longer."

The trees were in full fall color, and frost crisped the air. They'd sat out here every night for the past three weeks when Tina was strong enough to make the trek down the path. Tonight, Sheridan had pushed her in the wheelchair, but now they sat on a thick wool blanket on the grass.

"Sheridan?" Tina said, weakly pulling the oxygen mask away from her face.

"Yeah?"

"Do you really believe all that stuff you told me about fairies right after I moved here?"

"Yeah." Sheridan had shared the secret with her sister of how she'd captured the little blue fairy a few years earlier—how he'd shown his displeasure in the pesticide she'd been using on her roses. She quit using the chemicals, and he made sure she always had plenty of ladybugs around to stave off the aphids.

There were things out in these woods—magical, mystical beings—in her secluded haven that most people couldn't, or wouldn't, bring themselves to believe in.

"Me, too."

Sheridan frowned and brushed her hand over Tina's wool ski cap. "I thought you said I was nuts."

"I did." Tina lifted the mask and took a few more breaths that Sheridan, being a registered nurse, knew caused her sister pain. "But then I met someone special. And little." She grinned.

"Aislan?" Sheridan asked.

Tina turned her head and looked up into her sister's face.

Sheridan smiled and tried keep her tears at bay. She'd wondered if her sister had been calling a creature of the woods when she was still well enough to wander away from Sheridan's little log home by herself. "I heard you out here one night calling that name."

Tears filled Tina's eyes, and she turned her head, trying to hide them from Sheridan. "He said he was your gardener, and he smelled of roses and lilacs. He is a prince."

"I haven't seen any of them around lately." For months, ever since Tina's illness became severe, none of the colorful little winged beings had come around. In the past, they'd been around her home often. She missed them, felt it was just one more thing she was losing—had lost. She bit her lip to keep it from quivering as pain shot through her heart.

"I think he got in trouble because of me." Tina closed her eyes, and Sheridan listened to the water softly lapping at the shore over her sister's labored breathing and the soft hiss of the oxygen tank. The crickets were gone now, as were the frogs. Winter would come soon.

Sheridan brushed her fingers over Tina's cheek. "Tell me what it was like." She wasn't sure if Tina was totally coherent. There had been

days in the last couple of weeks that she wasn't.

"A little bit of heaven." Tina breathed in the oxygen from the mask. "His bed frame is made of toothpicks, and his table is an antique wooden thread spool. His lamp is a glowworm."

"It must have been amazing." Sheridan could imagine it, even if it wasn't real. She hoped it was. She prayed her sister had found that little bit of heaven before she died.

A tear dripped from her eye and landed on her sister's cheek.

Tina turned her head to look up at her. "Don't," she whispered.

"Tell me more," she begged.

"His home is a hollow in a tree trunk, and the inner walls are covered in the most amazing carvings I've ever seen. Better than anything in all the museums I've been in."

"My son is a great artist."

Sheridan gasped and jerked, looked up to see a man standing in front of them, his long white hair and beard reminiscent of the wizard from *The Hobbit*. His leggings and tunic were a rich, shimmering gray, and he held a scepter in his right hand.

"You must be the king," Tina said as she pushed herself up from Sheridan's lap to sit on her own. "I'm sorry..." She sucked in a breath of the oxygen. "...but I don't have the strength to stand."

Sheridan's heart thudded in her ears. The king? What king? What was she talking about?

"You must be the human causing me trouble with my strong-willed son."

Sheridan grabbed her sleeve. "You were serious? You and a fairy prince? Oh, my God."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Tina said respectfully. "I never meant to cause him trouble."

The fairy king—Sheridan supposed he was the fairy king if his son was a fairy prince—paced in front of them for a few moments. Tina closed her eyes and breathed from the oxygen mask.

"You will be dead by morning."

Sheridan gasped in outrage. "How *dare* you?" Though the words

echoed her own thoughts, she couldn't bear to hear them voiced.

Her sister took her hand and squeezed it with what little strength she had left. "Shh, sis." She looked up at the king. "Yes, I believe that to be the truth."

"I could not let him become human. He is my son. Destined to rule. I could not let him give it all up and abandon his duties for a human."

"I never wanted for him to become human."

He folded his arms over his chest. "That was his desire, and I denied it."

A fairy had wanted to become human? To be with her sister? Even though she believed in them, had met one and seen him up close, this seemed all too unreal. Perhaps she'd gone off the deep end because of the stress of losing her sister.

"I am glad you denied him," Tina said.

"Because you do not love him?" He pierced her sister with eyes as black as obsidian.

"No, sir. Because I love him too much to let him throw away his life for me." Tina sucked in a lungful of air and burst out in a wrenching bout of coughing.

Sheridan rubbed her back and held a napkin to her mouth. There was blood in the tissue when she pulled it away.

"Go away," Sheridan shouted at the king. "You're upsetting her."

Tina squeezed her hand again. When she could speak, she panted out, "Let him say his piece."

"You say you love him."

Tina nodded, and her eyelids drooped with fatigue. "If I were to wish for anything...it would only be to...feel his arms around me one last time...." She breathed from the mask, but Sheridan could see she couldn't catch her breath. Tina raised her eyes and looked up at the king. She pushed the mask away. "I love him, Your Majesty. Please don't let him doubt that. I...he..." Tina couldn't seem to form her thoughts into a coherent sentence. "Best thing...ever happen..." She slumped to the side, and Sheridan wrapped her arms around her.

"Tina. Tina!" Sheridan cried as she felt her sister's body go limp

and her breathing stop. “No! Please!” She rocked her sister as tears poured from her eyes. “Please, sis. Please...” she sobbed. What was she going to do without her sister, her best friend, the only person in the world who knew what was in her heart and soul? She couldn’t survive without her sister, because that would be living totally alone.

The gray-robed king moved closer, and Sheridan pulled her sister even tighter in her arms. “Go away!” she screamed. “Just go away!”

“There is little time.”

“She’s dying, you asshole!” She was sure she felt her sister’s soul preparing to leave her body.

“Yes, she is,” the king said. “Come along then. We will find out if she is worthy.”

And then, in a flash of glittering white light—which shouldn’t have been there, since dusk had settled—the world tilted.

Sheridan clung to her sister, buried her face against Tina’s neck, and squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe God would take them both so she wouldn’t have to be alone. *Please*, she begged. *Take me with her!*

Tina stirred in her arms, and Sheridan gasped in surprise. When she opened her eyes and raised her head, she was too shocked to take in her surroundings all at once.

Her sister lay naked in her arms. Shimmering, frantically quivering pink wings sprouted from her sister’s shoulder blades, brushing Sheridan’s arm wrapped around her. A soft pink, sparkling hue suffused Tina’s whole body.

Then she looked up to see the fairy king standing a few feet away. He still wore the same robe, looked exactly the same, except now, behind him, were wings the color of silver, shiny and nearly iridescent. Her heart thundered in her ears. Her hand shook as she stroked Tina’s long, soft hair, once a pretty blonde—non-existent the last few months because of radiation treatments—now tinted slightly pink and glittery.

“What’s happened?” Sheridan croaked.

“I saved her life.” The king cocked his head and looked down at her sister. “Is that not acceptable to you?”

That was when she looked around, past the fairy king, and realized

they weren't in her backyard any longer. No, behind the king was a wall made of some rich, dark stone, possibly granite. She sat on a hard, cold, smooth and shiny floor. The patterns were a starburst mosaic of richly colored stones in more shades of green, brown, gold and pink than she'd ever seen, all lit by dancing candlelight. Candles sat on every surface and dangled from the ceiling in a massive chandelier that dripped crystal-like colored stones.

Licking her lips, she brought her attention back to the king. "Where are we?" she whispered, afraid to know the truth.

"In my palace, of course." His tone was matter-of-fact. A bit condescending.

In his palace. The palace of a fairy king. This was impossible.

Tina mumbled something incoherent and used Sheridan's thigh as a lever to push herself up to a seated position. Those pink wings she now had fluttered like mad. She reached up and touched her forehead, squeezed her eyes shut, then glanced behind herself when the wiggle of her wings caught her attention. Her eyes widened, and then she turned toward Sheridan. "What the fuck...?"

"You will not speak with profanity in my presence," the king said, his voice hard. "Stand up and greet your king as you should."

Tina glanced around the huge hall, the way Sheridan had, her eyes wide. "Whoa. What's going on?"

"Stand up!" the king bellowed.

Tina scrambled to her feet, looked down at her nude body, and then tried to cover her more private parts.

The king glanced at Sheridan but seemed to ignore the fact she hadn't stood with her sister. She was afraid her legs would buckle if she attempted to get up. Fear coursed through her, fear of the unknown. She was still fully clothed in her jeans, heavy sweater and denim jacket, the way she'd been on the lakeshore. And *she* didn't have wings or a strange color to her skin or hair.

The king glared at Tina for a long time, and her sister fidgeted under his stare. Finally, he spoke. "You confess to loving Aislan, yet you were willing to die alone rather than take my son from me. That is a sign

of a strong heart, a loving heart."

Tina glanced at her fluttering wings over her shoulder again, then back at the king. "Thank you...Your Majesty."

The king shook his head. "The boy begged me to turn you fae in order that you may live. I refused him the request. Humans have not been allowed in our midst for thousands of years. They do not follow laws of our kind well."

He began to pace in front of them, and finally Sheridan pushed to her feet and shrugged out of her jacket, but when she went to wrap it around her naked sister, she couldn't figure out how with those big ol' wings in the way. She held it out to Tina instead, but Tina shook her head, rejecting the offer.

"Once, eons ago, further back than your history travels, the fae king would turn humans into our kind to grow our numbers." He shook his head. "But humans are fickle. Stubborn. Reject our rules, our laws." He stopped pacing and narrowed his eyes at Tina. "My son has been acting very much like a human since meeting you."

Tina remained silent, and Sheridan hugged her jacket to her chest. The soles of her hiking boots squeaked on the glossy floor when she moved, so she stood still. Something huge was going on here, and what it was—just the assumption of what it was—made her want to weep.

"The boy claims to love you, as you say you love him. I have done everything in my power short of banishment to lure him into denouncing you. He has not. For months, he has sat in a cell in my dungeon. He states he would prefer death over not having you."

Tears glistened in Tina's eyes. "I never meant him harm," she whispered. "I swear it. When he wanted to stay with me, I told him to go away. I knew I was dying and he belonged with his kind." She dipped her head, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

"I have made you his kind. The king of the fae still holds such power, though it has not been used in thousands of years." He turned his cold, obsidian gaze on Sheridan, and she trembled. "You. I know of your capture of him. I also know you have not spoken to anyone but your sister of him. You are good to our kind."

Sheridan could only nod. Who would she tell? She had no close friends besides Tina, and at first her own sister thought she was nuts for believing in little flying fairies.

"You have a decision to make," he told Tina. "And it must be made now. Do you wish to live out your days—hundreds of years for a fae—as you are this moment, or do you wish to die as you were about to? If you accept my offer," he said, cutting Tina off when she opened her mouth to speak, "you will never return to the human world. You will be fae. You will live here as Aislan's mate. You will work among *our* kind. Make your decision, Tina of the Humans."

Tina sucked in a shuddery breath and dropped her hands to her sides, standing proud in her nudity. "You are a kind and generous leader, Your Majesty. I wish to stay and become fae. I wish with all my heart to spend hundreds of years at Aislan's side as his mate, working, living, and loving."

It took all Sheridan's will to keep the tortured cry inside of her. Even though she lived, she would never see Tina again. It was better than her death, she reassured herself. Just knowing her sister was alive and happy should be enough—*needed* to be enough.

"It is done then." The king waved his scepter, and Tina was covered in a beautiful dress of pink. "You are fae—if Aislan accepts you as his mate."

Tina nodded. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Barachus! Dresden!" the king bellowed, his voice echoing and reverberating off the stone walls, floor and ceiling.

Heavy, wooden double doors opened behind them, and Sheridan turned to see two more fairies enter. Both male. One with gossamer wings the color of winter pine needles, the other the auburn of fall maple leaves. Their color shimmered over their bodies the way Tina's pinkness did.

"Your Majesty?" they said in unison as they bowed.

"Bring me my son."

Chapter Two

"Yes, Sire," they said as if they were one unit.

When the two colorful men were gone, Sheridan looked back toward the king. He was watching Tina, who now looked about her with interest, as if she hadn't a care in the world, as if she knew Aislan would take her. Sheridan wanted to grab her, throw her arms around her, but she stood still, hugging her jacket to her chest. This was her sister's moment. Even though it killed something inside of her, she stepped back.

"You will need to learn to control those wings of yours," the king said, motioning with his scepter toward Tina's fluttering.

"Can I fly?" she asked, wonder in her voice.

The king's eyes crinkled a bit, as if he almost smiled. "Once you learn how to use them, yes, you will be able to fly as any fairy can—if Aislan accepts you. Now move over there by your sister and keep your mouth shut."

Tina turned and came toward her, a huge grin splitting her face. Tina grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Can you believe this?" she whispered. "I'm alive."

"Silence!" the king bellowed, then moved up four tall steps onto a dais and sat on a massive throne that looked to be made of solid gold.

Tina squeezed her hand again and bounced on the balls of her bare feet, obviously too excited to stand still. Sheridan smiled in return, but her heart was too battered and broken. She looped her arm with Tina's and never wanted to let go.

The doors opened again, and the blue fairy Sheridan had captured years before walked into the room, alone.

"You summoned me, oh exalted one." There was absolutely no mistaking the anger and disgust in his tone, and Sheridan bit her lip. It couldn't be good if he angered the king when Tina's life was on the line. She'd lost her sister to death once today; she couldn't do it again. She'd let her go, but she couldn't let her die.

The king glared at his son with cold eyes. "You have lowered yourself to using sarcasm on your king?"

"You are no longer *my* king. *My* king, my *father*, would never be so cruel, so heartless. *My* king knows what love is and would have done everything in his power to see to the happiness of his subjects—of his only son. Of any fairy under his rule who would be in this same position."

His father tilted his head to the side slightly. His voice boomed when he said, "And this is the kind of king you would become were the scepter and throne ever passed to you? One who lets his subjects break the laws and go unpunished? To disrespect the rules handed down through centuries to ensure the survival of our kind?"

Aislan sighed, his voice softer. "If laws are broken, punishment must be meted out. But laws can change—*should* change. Time changes all things. Including the fact that humans are more willing to believe in creatures such as us. Some of them—" He shook his head and fell silent.

"Finish your statement."

"Some of them try to protect us."

"Such as the one who captured you?"

"Yes. Because she captured me and understood my problem with her, she stopped using chemical pesticides in her garden. That is one human who has made a difference to the environment we try to protect. Because I communicated with a human."

"She could have killed you. Turned you over to other humans to be used for experiments. They would have removed your wings, cut you open to see your insides."

Aislan growled and swiped his hand over his face. "But she *didn't*."

"That one contact makes it so you should be allowed to assume

human form and seduce human females?"

His wings drooped, as did his shoulders. Sheridan wished she could see his face.

"You have no answer?" his father demanded.

"Whatever you're going to do with me, get it done. I will not change my way of thinking, and the only thing I can swear to is that I will never again seduce another human female."

"How can I believe you? You have defied me at every turn in your life."

He snorted. "I have followed your rules, accomplished every job ever handed me, and run the Care Department with precision. But I don't care if you believe me or not. I know in my heart that Tina was the only female for me, the only one who will ever hold my heart. If I live another ten thousand years—" He shook his head again.

His father stood and paced in front of the throne. After four turns, he stopped and looked at Aislan. "Your human is dead."

Aislan shouted and dropped to his knees. He covered his head with his arms and rocked as the sobs tore from him.

Tears flooded Sheridan's eyes as she watched his agony. She frowned at the king for being so cruel, but then she saw him motion to Tina to move forward. Her sister pulled from Sheridan's grasp and walked up behind the blue fairy on silent, bare feet.

"Aislan," Tina said. Then repeated it several times. "Aislan, my love." She brushed her fingers down one of his glistening wings. "Aislan."

He dropped his hands and looked up at his father. Sheridan looked at the king, too, to see a pleased, arrogant grin curving his lips.

"If I am still your king and your father, and you are still the prince of the kingdom, rise and meet your princess."

Still staring at his father, Aislan swiped the back of his hand over his eyes as he stood up.

The king's smile remained in place, but he raised an eyebrow.

Tina took Aislan's hand in hers and said, "Hey, little bug," which nearly made Sheridan giggle, even as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Aislan turned his head, a smile tugging at his mouth as he sucked

in a quick breath of surprise. A gusty laugh ripped from his throat as he cupped her cheeks in his palms. "You're a fairy."

Tina grinned, and tears shimmered on her eyelashes. "Yeah."

"You have wings."

"Fairies do." Her wings flittered erratically.

He laughed. "You need to learn how to control them."

With a nod, she chuckled. "That's what your father said."

"Would you kiss her, please? You're killing me!" Sheridan cried from behind them.

Tina laughed, and Aislan jerked his head up to glance at her.

Aislan pulled Tina into his arms and pressed his lips against hers, and Tina wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips. "I thought I'd lost you."

She forked her fingers into his hair and gripped his head. "I love you, too. I never thought I'd be in your arms again."

Sheridan did everything she could not to sob aloud. She'd never seen her sister so happy, so in love. She hadn't been healthy in so damn long.

Aislan kissed a path from Tina's lips along her jaw to her ear as he cupped her cheek and held her tight against him, seemingly unable to touch enough of her. "How...?"

The king cleared his throat, and Aislan slowly pulled back from Tina, but he didn't release her. He grinned as he watched her wings flutter.

"Take your mate home, Aislan," his father said. "We will speak tomorrow."

Aislan placed a soft kiss on Tina's lips before he pulled away, went down on one knee, and bowed his head. "Forgive me, My Liege, for having doubted your wisdom."

"Love her as I loved your mother," the king said. "Care for her and gain strength through her. Someday, my son, your hardheaded willfulness will mellow into a strength that will lead this kingdom with wisdom."

"Thank you." Aislan raised his head. "Father."

The king gave a small nod of dismissal.

Tina ran to where Sheridan stood and threw her arms around her. "I'm so happy," she said, squeezing Sheridan tight. "So damn happy. Can you believe this? I'm a freakin' fairy!"

Aislan scooped Tina into his arms. "Pardon us, Sheridan, but I must claim this sprite as my mate."

Sheridan's cheeks warmed with a blush as she squeezed Tina's hand, knowing darn well what they were about to do.

"Barachus!" the king bellowed.

The two guards entered the room, glanced at the group of three huddled to one side, then bowed toward the king.

"See that Sheridan is comfortable tonight. I am sure she will want to stay until she's had time to talk with her sister in the morn."

Sheridan and Tina both nodded, Sheridan filled with relief that she'd have just a little more time with her sister to say goodbye.

"Yes, Sire," the green fairy said. The auburn one grinned and held out his arm for Sheridan to take.

She ignored the proffered arm and called, "See you in the morning," as Aislan carried Tina out through the big double doors.

"Come along," the green fairy said, cocking his head toward the door. "It's suppertime, and I have some rounds to do before bed."

Sheridan looked back and forth between the two men—fairies—uh, she didn't know what they were. Men fairies, she supposed. Then she turned to find the king, but he was gone. She was left alone in this big, stone room with the two...*men*.

Fear tickled the edges of her senses. Alone with two men. They might have wings, but they still had dicks, and that made them dangerous.

Searching for her outward calm, she pasted on a pleasant smile, slipped her jacket back on and pretended it was armor, then shoved her hands into her jeans pockets. "Where are we going?"

"To our domicile," the green one said.

That tickle of fear threatened to bloom. She licked her lips and

searched for her calm.

The auburn one cleared his throat, cast a quick glance at the green one, then smiled. "I suppose we should introduce ourselves. I'm Dresden, and this is Barachus."

She didn't care what their names were, only that they expected her to meekly follow them to their house. She hadn't been alone with men—any man at all—in a very, very long time. And these two were huge. Standing over her, muscles bulging, wearing nothing more than a set of shimmering wings and a loincloth.

"Aren't there any women I could stay with?" she blurted out.

Dresden cocked his head to the side, his brow furrowing in a slight frown. "We are the king's guard. We will take care of you."

That's what she feared the most.

The green one—Barachus—grumbled something under his breath, then said, "Human, don't try my patience. I have work to do and no time to stand around—"

"Brock," Dresden said, clamping his hand onto the other fairy's arm. "Sheridan, isn't it?" he asked, looking back at her. His voice was smooth, low, cultured, with just a hint of an accent she couldn't place.

She nodded.

"You fear us?"

Nibbling on the inside of her bottom lip, she stared at his straight, shoulder-length hair. It was an odd color, like cinnamon. It matched his eyes. He didn't shimmer quite as much as Tina had, but there was still a hint of shininess to his skin and hair. Finally, she decided the truth was the best course of action and nodded, though fear was a bit of an understatement. Men scared her. Being alone with two of them terrified her.

He sighed. "We will not harm you. I swear to you on my life."

She shook her head. Words. Just words. She didn't know this guy. How was she to trust him no matter what he said?

"The king ordered us to take you home and give you a place to sleep," Barachus said. His voice was not low nor smooth. It was gravely and filled with anger, impatience. "You will come with us." His hair was

darker than Dresden's. Shoulder length, also, but black. The slight pine color that covered his body was a bit more pronounced in his hair than in Dresden's.

When he reached for her, she sidestepped, right into Dresden's brick wall of a chest. She pulled away from him so fast she nearly lost her balance. "Okay," she said, "I'll go. Just...don't touch me." She was very proud of herself that her voice came out strong and commanding, not weak and terrified as she felt. There was no choice in the matter, and the king had vanished.

Barachus rolled his eyes and headed for the double doors. Dresden gave a slight nod and motioned with his hand that she should walk with him. Through the heavy wooden doors was another room. Humongous, with a high, domed ceiling and mosaic floors. Fat candles flickered from candelabras, making rich colors bloom from every corner. There were stained-glass windows, but the darkness beyond made them seem a little eerie. Then they reached another set of wooden doors, these even higher and wider than the first, and Barachus threw them open.

Sheridan yelped and jumped back, falling on her butt just steps from... "Holy shit," she muttered as she crawled forward on her hands and knees and looked out through the opening. "I'm tiny!"

Dresden, standing next to her, chuckled. "You are our size, Sheridan. It is the only way you could be allowed in our village."

She stared out at oak leaves that were bigger she was, tree branches the size of redwoods. Moving even closer to the opening, she looked down. Glad she was already on her hands and knees, she experienced a bit of vertigo as she looked down, and down, from their perch in the branches of a massive tree. Or maybe it wasn't so massive, she was just very, very small.

"Where's the stairs?" she whispered, searching for some way down.

"There are none," Barachus grumbled.

"Then how...?"

"One of us will carry you."

She shook her head. "No. Can't I just stay here? There must be a

spare room in this place. It's huge."

Barachus heaved a sigh, and she looked up at him. He stood over her, his muscular arms crossed in impatience, his shimmering wings drooping slightly.

"I'm sorry, Sheridan," Dresden said. "All fairies have wings, and there is no other way to and from the palace than by flight."

She shook her head as she scooted back from the edge of the doorway and gained her feet. "Didn't fly to get here. In fact, I don't know how we got here, how we got little. One minute we were sitting by the lake, the next we were here."

"The king has magic we do not possess," Barachus informed her.

Magic and fairies. She believed in fairies, because she'd communicated with Aislan years ago. But she hadn't quite believed her sister's stories of his home. It was too unreal, too fantastic, to be fully believed. Besides, she'd been on such heavy medication for so long, her mind wasn't what it should have been. Or so Sheridan had thought. A fairy king, the king's guards, living in a tree!

She glanced out the doors again. "Where do you live?"

Dresden pointed down and to the right from where they stood. "In the crook of that branch right down there. It's not far."

She looked but saw nothing. The moonlight from above filtered through the giant leaves, but it cast too many shadows.

When she frowned, he added, "Our domicile is hidden within the branches of the tree, but I assure you there is a comfortable bed for you, and it is just about suppertime. I'm sure you are hungry?"

Well, yes, she was hungry. She hadn't eaten since lunch, and who knew what time it was now? It was dark out—night had fallen, but how long ago?

She sucked in a deep breath. "Okay." She frowned at Barachus and moved closer to Dresden, hoping the grumpy green one wouldn't touch her.

Dresden grinned, his teeth straight and white against the lovely auburn hue of his skin.

"I will set supper," Barachus said. Then poof, just like that, he dove

off the edge of the doorway.

Her stomach plummeted as she watched him glide down and then land on a branch and disappear into the thick foliage.

"Oh, Lord," she muttered. She wasn't a fan of heights and hated men. Well, didn't hate them, but preferred to not be around them.

"I will keep you safe, Sheridan," Dresden said in that smooth, gentle voice. "There is no need to fear me, or Barachus."

Stealing herself, she said, "Let's just get this over with." The faster the better. Have supper, lock the bedroom door, and pray morning came quickly.

She yelped when he scooped her into his arms as if she weighed nothing. For an instant, she struggled against his hold, the fear of a man's touch in full bloom, but then she took a couple of deep breaths and forced herself to relax.

"I have never harmed a female in my long life, Sheridan," Dresden said when she slowly raised her arm and put it around his neck for support. "I will not start tonight with the relation of my best friend's mate."

His mysterious cinnamon-colored eyes held no malice in them. His silky hair brushed her hand as she clung to his neck.

With a slow nod, she brought up her other arm and laced her fingers together around his neck. "Okay. Thank you."

"You still tremble."

"I can't help it. I don't like heights."

"Or males," he said matter-of-factly.

Again, she nodded.

He gave a sad smile. "I hope we can change that."

She tensed and nearly jumped from his arms. "I don't want to change it. I'm perfectly fine with it." The last thing she wanted or needed was some creepy fairies trying to change her mind about anything.

No, they weren't creepy. They were beautiful, and they'd saved her sister's life.

"Are you ready?" he asked, obviously ignoring her outburst.

She nodded, squeezed her eyes shut, and waited for the ground to

fall out beneath them. It didn't though. The soft whoosh of his wings stirred the air, and then it was as if she were floating. Hovering. She opened her eyes and looked into his. He grinned at her. "Nothing to fear, Sheridan," he said. And then they landed, soft and gentle.

Well, that wasn't so bad, she thought as he lowered her legs and steadied her until she stood upright. They stood on a branch of another oak tree, yet what she supposed was a fairly thin branch to a human seemed ten feet thick to her. Now that they were here, she could see the small house—cabin—hut—she didn't know what it was called, tucked into a crook in the branches. Steps had been carved into the tree's wood leading up to the door. The house looked like something out of an English garden. Field stones—or pebbles, she supposed—and a thatched roof. It was beautiful.

"Come along. I smell Brock's stew."

She followed him in through the door and sucked in a surprised breath. It did look like something she'd seen in pictures of old English houses. The walls were paneled in cedar, which gave the place a sweet, tangy scent she'd always loved. To one side was a large, open space with something akin to a sofa and loveseat—though they looked much more plush and comfortable than anything made by humans. Off to the other side was the kitchen, with a wooden slab table with four carved chairs. There was a stove—the kind you build a fire in—with a chimney. The scent of some kind of food mingled with the cedar scent of the walls, and her insides calmed a little.

"Wow," she said on a sigh.

Dresden turned and grinned at her. "It is home," he said simply and pulled out a chair at the table and indicated she should sit.

Barachus moved around the kitchen, rattling pots and pans.

"Tina told me about Aislan's home, but what she described was nothing like this."

Dresden pulled a pitcher of honey-colored liquid from some kind of cabinet and then three cups that looked to be made of glazed ceramic. "No. Until now, he was single. Most unmated fairies eat in the community hall. For the most part, only mated fairies have full homes."

"You are mated then?" she asked as she watched him pour the liquid from the glass pitcher into the three tall, blue tumblers.

Dresden frowned for an instant. "Yes, Barachus and I are mated. We have been for half a century."

When his words sank in, a sense of relief so strong it made her a little lightheaded flowed through her. "Ohh." She grinned. "Oh." Very cool. Gay fairies. She almost giggled with the giddy reprieve she experienced.

Dresden gave her a strange look then sat down at the table to her left. "I don't understand," he said, a slight frown wrinkling his high brow. "You seem..."

"I didn't know you were gay. Sorry I overacted earlier. If I'd known, I wouldn't have freaked out."

"Gay?"

Barachus set a bowl of thick, steaming soup in front of her. "Remember, Dres? Humans think it wrong for two males to mate."

"Not all humans think that," Sheridan jumped in. "I don't. I think it's great. I mean..." She chuckled. At least she knew they weren't interested in her body. Thank God for small favors. "I have never had a problem with homosexual relationships."

"Homo—"

"We are fae, not humans, not homo sapiens," Barachus stated firmly with a nasty scowl as he sat down on the other side of her.

Well, that put her in her place, didn't it? "Sorry," she muttered and reached for the tumbler of drink. The sweet, tangy alcohol made her taste buds pucker, and she moaned in delight. "This is so good."

"Honeysuckle mead," Dresden said. "Barachus is the only one in the village who makes it."

"You could make a fortune off this." She grinned at the grumpy green fairy, which earned her another frown.

"I have no need of a fortune. I am fae. I have all I need right here." He swung his arm in a motion meant to encompass the forest.

"She gets it, Brock, you're fae. Back off." Dresden shook his head. "Forgive him. He gets snappish when he hasn't eaten."

That comment reminded her of Tina. She'd suffered from hyperglycemia when she was younger, and turned into a real bitch when she was hungry.

Tina....

Sheridan lifted her spoon from the bowl and tried to distract herself from thoughts of her sister by attempting to figure out what she was about to eat. The sauce was an orange color, and there were green things, some red. She didn't see any meat. Did fairies eat meat?

Tina thought vegetarians were weird. Said people had teeth because they were meant to rend and tear.

"What's wrong?"

Sheridan jerked her head up and looked at Dresden. "Uhm. Nothing." Her heart pinched, and her throat felt tight. After tomorrow, she probably wouldn't ever see her sister again. Her eyes burned, and she feared she'd tear up again. God, she'd cried a lot over the last few months about her sister.

Her chin quivered, and she stuffed the spoon in her mouth to cover it. She didn't want to break down in front of these men. The food tasted good, some kind of vegetable stew, as she'd thought, but it hurt to swallow, her throat was so tight.

"Sheridan?"

She shook her head and forced another bite into her mouth. Tina was alive, but she was still gone from her. Sheridan had never been totally alone before; she'd always had Tina. Now, she had no one.

Dresden stood up, catching her attention, and he leaned over the table to pour Barachus another tumbler of mead. As he leaned near her, the edge of his beautiful, shimmering wing was just inches from her fingertips, and she reached out to see what it felt like.

Dresden jerked with a yelp, dropping the glass pitcher and spilling the drink.

Barachus surged to his feet. "Don't you *ever* touch a fairy's wings. Not ever!"

Chapter Three

Sheridan shrank down in her chair, and tears came to her eyes hot and fast. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's all right," Dresden said as he ruffled his wings like a bird.

"It is not all right. She is an uncouth human who has no business in our village. And now she touches my mate." He turned on her and wagged a finger right in front of her nose. "You keep your mouth shut and your hands to yourself for the rest of the night."

The tears spilled over her eyelids and trickled down her cheeks.

"Brock...."

"I have to work. Show her to the bedroom, and make sure she stays there." He stomped out the door and disappeared.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered past her tears. "I didn't know...." Her voice broke on a sob, and she buried her face in her hands.

"Sheridan, it's all right. Brock overreacted. I know you didn't know."

She stood up and went out the door, into the darkness beneath the enormous leaves. She climbed up the branch a ways and sat down, brought her knees to her chest, and hugged them. The tears wouldn't stop. She'd never felt so empty in her life. So alone. She was sad, and angry, and...scared.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she jerked, almost tumbling off the branch. But then those big hands closed over her arms and hauled her back from the edge.

"Sheridan, please. Do not be afraid of me."

"I'm not," she cried. "I'm not." She tried to suck in a breath, but it rushed out on a sob. "I'm not...."

And then his arm was around her, and for the first time in her life, she leaned into a man's solid chest, buried her face against his neck, and cried. And cried.

He rubbed her back, stroked her shoulder, and thankfully didn't say a word.

She couldn't say how long she sat there in his embrace, wetting his bare shoulder with her tears, but eventually the wracking sobs subsided and she sat up to swipe the sleeve of her jacket over her eyes and nose. "Sorry," she muttered, glad for the darkness that hid her embarrassment.

"I have never seen a female cry so hard. Are you injured?"

She shook her head.

"Barachus made you cry?"

She shook her head again and once more hugged her knees to her chest, but she still leaned slightly against Dresden's side, his arm around her shoulders. It felt good, comforting. She'd never allowed any man to touch her so intimately. "It wasn't Barachus. It's...everything."

Somewhere in the distance, a coyote howled.

"Your relation," he said.

"My sister."

"She will be happy here."

Tears flooded her eyes again. "I know. And a little part of me hates her for it." She sniffled and swiped her hand under her nose. "It's awful, I know, but I do. She's always been so beautiful, successful." Another sob broke free, and she shook her head. "That's not what I mean. She's had it hard, battled cancer for years. But she's always been..." The guilt over her jealousy overwhelmed her, and she buried her face in the crook of her arm.

"It's not your sister, is it?" Dresden said softly as he rubbed her back with a gentle, warm hand. "What is bothering you?"

"I'm scared," she whispered, admitting it aloud for the first time in years. Scared to be alone. Scared she'd never find a man who could touch

her the way...well, the way this one did. But one who had interest in her as a woman. She wanted a family, to be loved and give love. Needed it. Craved it. But it terrified her to even think about beginning the process of finding someone.

"You are safe here."

"Not here, Dresden," she said on a sigh. "At home. I'm always scared." A dry laugh nearly strangled her. "You're the first man to touch me in over two decades. Can you believe that?" She turned her head and rested her cheek on her knees to look at the gorgeous fairy. "And only because you like men and not women am I able to sit here and let you touch me. Isn't that sick?"

In the moonlight flittering through the branches overhead, she saw his brow pucker in a frown. "I like females."

A small smile tugged at her lips. "Well, I'm sure you don't hate them, but that's not what I'm talking about."

"I don't understand."

"You don't find me attractive. You love Barachus. You have sex with men."

"I have sex with females, too."

Her breath lodged in her throat, and her muscles tightened, an automatic response to such a declaration from a man who still had his hand on her back. "You're gay."

Dresden sighed and dropped his hand. He must have felt her tense. "Do not be frightened, Sheridan. Please. I don't know much about humans. They've really never interested me. I'm a king's guard, and I dabble with woodworking and designing domiciles. I don't know how you think."

"If you're mated to Barachus, what do you mean you have sex with females? Don't you find women unattractive? I thought men..."

"I love Brock. He's my mate for life. But we have females who occasionally share our bed."

Her heartbeat raced. She inched away from him, scooting slightly up the tree branch on which they sat. He was a man who liked women. And he'd touched her. She'd liked the caress, too. Wanted more of it.

Wanted to not feel so alone.

"You are afraid of me again," Dresden said, and the sadness in his voice stopped her motion away from him.

"It's not just you. Don't take it personally. I just don't like men."

"You do not like males who like females, you mean."

She nodded. It so wasn't true, but it was the best she could come up with without explaining her problems—which she so wasn't going to do to this winged stranger.

"A male harmed you in some way."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway.

"I would harm him if I could, if it would heal you."

The fight went out of her and the blasted tears came again. She stopped moving and folded her hands in her lap.

"I understood from Aislan that you are a healer. How do you survive your day without contact with males?"

"I'm not a healer, I'm just a nurse. And I work with premature babies, not grown men. The only men I deal with are doctors and worried fathers. All very professional. I don't get close to any of them, and they never touch me."

"Are you...homo—the word you used to describe myself and Brock."

"Homosexual? No. I don't think of women that way. I'm not attracted to them. I'm not attracted to anyone." That wasn't true, either. She watched TV, movies, had a huge crush on Hugh Jackman like every other hetero woman in the world. She enjoyed watching a nice ass walk by in a tight pair of jeans, the shape of the male body clad in a tuxedo. Hell, Dresden had a body to make most women drool. Washboard abs, bulging biceps, a lean jaw and a straight, perfect nose.

"You look at me as if you feel attraction," he stated in a calm, matter-of-fact tone.

"Okay," she admitted a little sheepishly. "You're attractive. And if I were the type of woman who...you know...yeah...I would be...to you...but..." She sighed and clenched her arms around her legs again. "I was raped, okay? When I was fifteen. I've never been with a man—or a

woman for that matter—in a sexual way. I can't. I just can't."

When Dresden made no response, she finally looked over at him. A tear dripped from his right eye and traveled down his cheek. He blinked and looked away, but not before another tear escaped to shine in the filtered moonlight.

"Dres—"

He held up his hand, swallowed hard, cleared his throat. "I know what rape is, but is not something that happens here. Ever. If it did, the male would be de-winged, banished from our society, a sure death sentence." He turned his head to look back at her. "Sheridan, I do not know what to say in response to your admission." He reached out his hand to touch her, but stopped short and lowered it. "I will not touch you again. And I vow to you, as long as you are among us, I will not allow anyone else to, either. I swear on my life, you are safe here."

* * * * *

Dresden paced the living space in his domicile and awaited Barachus' return. Sheridan had gone to the bedroom after he'd showed her where to find the latrine and washed up. She seemed a little disconcerted that there was no door on the bedroom, but he swore no one would cross the threshold into her space while she was there.

Rape. The most vile of offences against females. In the nearly four hundred years of his life, he had never known anyone who had suffered such a crime. Never had he had his heart so twisted with agony for another. Sex, to a fae, was the right of experiencing physical pleasure. To be shared and enjoyed equally by both participants. In his lifetime, he'd been with countless partners, both male and female. In the last half century, since being mated with Barachus, sex and love went hand-in-hand. Even when they brought a third member to their bed, the love for Barachus was unchanging. Both he and Barachus enjoyed female bodies, female companionship. Never, ever was there any force, no coercion. The thought of it made him physically ill.

The door opened, and Barachus came into the dimly lit room. Only

one candle flickered from the dining table, casting dancing shadows against the walls. Dresden went up to him and wrapped his arms around him, pulling him into a hard embrace.

"What's this?" Barachus asked, returning the hug.

Dresden shook his head. "I love you," he said softly, running his fingers over the top curve of his mate's right wing. "I love you."

Barachus shivered at the intimate touch and pulled back to look him in the face. "What's happened? What's upset you?"

Dresden kissed him, softly pressing his lips against Barachus', and threaded his fingers through his mate's wavy black hair. Barachus pulled away, though, out of his arms, taking away the hard planes of his body from Dresden's touch.

"You fucked her."

The accusation hit Dresden in the solar plexus. "No," he whispered fiercely, hurt Barachus would think such a thing. Not in all the years they'd been mated had he taken another without Barachus.

"Then why the look of guilt on your face?" He turned away and went to the kitchen, drawing out a bottle of mead from the cupboard. He didn't bother with a glass, simply pulled the stopper and tipped the bottle to his lips.

Dresden shook his head. "It is not guilt."

Barachus took another swig. "Then what is it? You haven't greeted me at the door like that in decades, and then only when you were horny."

"Stop," Dresden hissed, stalking into the kitchen. "Stop with the attitude. What's your problem?" He snatched the mead from Barachus' hand and set it on the table. "Why did you treat her so badly?"

"Humans don't belong in our village. There's a reason laws were laid out centuries ago. Now we have one living among us and another in our bedroom. It's wrong. Can't you see that?"

"Our best friend loves Tina."

"And he broke the laws to be with her. He. Broke. Laws. Don't you understand that? We're the king's guard. We're here to uphold the king's laws. He broke them, but instead of punishment, she's turned into one of us—but she's still human on the inside." He shook his head and made a

face of disgust. "She's a human and always will be, whether she's got wings or not."

"He was punished," Dresden reminded him, hurt his mate could be so prejudiced. He spent months in the dungeon. He suffered. The king saved her life."

"If Aislan hadn't been the king's son, he would have been de-winged, not given what he wanted."

Dresden picked up something in Barachus' tone. "You are jealous."

Barachus scoffed. "Of someone mated to a human?"

"No. Of Aislan in general. Of his station—the fact his father is the king."

Barachus narrowed his dark green eyes. "I am not jealous of Aislan. I am angered that because he's the king's heir he got away with things anyone else would have been banished for."

Dresden sighed. "Brock...."

Barachus held up his hand to stop him from speaking. "I'm tired. I just want to get a good night's sleep and get that human out of our domicile first thing in the morning." He brushed past Dresden and went into the living space where Dresden had laid out the settee cushions for them to use as a bed, since Sheridan was in theirs.

Dresden blew out the candle and followed. He'd hoped to talk to Barachus about Sheridan, but that obviously wouldn't happen tonight. He'd never known his mate to be so...hard. Unmovable. Barachus was normally the picture of reasonability.

He lay down on the cushion next to Barachus, but was far from falling asleep and stared up through the darkness at the ceiling.

Barachus tossed and turned for a few minutes, then heaved a heavy sigh. "What did you want to talk to me about when I got home?"

Dresden didn't answer, still stung that Barachus accused him of having sex with Sheridan behind his back.

"I'm sorry." Barachus rolled toward him and propped his head on his hand. "Yes, I was jealous. I admit it."

Dresden frowned at him. "Of Aislan?"

Barachus shook his head. "Of that human."

"I don't understand."

He reached up and stroked Dresden cheek. "Of the way you looked at her. Smiled at her. Spoke to her."

"I'm confused," Dresden said, but closed his eyes and reveled in Barachus' gentle touch.

"I've never seen you look at another the way you look at me. And then when she touched you—"

Dresden jerked and sat up. "She had no idea. It wasn't anything. It startled me is all. I love you, Barachus. With all my heart."

"I know you do. But you are attracted to her. No, don't deny it," he said quickly when Dresden shook his head. "I see it in your eyes, in the way you speak to her."

He might as well admit the truth. "Yes, I was—am—was—" He heaved a sigh. "She's untouchable. She's been..." He swallowed, almost unable to say the word. "...raped."

Barachus' hand stilled.

"She is afraid of males. When she found out we were mated, she felt safe, thinking we weren't attracted to females. When I inadvertently corrected her, she pulled away from me, and I saw the terror in her eyes. That's when she told me why she did that—why she pulled away from the comfort I tried to give her." His heart bled for her all over again. "I've never felt so helpless."

Barachus pulled Dresden against his chest and wrapped his arms around him. "I owe her an apology."

Dresden nodded against Barachus' shoulder and held him tight. "She's very fragile," he muttered. "So fragile...and alone. She lost her only relation today. Her sister is alive, but she is ripped from Sheridan just the same."

Barachus ran his hand down Dresden's left wing in a sign of tenderness, a request for forgiveness, a calming stroke.

"There must be other humans she is close to," Barachus said, then kissed his forehead.

"I don't think so. She told me she's scared to go back."

"She has to, though."

"I know." Dresden snuggled down against Barachus, and they lay as they had for years, with legs intertwined and arms around each other.

"Humans are barbarians," Barachus muttered into Dresden's hair.

"I never thought so until tonight. I wish I knew more about them. I wish there was something we could do for her."

Barachus sighed. "Go to sleep. Morning'll come early."

Dresden kissed his mate, slow and deep, swirling his tongue into Barachus' mouth. "Goodnight."

* * * * *

Sheridan lay in the ultra-soft bed and listened to the whispers from the next room. She'd heard the argument, she'd heard them speak of her, and tears came to her eyes when Dresden said he wished there was something he could do for her.

Tina was the only person in the world who ever wanted to take care of her. Who cared about her.

She turned her face into the pillow and let the tears silently fall. She didn't want to go back to the human world. She wanted to stay here, where total strangers treated her as if she meant something. Where her sister was. Where...she was cared for.

* * * * *

Barachus awoke to the erotic sensation of a big, callused hand stroking his cock, and the light nips of his lover on his shoulder blade at the base of his wing. He shivered and groaned, stretched and sighed.

"Good morn, my love," Dresden whispered then scraped his teeth along the base of Barachus' wing.

Barachus moaned and pressed back against Dresden. "Feeling a little feisty this morning?"

"Mmm." Dresden stroked his tongue along the top curve of Barachus' wing, and Barachus nearly spilled himself into Dresden's hand. The erotic sensation of his mate's mouth on his most sensitive part made

him so hard, it wouldn't take long to stroke him into oblivion. "I don't like fighting with you," Dresden muttered, his warm breath caressing the sensitive silk of Barachus' wing.

Barachus sighed. Dresden had the gentlest heart of any fae he knew. They were equal in size and strength, but Dresden's soul was so much softer. It was what had made Barachus fall in love with him so long ago. "That wasn't a fight, Dres. It was me being my stubborn self."

"You know I love you."

"I know." He reached behind him and stuck his hand into Dresden's loincloth, pushing it out of the way so he could wrap his hand around Dresden's semi-erect cock.

Dresden groaned and rubbed his smooth cheek against Barachus' wing.

"I love you, too, Dres," Barachus said as he stroked Dresden to full hardness. "Fuck me. I need you."

With a soft growl, Dresden shoved the back of Barachus' loincloth down around his thighs and leaned into him. Barachus guided his mate's cock to his ass and bent forward just a bit. Dresden surged inside of him in one firm, smooth motion, which made them both moan.

"Tha's good," Barachus said, his words a little slurred from the pleasure. "Ahhh."

Dresden slowly stroked, his cock going a little deeper on each one. Reaching behind him, Barachus grabbed Dresden's ass. Muscles bunched beneath his fingers, and Dresden jerked, slamming into him with a grunt.

"That's it, Dres, harder."

Dresden rolled him over onto his stomach, plunged deep within him, then, on his withdraw, grabbed his hips and pulled him up to his knees. The change in position made Barachus tremble, his arms shaking as he pushed up to support himself, because Dresden did as requested and fucked him hard, with deep, fast strokes.

Dresden ran one hand up Barachus' back, between his shoulder blades, then gripped his right wing.

Barachus shouted at the bliss of his mate's touch on his wing while his cock was buried deep inside of him.

Dresden leaned over his back, reached beneath him, and wrapped his other hand around Barachus' cock. He stroked at the same quick, hard speed as he pumped into his ass. Dresden's grunts on each thrust pushed Barachus closer and closer to the edge.

When Dresden's cock got harder, even bigger, Barachus stopped fighting the need to come. His mate was close. Barachus squeezed his ass cheeks tight, trapping Dresden's cock within him. Dresden's harsh breaths stopped. He rocked his hips a few more times and tugged hard on Barachus' cock. Barachus let his arms collapse from beneath him, and Dresden came down over him as they both came hard, Dresden's groan against Barachus' wing, and Barachus' shout into the soft pillow beneath him.

Chapter Four

Sheridan held her breath and listened to the sounds of completion. Two husky, male voices coaxing each other, their sounds of pure erotic pleasure making her pulse pound and her pussy clench and weep. She'd shoved her hand into her jeans and stroked her clit hard and fast, close, close, close, but as always, the finale eluded her.

Even when she heard the muffled shouts and groans of the men's orgasms, she couldn't reach the peak. Couldn't finish, no matter how she rubbed, tweaked, sank her fingers into her cunt and pumped them. Tears of frustration trickled from her eyes, but she didn't stop, couldn't give up. She needed to come.

Please, God! Please!

"Sheridan?"

Dresden calling her name made her jerk her hand from her pants and look toward the open doorway. He wasn't there, hadn't seen her.

"What?" she said, her voice strained and harsh.

"Are you all right?"

No! She was so far from all right it was laughable. She swallowed hard. "Yeah. Fine."

He appeared then in the doorway. His chest was a little shiny in the morning sunlight streaming through the windows, the only sign he'd just had hot man sex with his mate. "Bad dream?" he asked.

She sat up in the bed and pushed the softly woven covers to the side.

"You were making some odd sounds. I was worried." He shifted from foot to foot as if nervous.

"I'm fine. Give me a minute?"

He nodded. "Take your time. Brock's just starting breakfast." He turned and moved out of sight.

Sheridan let her shoulders droop and covered her face with her hands. The sweet, musky scent of her juices clung to her right hand, and she needed to get to the latrine and wash up before she sat down to eat with the fairy men again.

And then she'd see her sister for the last time.

She wasn't ready to face this day.

She made the short hike up the tree branch to the latrine, a trip that seemed much more treacherous in the daylight when looking over the edge of the branch into nothing but more branches for as far as she could see. But she made it there and back without any mishap, stopping at the small stone fount in what would be a real house's front yard to wash her hands with the foamy bar of some kind of minty smelling soap that sat on the edge. Seeing the cottage in the daylight was like walking into a storybook fantasy. The stone front and thatch roof really did make it look like an English cottage, but instead of a setting in the forest, this one was *in a tree*.

Sheridan shook her head in amazement. It was stunning. She climbed up the shallow steps carved into the nook of the tree branches and ran her hand over the smooth stones of the building.

Tina's giggle caught her attention, and she turned to see Aislan carrying her pink, winged sister through the air. He landed softly just feet from her and grinned. "Good morn, dear sister," he said and gently put Tina to her feet.

"Hey," Sheridan said, unable to completely hide her sadness. She had a brother-in-law now. Tina had never married, though she'd been in a couple long-term relationships. Now she was mated to this fairy man.

Tina threw her arms around Sheridan and hugged her tight, rocking her from side to side. The happiness vibrated through her, and Sheridan forced a smile.

"Hey, sis."

"Isn't this place cool?" Tina asked as she pulled back and looked around her at the cottage. "It's better than the fairy tales Mom used to read us."

Sheridan nodded. It was. This was real, not a story from a book.

The door opened, and Barachus stood there. "Breakfast is ready," he said. "Aislan." He nodded toward his friend. "Tina." There was a bit of coolness when he said her name. "Sheridan, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure. Be right in," she told Tina.

After Tina and Aislan went into the house and shut the door, Barachus turned to her. He had a look on his face that was almost comical. Sweet and a little confused. His brow wrinkled, and his lips pressed tight, but in his deep green eyes she saw tenderness toward her for the first time.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out.

She raised her hand to stop him. "I overheard your conversation last night. It's okay."

He blew out a breath. "I didn't know...."

She nodded. "I know. It's not something I go around telling everyone. And if I offended you in any way, I'm sorry, too. Could you just do me a favor though?"

His brow furrowed further. "What is it?"

"Be kind to my sister. Please." Tears rushed to her eyes, and she pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. Sometime during the night, tossing and turning, she'd realized that Tina could be as lost as she felt. This was all new to her, too, and she'd never be able to run out to Starbucks for a latte ever again. Tina had been a city girl her whole life, and now she lived out here without electricity or plumbing, amongst a bunch of strangers.

"Do not cry," Barachus said and sounded just a little panicked, which made Sheridan smile through her tears.

"Please. She's a good woman. She's been through a lot in the last few years, and she's got happiness now with Aislan. Don't make her life

difficult.”

“I would do no such thing.”

His tone helped dry her tears. He sounded very offended she would suggest such a thing. “Not on purpose, but you are kind of hard. No offence.”

“For a human, you’re not as bad as I expected,” he stated grudgingly. “I will not cause your relation harm.”

“Thank you.” She went to step past him, into the cottage, but he stopped her with a gentle touch to her shoulder. She jerked slightly at the contact and turned to look at him, pressing into the hard wood of the door.

He pulled his hand back and frowned. “Will you be all right when you return to your side of the lake?”

The tears did come then, and she couldn’t help it. His beautiful eyes were full of concern. She nodded, unable to speak. When she was able to swallow the lump in her throat, she took a calming breath and said, “I will survive. I always do.” Then she turned and went into the cabin to share a meal with her sister, her new fairy brother-in-law, and his best friends.

“But that does not mean you will be happy,” she heard Barachus say just above a whisper as he followed her into the cottage.

* * * * *

Once the pancakes smothered in a sweet berry sauce were consumed, Aislan left with Barachus and Dresden, leaving Sheridan alone with Tina. They’d have the day to visit, Aislan assured them, because his father, the king, had made it so—whatever that meant—and he and the other two had something to see to. Though she had no idea what they did for *work*, they seemed to be in that kind of mode when they left. She knew Barachus did patrols, or something like that, but... She shrugged and turned to her sister.

Tina wrapped her hand around Sheridan’s. “You okay here with the two males?”

Tina was even talking like them already, calling them males instead of men. Sheridan nodded in answer.

"You sure? I told Aislan I was worried about it, but he said they're great guys and that you'd be fine, but I know—"

"I'm fine. They're fine. Very considerate, actually."

"Barachus seems pretty cold. He doesn't scare you?"

Her sister knew her too well. Put her in a room with a dozen premature babies, and she was in charge, could handle any emergency that could possibly arise. Put her in the same room alone with a man who had a temper, and she turned into a frightened teenager.

"He did. Scare me, I mean, but we got past it." She didn't want to tell her sister she'd broken down and told Dresden about her past. She didn't talk about it with anyone, and she just knew Tina would read something into it. There wasn't anything behind it, and she wasn't sure why she'd told him other than he'd been offering comfort, and for once it felt good.

"What happened?" Tina asked then released her hand to pick up her tumbler of mead.

Instead of a direct answer, Sheridan asked, "What's with not touching their wings?"

Tina choked on her drink. "You touched one of their wings?" she nearly yelped when she stopped coughing, her face red.

Sheridan nodded.

"Oh." Tina blew out a breath. "Well, see, a fairy's wings are like the most incredible erogenous zone imaginable."

Sheridan's lips parted, and she sucked in a breath.

"The wing-touching thing is only between mates, from what Aislan told me. It's a very private thing, and let me tell you, there is nothing—and I mean *nothing*—as erotic as having Aislan stroke my wings. I had an orgasm last night from just that."

Sheridan covered her face with her hands. "TMI, sis!" Her face blazed under her hands. She'd violated Dresden. Touched his private part. And she sure didn't need to hear about her sister's orgasms when she hadn't had one in forever.

"Sorry," Tina said around a chuckle. "For a nurse, you're an awful prude, you know that? I don't think we've ever had girl talk where you didn't turn bright red."

Sheridan dropped her hands as pain pierced her heart. Their time for girl talk was at an end. This was it.

Tears swamped her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. She'd watched her sister go through puberty, but had nothing to tell her when it'd happened. She couldn't share stories of her first kiss, her first time. She didn't have any happy memories about men. Then when Tina was older and had moved to Portland and she'd call complaining about this boyfriend or that, or about something that one did, again, Sheridan had nothing to share. She'd never been on a date, let alone had a boyfriend to complain about.

"Oh, sis...." Tina came out of her chair and wrapped her arms around Sheridan. "Don't cry. I wasn't thinking. I know you don't talk about men and sex and all that. I don't know what made me say that."

Sheridan sniffed. "Because it's true. I never was your big sister, was I? I didn't have the answers I should have." She wiped her sleeve over her eyes. "And now I'll never see you again, and what good was I ever to you? You've always been the big sister, even though I'm older." A sob broke free. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do without you."

Tears tracked down Tina's face now, which made Sheridan feel even worse. "I'm sure I'll be able to come see you. Aislan came to see me in human form; why can't I do the same?"

"He got into trouble for it. You're an outsider. And the king said you were cut off from the human world if you accepted the offer of becoming one of them."

"Yeah, but Aislan's the king's son. I think he'll be able to let me, take me, something." Tina gripped Sheridan's hands tight. "It's not like I died or moved to another country. I'm just across the lake."

Sheridan bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling, but when she looked at Tina's fluttering wings, she nearly lost it again. They lived in two different worlds now. Two completely different worlds. They weren't even the same species any longer.

"I love you, sis," Tina said softly. "You took such good care of me when I was sick. You're my best friend. You always will be. I'm alive, not dead, and if I want to see you, I'll make damn sure Aislan takes me to you."

Sheridan shook her head. How could that be? No matter what Tina said, after she saw that the king locked up his only son because he defied the rules and went to Tina in human form, she couldn't see him allowing this new fairy anything close to that amount of freedom.

Tina pulled Sheridan out of the chair and led her into the living room area. They sat down on the soft cushions of what she supposed was their form of couch. Tina wrapped her arms around Sheridan and held her tight. "You're scared, aren't you, sis?"

More than Tina could ever know...and afraid of things she hadn't shared with her sister and wouldn't now.

"God, Sher, I wish you could find a man who would be there for you and make you feel safe."

That was out of the question. Unless she thought he was gay, as she had Dresden, she couldn't stand a man touching her. Didn't even like women to touch her, other than Tina.

Tina ran her hand over Sheridan's head and rocked her as if she were a child. "It'll work out someday, sis. It did for me. Come on, think about it. I was dying. No, I think I really did die. But then I was saved. If that can happen to me, then your miracle could happen, too."

Sheridan had quit believing in miracles a long time ago. She closed her eyes and relaxed against her sister's shoulder. She wished she could stay here forever. There were men, true, but at least the two in this house understood her, really seemed to care about what had happened to her so long ago. They didn't judge like so many others. Didn't tell her it had been twenty years and she should just "get over it."

After her horrible night's sleep, it was easy to close her eyes and let her sister's embrace soothe her. Tina had always made her feel safe. She desperately wanted to find someone else who could make her feel that way, but she knew no one existed. She lived in her own little nightmare.

She'd often wondered why she couldn't have been the one to get

cancer. She was the one who really had nothing to live for.

Chapter Five

Dresden and Barachus crashed through the front door of their domicile and landed in a laughing heap on the floor. Dresden buried his tongue in Barachus' mouth as Barachus shoved Dresden's loincloth out of the way and wrapped his big, hot hand around Dresden's cock.

"Ahh, yeah," Dresden breathed into his mate's mouth. "That's good." He moved down Barachus' jaw, nipped at his neck, licked over the scar he'd left decades ago on Barachus' left chest to signify their mating. "I love you."

They'd spent the day working with Aislan. The honeybees were disappearing from the hives, and they'd figured out what was happening, they just didn't know why, yet. They'd be back at it tomorrow, trying to unravel the mystery. Now it was their time to relax and play.

Aislan had returned to collect his mate and take Sheridan home, while they went to the community hall and had a few drinks with some friends. Anything stronger than mead made Barachus frisky. Tonight was no exception.

Barachus groaned as Dresden nipped a path over his chest, his tightly muscled stomach, and took his cock in his mouth. He engulfed the hot, hard length in one deep suck that had Barachus thrusting his hips.

"I love you, too," Barachus said on a heartfelt moan.

Dresden laved his tongue underneath the head of Barachus' cock, reveling in the sweet nectar of his lover's pre-cum as it dribbled into his mouth. He sucked hard, harder, extracting more of the delicious essence,

until Barachus grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him up his body.

He laughed at the way Barachus fumbled to push him onto his back and trap their cocks together in his hand while he kissed him so hard it nearly bruised his lips.

"So fucking hot," Barachus panted. "You make me...so hot." He stroked their cocks with his big hand, their flesh rubbing together.

It was Dresden's turn to thrust up, reveling in the contrast of Barachus' callused hand and the smooth silk of his mate's cock against his, slicked by pre-cum and saliva.

"You're just horny because you're drunk," Dresden teased as he bit Barachus' bottom lip and tugged it, licked it.

"I'm horny because you are so fucking gorgeous. I got lucky when I found you."

Dresden reached up and ran his fingertips over the velvety length of Barachus' wing. "I do believe I'm the one who came after you."

Barachus bit his shoulder, making him groan.

"Shut up, Dres. Just shut up and give me your ass."

Dresden shook with laughter as he spread his legs wide, reached down between them, and guided Barachus' cock toward his anus. "All yours, lover."

Barachus surged into him in one hard stroke. Dresden groaned at the fullness.

Barachus shouted and gripped Dresden's wings above his shoulders, using them for leverage.

Dresden raised his knees, taking Barachus even deeper on the next stroke, and deeper again on the next. His cock, trapped between their bodies, got a nice bit of friction as Barachus moved against him. It wouldn't take him long to come. Not long at all. He touched Barachus' wings with long, soft flutters of his fingers, knowing just how his mate liked it, what got him off.

"Dres.... Ahhh...." Barachus pumped into him so hard, pressing against his balls with his pelvis on each deep penetration.

Dresden's body heated as climax approached. He panted against Barachus' shoulder, trying to keep his touch light on his lover's wings, but

as the pressure built, he couldn't stand it, and scraped his very short nails over the top arches.

Barachus' shout was more of a strangled cry as his pumping grew faster and his cock got even harder. "No, Dres. Got...to...come...now!"

Cum spurted up over their stomachs as Dresden came, and Barachus stilled, his cock impaled deep in Dresden's ass. Then he came, his cock twitching and pulsing inside Dresden.

With a loud sigh, Barachus collapsed over him, wrapping him in a tight embrace. "You're so fucking good," Barachus said, his words just slightly slurred.

Dresden chuckled and held his mate. "Yeah," he said on a sigh. "I am."

Barachus laughed and kissed him, his tongue swirling into his mouth and stealing his breath.

A soft moan from the direction of the bedroom had them scrambling to their feet.

Sheridan stood in the bedroom doorway, her hand pressed against her crotch, her eyes squeezed tightly closed. Her other hand supported her against the doorframe. She whimpered again and stroked her pussy through her thick clothing.

Dresden cast a glance at Barachus. Sheridan hadn't noticed them watching her. She made a soft, mewling sound—a sound of agony, of frustration.

Barachus frowned, cocked his head toward her, then nodded, telling Dresden to help her.

Dresden wasn't supposed to touch her. He'd promised.

Then a tear trickled down Sheridan's cheek, shimmering in the soft candlelight he hadn't realized burned until then.

He stepped toward her, but stopped two arm lengths away. She bit her bottom lip, her eyes still tightly closed, and rubbed vigorously at her crotch. Another tear tracked down her rosy cheek.

"Sheridan," he whispered.

Her eyes popped open, and her hand stilled. She seemed to shake, and despair shone in her big, gorgeous, midnight blue eyes.

"Sheridan," he whispered again. "Let me help." He could feel her frustration rolling off her in waves, seeming to overpower the fear she'd had of him just the day before. He didn't know why she was still in their domicile, but he couldn't let her suffer this way. She needed to come; he could smell her arousal, but she seemed unable.

She shook her head just a tiny bit and moved her hand from her crotch. "I can't..." Her voice was strangled, and another tear glistened on her lashes. She started to back away, into the bedroom.

He'd promised not to cross the threshold when she was in there. "Wait. Sheridan." He held out his hand toward her. "Let me try to help you. I won't hold you. I won't touch you other than with my hand. Just one hand."

Her gaze skittered over his shoulder, toward Barachus. Dresden felt his mate approach, stand next to him.

"I won't let him hurt you," Barachus said, his voice gruff. "We cannot stand to see you suffer."

"I'm..."

She was going to say she wasn't, but she couldn't seem to let the lie pass her lips. She closed her eyes again and sagged against the doorframe.

Dresden stepped closer, so he could reach out and touch her shoulder. She jerked slightly at the contact but didn't pull away. "I'd never hurt you, Sheridan," he whispered. "Hurting a female is a crime worse than murder."

She swallowed hard and slowly opened her eyes. "Just your hand."

He nodded and slid his palm down her arm, over her rough clothing she'd worn since she arrived, then back up to her shoulder. He moved it gently to her collar, then just his fingertips to the soft flesh of her neck above the ribbed neckline of her knitted clothing.

She shivered, and her eyelids fluttered. "That feels nice."

He soothed his fingers over her skin, so gently he barely touched her. She enjoyed that, obviously. But she'd been hurt by a male. Could he make her come? Could he give her what she needed?

Slowly, he let his hand trail down over the front of her shirt. He decided to keep to the outside of her clothing. It might make her feel more

secure, especially since he stood here naked in front of her. If she was clothed, he obviously couldn't harm her.

He touched her belly, and she sucked in her breath. He spread his hand over her side and slowly slid it up to the side of her breast. She trembled, and her breath stuttered.

"Just my hand, Sheridan. Nothing else. I want to give you pleasure. You need it. It would be my honor to help you find it."

Another tear trickled from her eye, and he desperately wanted to kiss it away. It hurt him to see her pain. When she closed her eyes again, he looked over at Barachus. His brow was furrowed, his lips turned down in a frown. He was hard and sometimes unfeeling toward others, but he felt for this human. Of that, Dresden had no doubt. Maybe because of that, he'd acted like a jerk yesterday.

Dresden refocused his attention on Sheridan and gently stroked his thumb over her nipple.

She tensed.

"Shh, feel the pleasure in your body. Let it flow through you." He stroked again, and this time she relaxed. A third gentle touch, and her nipple hardened so much he felt it through her layer of clothing. "That's it, Sheridan," he said, keeping his voice at a whisper. "Feel it as it courses through you." He stroked yet again, and this time she moaned and gripped the wall as if needing the support to keep her upright.

He slowly moved to her other breast and repeated the process until she whimpered, a sound that had his own cock thickening. With his other hand, he braced himself against the wall so he didn't lean into her, so he forced himself to keep that bit of distance between them. Her tremors now weren't from fear or distress, they were from pleasure. The tang of her arousal scented the air, and there was nothing he could do about his body's response to it. He hoped for her sake she kept her eyes closed, because he feared what her reaction to his erection might be.

"More?" he whispered.

She nodded, her silky golden hair shining in the candlelight as it brushed her shoulders. She bit her bottom lip between her teeth again as he cupped her breast in his palm and gently kneaded it.

With slow deliberation, he spread his palm and ran it down her stomach, judging her reaction. She quivered under his touch, and her breaths grew shallow.

“More?”

She nodded, this time more vigorously.

He twisted his hand so his fingers led the way down her pelvis, over the thick blue pants she wore, until he felt her heat.

She grabbed his wrist as her eyes popped open. She stared him deep in the eyes, then she swallowed hard again. He waited. It would be up to her if he touched her there. Even though she’d stopped his movement, she hadn’t pushed him away.

Her breaths spurted out in quick little pants, and her cheeks were a becoming shade of pink. Her wide eyes showed her desperation and her indecision.

“I will be gentle,” he said, his words the softest of whispers.

She slowly released his wrist and reached out to lay her hand against his chest.

He inched his hand down, until his fingers were between her legs. She shook like a leaf in the wind, and her fingers curled into the flesh over his heart, making his cock grow to full hardness. He ignored his own lust, would never, ever force himself on her, and pressed ever so lightly against her cunt.

She cried out and slammed her eyes shut. Her body tensed. Fear? Pleasure? He glanced at Barachus for help. Barachus gave a single nod, telling him to continue. Barachus’ cock was long and stiff, standing straight out. He, too, wasn’t unaffected by this human’s pleasure.

Dresden moved his middle finger, pressing it against her core once again, hoping he was in the right spot to afford her clit the sensation.

Her hand slipped from his chest to his shoulder, and she gripped him, holding him away, yet seeming to ask for more. He repeated the light motion, pressing just a bit more firmly this time, and she cried out. Her arm went straight, shoving him back just a bit, but her nails dug into his shoulder, keeping him from moving away.

She seemed close, very close, to coming. He adjusted his hand just a

bit and used a second finger along with the first to make a circular motion over where he thought her clit was.

Even as tiny, erotic whimpers tipped her every breath, he kept up the caress. As her nails dug into his flesh. As his cock throbbed between them, needing its own touch. As she thrust her pelvis toward him and cried out.

Tears dripped down her cheeks. Her body rode his fingers in a sensual thrust of hips, and then every muscle seemed to draw tight in her body, and she cried out, a soft sound of release.

A sense of peace flowed over Dresden as Sheridan climaxed. She slumped against the wall. He pulled his hand away from her crotch and laid it gently on her side, keeping her steady.

"You're safe, sweet Sheridan."

She panted and nodded her head. The tears had dried, but her face blazed with heated color. Her eyes were still closed, her head tipped against the wall. He wanted to hold her, to pull her into his arms and finish comforting her, but he didn't dare, couldn't do anything that would frighten her.

When her breaths slowed to near normal, she opened her eyes and looked at him. She sighed deeply. "I'm sorry for spying on you."

A smile tipped his lips. "I am not."

Her cheeks darkened a shade. "I mean. I...heard you...and..." She blew out a breath. "I haven't had an orgasm in so long. The sound of you two..."

Sorrow filled him at that statement. Sex was a beautiful thing. Alone or with another. To be unable to climax would be unimaginably horrible.

He raised his hand from her side and touched her cheek. She flinched only slightly but didn't try to pull away. "I hope this has helped you, Sheridan." He shook his head. "I hope you feel safe with us."

As if she'd forgotten about Barachus, she turned her head to look at him. Her eyes widened, and she let out a squeak. Then she looked back at Dresden, then down to his middle. That was when she jerked away and the look of fear returned to her eyes.

"Sheridan," Dresden said. "No. Don't be afraid."

"You..." She waved her hand toward his engorged cock. "You have..."

"Yes, I do—we do—but you are safe here." Desperation tainted his voice, and that seemed to frighten her more. Her fear helped to ease his lust, and his erection lessened a bit.

She backed into the bedroom, out of his reach.

"We don't put them where they're not wanted," he said, exasperated, thinking he'd shown her that he wouldn't hurt her.

Her breaths were shallow again, only this time it had nothing to do with pleasure and everything to do with terror.

"Thank you for what you did, but I can't..."

She wouldn't listen to them now, of that he was sure. The fear had overtaken her senses again.

Dresden turned, grabbed Barachus' arm, and hauled his mate outside.

They went to the washing fount in the yard and splashed the cold water on their bodies, effectively deflating what was left of their lust. They soaped away the dried cum from their chests and stomachs, and Dresden took a bit extra care to clean the evidence of their earlier sexual encounter. When they were finished, they went back inside and found their loincloths on the floor, donned them, then went back to the doorway of the bedroom.

Sheridan sat on the edge of the bed, her head bowed, her shoulders hunched as if in defeat. Dresden's stomach curled in misery for the woman. He wanted to help her—experienced a deeper need to comfort than he ever had in his life.

"Are you hungry?" Barachus asked.

She looked up, and the evidence that she'd been crying shone on her cheeks. The despair in her eyes tore at Dresden's soul.

"No. I ate with Tina before Aislan took her away."

"We thought Aislan was taking you home tonight," Dresden said.

She shrugged. "He said something about needing his father's magic to get me home, but the king wasn't in the palace when he went to find

him."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Dresden asked.

"You've done more than I ever thought possible." She dropped her gaze and turned back to staring at the floor. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm just fucked in the head. I think you're both wonderful, and if I were different..." She shrugged. "I wish I were different."

Barachus laced his fingers through Dresden's and squeezed his mate's hand in a sign of reassurance. He'd obviously picked up on Dresden's distress over Sheridan's sadness. "We'll be right out here if you need anything."

She nodded but didn't look at them.

In silence, they moved the cushions to the floor. Dresden blew out the candles spaced around the room, and then they lay down together.

Barachus wound his arm around Dresden and kissed his shoulder. "There's no more we can do for her," he whispered in Dresden's ear.

Dresden nodded.

"She's special, for a human. But she will be leaving, and there's absolutely nothing we can do to help her. She's too...damaged."

Dresden nodded again. He'd give anything to help her, though. To take away the pain in her eyes and make her smile. He was sure she had a beautiful smile, and he desperately wanted to see it.

When they awoke in the morning, she was gone. An hour later, Aislan informed them that the king had sent her home in the middle of the night when he returned from wherever he'd been.

Dresden doubted he'd ever see the sweet, hurting human ever again.

Chapter Six

A tear-inducing yawn grabbed Sheridan as she entered her cabin in the woods after her first day back at the hospital. She'd been on personal leave just over a month in order to care for Tina, preferring to be the one to tend to her instead of a hired nurse, spending with her what they both assumed would be her sister's last days on earth.

They'd been wrong on that account, thank God, but Sheridan was exhausted.

She'd awakened in her own bed yesterday, and for a few moments in the early morning dimness, she'd thought the last days had been a dream. She'd even pushed herself up and gone to Tina's room to see how her sister fared, but the bed was empty. All the medical equipment still sat scattered around the room. When she'd gone outside, she'd seen Tina's wheelchair and oxygen tank still down by the lake where it had been when the fairy king had taken them to his castle in the tree.

Avoiding thoughts of where her sister now lived, so close yet so very far away, she'd gathered up all the rented medical supplies and headed to the hospital, where the women and men she worked with greeted her with sympathy. Everyone thought Tina had died. She supposed she couldn't tell them she hadn't, since they all knew Tina was literally on her deathbed the last few weeks.

Tina was as good as dead, Sheridan supposed. It wasn't as if she could pick up the phone and call her as she had at least three times a week for years. Throughout the day of caring for the babies in the Neonatal

ICU, she realized that there was no reason she should be jealous of her sister, no reason she should feel the anger that had plagued her. Life—any life—was better than death.

While holding and feeding a premature baby who weighed only two pounds at birth, she came to the realization that though that baby had a ninety-percent chance of having health problems her entire life, she would live. She had a chance to grow and thrive. Sheridan's animosity toward Tina was absolute selfishness on her part, and she forced herself to put it aside. Tina lived and was happy.

Even Sheridan could see that life was better than death. Hadn't she, herself, fought the depression and pain in her heart over the last two decades because she refused to give in? Yes, she had, and she'd keep going. Maybe she'd never find any true happiness outside of caring for other people's sick babies, but that was enough for her. She'd settled that with herself years ago.

She wouldn't hold Tina's happiness against her, and she just prayed that someday, as Tina had said, Aislan would bring her sister back to her for a visit. So she could feel her sister's arms hug her one last time. She hated herself for the way her emotions had run when they'd visited the last time in Dresden and Barachus' little cottage. She hated that she'd felt so much animosity toward her sister, and herself, during their last hours together—though she prayed she'd hidden her true feelings from her sister.

So now she was home after her first twelve-hour shift back at work. She dropped the bag of groceries onto the kitchen counter and plopped her purse on the floor. She pulled a frozen dinner from one bag and popped it in the microwave to cook while she put the rest of the food in the fridge and freezer.

Her life would fall back into its normal routine quickly, she surmised. Cooking for one, the daily grind of twelve-hour shifts at the hospital—almost fifteen if the commute counted—and spending her evenings alone in her little cabin in the woods, safe and secure knowing that less than a mile away, her sister was with her new husband—mate—whatever—having a ball. It was okay now. She was

okay.

Sheridan slipped off her jacket and dropped it over one of the stools at the breakfast bar. Another yawn caught her, and her eyes watered. She just hoped she could catch up on sleep soon.

Sleep.

She'd slept more soundly the night she'd been returned home from fairyland than she had in...years. She still couldn't believe she'd let a man touch her, but she'd been so damned desperate.

For all her hang-ups where the opposite sex was concerned, she was still a functioning woman who had sexual needs like everyone else. She never knew why, suddenly, a few years earlier, she became unable to orgasm. She'd spoken to her gynecologist. Had her hormones checked. She'd been told she was perfectly normal, and there shouldn't be any physical reason she couldn't reach climax. But she couldn't—which meant it was in her head.

She'd even taken to watching porno flicks on cable now and then—the ones made for couples, not the hardcore stuff. Though they made her hot and helped bring her to the edge, she hadn't been able to go over and experience an orgasm. She'd tried every toy imaginable...nothing helped. She'd all but given up until that first night when she heard the men.

God, the sounds of their lovemaking had heated her. She heard *love* in their voices, along with the lust. You never heard that on the dirty movies. Yet, even while listening to the loving words, along with the grunts and groans of pleasure, she hadn't been able to force herself to come.

The next night, though, she hadn't been able to stop herself from peeking at them. When she heard them laughing and kissing, the sounds not only heating her lust but also warming her heart, she got up off the bed and watched. It was raunchy and dirty. Hot and carnal. She'd never seen man sex before, and she liked it. A lot. She'd touched herself, sure she'd be able to come because her pussy throbbed and she was so wet. But yet again, even though she'd been so close, it didn't happen.

Then they caught her. Dear Lord, she'd been mortified. Too

embarrassed to even run from them. Too horny to tell Dresden no when he offered to help.

The microwave dinged, and she turned to get her dinner.

A fairy man was the only man to ever make her come. She laughed at the idea. Maybe it was because they were magic. Maybe because he seemed to truly care that she was frustrated. Or maybe, even, it was because his lover, another man, stood guard over them and swore he wouldn't let Dresden hurt her.

In those few moments when he touched her, when she closed her eyes and did as he instructed and let herself feel the pleasure coursing through her from his light touch, for the first time in her life she wondered if there could ever be a possibility of her leading a normal life. Of finding a man who didn't scare her, who could make her mind let go of her fears and allow her to feel passion.

She ripped the lid off the cardboard tray and grabbed a fork from the drawer. The Salisbury steak looked a bit anemic, but she was too tired and too hungry to care.

Then she'd seen their erections, and the pleasure had fled right out the pretty little leaded-glass window. They'd both gotten hard watching her come. And she'd freaked.

Taking a potholder from the hook near the stove, she slipped it under the cardboard tray and headed to the living room to watch the news and eat before passing out in bed.

As she sat down on the sofa, she noticed the red light blinking on her phone, letting her know she had a voicemail. She frowned and picked up the handset to punch in the code to call her mailbox. The only person who ever called her was her sister. And, well, her sister didn't have a phone anymore.

A cold chill went through her, and her stomach contracted. She thought she might throw up.

This was what she hadn't told Tina about. This was her worst nightmare come true.

"Ms. Yonker, this is Beverly Smith from the Washington State Parole Board. You are on the list to be notified when Clayton Brown is released from

prison. Mr. Brown has served his seventeen years and is scheduled for release October tenth.

"If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call me."

The date today was October nine.

* * * * *

Dresden glanced at his mate as they entered the king's palace.

"It'll be fine, Dres," Barachus reassured, but his expression said otherwise.

They found the king in his private study, bent over a thick journal with quill in hand.

Dresden licked his lips. Barachus shifted from foot-to-foot next to him.

They were the king's guard. They did the king's bidding. Although, other than the whole situation with Aislan before he was allowed to take Tina as his mate, there hadn't been much for them to do for the king in the past half century. They knew they were trusted by him or they wouldn't be allowed free access to the palace. None of the other fae in their forest were, except Aislan, the king's son.

"What has you hovering in my doorway?" the king asked as he sat up straight and set his quill aside. He wiped his fingers on a cloth to remove any remaining ink, then turned his attention toward them.

Together, they entered his chamber and bowed low. "Your Majesty."

"Is something amiss?" the king queried.

"No, Sire," Barachus said. "We wish to make a request."

The king raised an eyebrow. But then his lips pressed into a scowl. "Does this request have something to do with the human?"

"Yes, Sire," Dresden answered with a slight nod. "Sheridan."

It seemed the king rolled his eyes, but surely he hadn't. Their ruler would never do such a trite thing. "I should have known bringing her here would cause more problems than were already brewing." He sighed heavily. "State your request."

Barachus cleared his throat. "Dresden and I request that we be allowed to assume human form and...check on her."

"If I did not *allow* my own son to assume human form, what makes you think you would be permitted? And why would she need to be checked upon? When I left her, she was sleeping soundly in her own bed in her domicile."

Dresden answered, "We make the request from our heart, Your Majesty, and we ask for this only once. She..."

"She is a damaged soul," Barachus cut in when Dresden couldn't find the words. "We fear for her safety—no, that's not right. We fear for her peace of mind. We feel that now that her relation is here, she has no one to..." He ended with a shrug, obviously unable, as Dresden had been, to vocalize the fears they held in their heart for the sweet human woman.

"She has millions of other humans," the king said. "What is one visit from the two of you?"

"We don't know," Dresden said, fearing the king would refuse their request.

"Why is her relation's mate not here asking for permission for this? Why has Tina not come to me and asked permission to visit her relation? She is mated to my son and has my ear as much as he does."

To Dresden, the king seemed rather upset Aislan had not come to him.

"We do not have the answer for that, either, Sire," Barachus said, "other than they are busy with designing their new domicile, and Tina is working hard in the laboratory with Jade."

"I have heard she has become an asset." The king gave a grunt and folded his hands over his belly. "I must say I am pleasantly surprised."

Dresden glanced at Barachus again to judge his opinion, but his mate kept his attention on the king.

"Very well," the king finally said on a heavy sigh. "You are limited to one night, and you must have no contact with any other humans, only Sheridan."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Dresden and Barachus said in unison.

"I expect a report from you on how the woman fares."

"Yes, Sire," Barachus said, a grin on his face. "We will report to you first thing in the morning."

The king gave a nod and reached for his quill, a dismissal. As Dresden and Barachus turned for the door, the king said, "By the way. What would you have done if you had not received my permission?"

Both Dresden and Barachus stopped, turned back, and dropped their gazes. Dresden chose to be the one to answer, since he was the one who had brought them here, the one who'd insisted he couldn't rest easy until he found out if Sheridan fared well.

"I would have maintained fairy form, Your Majesty, but I would have gone to her domicile to see that she was well."

"And you, Barachus? My most trusted guard?"

"I would not have let Dresden go alone."

Dresden jerked his head up and stared at Barachus. That was not what he'd said last night when Dresden suggested the idea. Barachus had done everything in his power to talk him out of it—he was the one who'd dragged him here to the palace to ask for permission rather than sneaking off as Dresden had wanted to do.

The king dipped his quill in the ink and dabbed it on the edge of the bottle. Never looking up, he asked, "And if you'd found the human in distress?"

Without pause, Barachus said, "Then I would have assumed human form and gone to her aid."

"That's what I feared." The king gave a wave, dismissing them yet again without further comment.

As they left the king's study and headed through the palace, Barachus said, "Perhaps we should stop and see Aislan and Tina before we go. The king seems upset."

"They've been busy building their new life together. But you're right. We should. But let's hurry. I don't want to waste the night." And because their magic would only last until sunrise, Dresden was in even more of a hurry to get on their way. He wanted to spend as much time with Sheridan as he could. He hadn't known it was possible to feel this yearning in his soul for another—other than his mate. But since they were

bonded, he never feared being without Barachus. He wished he could bring Sheridan back to the forest, back to their home, and keep her there forever.

He glanced at his mate as they flew through the evening dusk toward Aislan's domicile. He needed to keep his emotions about Sheridan contained inside of himself. Barachus had come to accept Sheridan in the short time she stayed with them, had even, obviously, felt her distress the night she stood watching them make love, but he harbored ill feelings toward humans as a race, and Dresden doubted Barachus would ever truly accept a human. Especially if that human had a piece of his mate's...heart.

* * * * *

Sheridan wrapped the blanket tighter around her shoulders, sipped her chamomile tea, and tried to concentrate on *Dateline* that played on the television. She hadn't slept worth a damn in the week and half since that blasted phone call from the state parole board.

Logically, she knew she was safe. But that didn't stop her insides from trembling every time she thought about the fact that Clayton Brown was free now, roaming the streets, maybe hurting other little girls. He'd served his time, wasn't even on parole, so no one would be checking up on him. He was free, and she was trapped with all the memories of that one horrible night when Clayton Brown and his brother took away her innocence and made sure she'd never led a normal, carefree life.

She sipped her tea and tried to focus on Chris Hansen and his investigative reporting. Her mind, though, kept wandering back to that night almost twenty years ago. The pain. The terror.

Through years of therapy, she'd learned to deal with most of it. She had panic attacks that came out of nowhere and stole her breath and made her heart feel as if it'd beat right through her ribcage. Those she could work through, and she'd learned to understand them and not fight them, but to focus her mind until they subsided.

To this day, she couldn't stand being touched. Especially by a man.

A polite handshake was about all she could muster herself to give, and even those were difficult at times.

But Dresden had touched her, and intimately. He'd been so gentle, and the kindness in his eyes had eased any lingering fear that overrode her need of sexual release.

Then again, he was two inches tall and had wings.

A small smile curled her lips as she thought of the two fae men, so big and fierce looking—yet she knew they were tiny. Over the last years, ever since capturing the fairy she now knew was Aislan, she saw the winged fae often in her garden, especially in the summer.

She hoped they didn't stop coming. She liked them. They added magic to her life. She needed that.

Without thinking, she reached for the phone to call Tina, something she always did when memories became too much for her to bear. She was halfway through dialing her sister's phone number when she realized what she was doing. She slowly lowered the phone back into the charging cradle and set her tea on the coffee table.

Pulling the blanket tighter around her, she curled her feet under her and stared at the television. She wasn't even sure what the show was about tonight. She couldn't find it in her to care.

A knock at her front door made her heart stall for an instant. Her throat seemed to close up on her as one of those panic attacks threatened to erupt.

No one came to her door! *No one*. She lived in the middle of nowhere, at the end of a long, dirt road for a reason.

The knock sounded again, but she huddled into the blanket, trembling, her breathing erratic as she tried to calm her mind, tell herself it wasn't anything bad. She was safe.

"Sheridan?" a man's voice called.

She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep in the yelp of fear. No, he couldn't have found her. He had no idea where she lived.

Chapter Seven

"Sheridan? It's Dresden and Barachus," came from the other side of the door.

A sob of relief burst from her throat as she threw back the blanket and rushed for the door. She undid the locks and threw it open to see...

"Where's your wings?" she almost shouted. Without them, they looked too...manly. Too human. She shrank back a bit and wanted to shut the door before they could burst into her home.

Dresden frowned. "We are in human form."

And their strange coloring was gone. The slight hue that touched their skin and hair when they were little. They looked *very* human now, except for the exotic tilt to their eyes, and their eye color. And they were practically naked.

She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deep. The two men were wearing the same thing they'd worn in fairyland—what she'd come to think of their woody home. Loincloths, and nothing more. Their bodies bare, muscles bulging. Just because they didn't have wings didn't mean they were any different than they had been. She could trust these two—had trusted them enough to sleep in their home. Enough to let one of them stroke her to climax.

"Sheridan?" Barachus said, his voice that same gravelly sound she remembered. Had it only been less than two weeks since she'd been there? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. "Hi." Pulling the door open wide so

they could come in, she added, "What are you guys doing here?"

The men entered her house, but they didn't look around. Instead, they kept their attention riveted on her. Dresden spoke first. "We wanted to see how you were doing."

"To make sure you were all right," Barachus added.

"Oh." She shut the door and turned the deadbolt. "I'm okay." When she turned toward them, they stood close—very close. She sidled away and around them, moving into the kitchen and putting the breakfast bar between them. "Are you hungry?" She didn't know what else to say, to do. She never had guests. And never in her wildest imagination would they have been two big, huge, muscle-bound men if she had invited someone to her home.

"A little," Dresden said, moving closer to the breakfast bar. "Are you sure you're all right? You seem..."

"Frightened," Barachus said in his no-nonsense way.

She forced a little laugh as she opened the fridge, turning her back to them to hide what she figured was her strained expression. "Well, I do live alone in the middle of nowhere. Not often anyone knocks on my door." *Not ever!* "You startled me." She stared at the contents of her fridge. A pack of ham for sandwiches. A bowl of salad. She pulled out the salad and set it on the counter. "You don't eat meat, do you?"

Glancing up at them, she saw them both frowning and shaking their heads as if the thought was beyond repulsive. That made her chuckle.

"Cheese?"

The men frowned.

"You've never had cheese?" Then again, if she really thought about it, how would they get the milk? Rabbits? Mice? She chuckled at the image that put in her head and pulled out a block of aged cheddar.

"Have a seat." She motioned to the stools they stood near. It was best to keep them on the other side of the counter from her. At least until she got used to them invading her space. She wasn't frightened of them, not really. They'd made her feel very safe in their home. Why would they be any different here?

They settled on the stools, and she pulled plates from the overhead cupboard.

"How have you been?" Dresden asked.

"Good." She opened the plastic container and dished out the tossed salad onto the two plates, glad she'd made up the fresh greens before settling in to watch TV earlier. "Work's busy. But that's typical." She gave them a slight smile. "I take care of sick babies."

Dresden nodded. "You mentioned that. You enjoy doing this?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely." She laid a wooden chopping block on the counter and sliced some cheese, then cut it into thin sticks. "It's what I was born to do, I think. The only thing I ever wanted to do." She picked up two pieces of cheese and held one out to each man.

They took the food from her and looked at it, examined it. Sniffed it. Dresden was the first to take a bite. He held it in his mouth a moment, then chewed slowly. He shrugged, and then Barachus popped his piece into his mouth.

"Interesting," Dresden said after he'd swallowed.

Barachus' eyes raised. After he swallowed, he asked, "What's it made of?"

"Milk. From cows." She took a bite of a piece herself. Cheese was a favorite of hers. She put it on just about everything.

Barachus and Dresden both broke into hearty laughter.

"No wonder we've never had it before," Dresden said around his laughter.

"We don't eat food from animals, usually, and how would we get milk from a cow?" Barachus said, his laughter hearty and rich.

A small tingle went down Sheridan's spine at the sweet sounds of the men's laughter. Sure, she'd heard men laugh before, but this was different. This...was hers.

She smiled and turned to retrieve the salad dressings from the door of the fridge. She liked variety, so she had several, and she set them on the breakfast bar then pushed the plates of salad toward the men. Iceberg and romaine lettuce, orange peppers, green onions, red radishes and grape tomatoes made for a pretty mix. She laid forks on the sides of the plates.

"It's been a long time since I took human form," Dresden said, picking up his fork. "I know what all of this is..." He touched a slice of pepper with the fork. "...or at least I think I do. But it looks much different from...up here." He gave Sheridan a slightly bemused look, and it made her smile.

"Dressing?" she asked, holding up a bottle of French dressing.

Dresden shrugged. "Sure. I'll try it."

She popped the lid and squeezed a dollop onto his plate, then offered it to Barachus, who shook his head and put his hand on his plate, as if to pull it out of her reach.

"It's good," Dresden said after he tried it. "Sweet. Spicy." He took the bottle from her and squeezed more onto his salad, then reached over and squeezed some onto Barachus', which made the other guy frown. "Try it, hon. It's good."

Hon? That tingle inside of Sheridan intensified. She'd heard them make love, watched them, but hearing such a simple pet name come out of Dresden's mouth toward his lover did something to her. Made her yearn to hear him say it to her, which was silly. She wasn't even of the same species as them.

Barachus tried a bite of lettuce drenched in the red dressing. He nodded his approval and took a few more bites.

"You're not eating?" Dresden asked after he'd downed a few more mouthfuls.

Sheridan shook her head. "I ate a while ago." She did, however, take another piece of cheese before she put the rest on a small plate and set it in front of them. "How's Tina?"

"Good," Barachus said. "She's settled in well to her new life." He pushed a radish to the edge of his plate, obviously not fond of the first one he'd eaten. "Aislan has had Dresden helping him design a new domicile. Now that he's mated, his is too small for the both of them."

"She's been working with Jade in the laboratory," Dresden added. "Jade says she's a good assistant."

"Laboratory?"

Both men nodded.

"Developing medicines to combat the effects of human pesticides on the animals," Barachus said.

Sheridan nodded. That was what had facilitated her first meeting with Aislan several years ago. The fairy had been upset at her because of the pesticide she'd been using to try to rid her roses of aphids. She'd captured the strange blue bug and realized he wasn't a bug at all.

Funny, only months ago she'd told this story to her sister, and Tina had laughed at her. Now, her sister was *mated* to that same strange blue bug.

"I never thought Tina had science in her. She's always been all about numbers."

"Numbers?" Dresden asked.

"Yeah. She's an accountant for a big law firm—uh, *was* an accountant."

Barachus finished his salad and pushed his plate aside. "Are you happy?"

He'd commented on her happiness before, when she was in the fae village. Funny, she thought, she'd never encountered any other fairies when she was there.

"You don't seem happy," he continued. "Are you ever happy?"

"What do you mean? Of course, I'm happy." She busied herself putting away the salad, dressing, and block of cheese.

"No. I don't think so," Barachus said while her back was turned. "Tina laughs all the time. Her eyes dance with it. You seem rather..."

"You don't sparkle," Dresden added.

She swallowed hard as she shut the fridge door. "Of course, I don't. I don't have the same kind of skin as you fairies. All your skin sparkles." Why did they have to push this? She was as happy as she could be. As happy as she'd ever be. She'd made peace with that.

"We want you to be happy," Dresden said, and in his voice she could hear his sincerity. "We worried about you because you were so sad when you were with us. We know you miss your sister, and we know about your past, but is there something that will make you smile? Make you shine? We want to see that in you."

The only way she'd ever be truly happy was if someone could take away her memories of one terror-filled weekend two decades ago. She doubted all of the fairy king's magic could do that. She turned around to tell them she was fine, that she was happy. What came out startled her. "I don't know how to be any other way than I am."

Dresden stood up and rounded the end of the breakfast bar, until he stood right in front of her. "What do you need to experience joy, Sheridan?"

She closed her eyes and envisioned the night in their pretty little cottage. Hearing them make love, then letting him touch her so tenderly. For an instant, just the time it took for him to stroke his fingers over her, she'd felt a peace she'd never thought possible.

Escaping into sex wasn't the answer. There was no answer. Though, here he stood, just inches from her, hovering over her, and she felt no fear of him. She opened her eyes and looked up into his. "What I want isn't possible," she whispered. Because in that moment, all she wanted was to be in Dresden's arms, to be surrounded by his caring, maybe even his love. For him to call her "hon" and kiss her the way he'd kissed Barachus that night while she stood in the shadows and watched.

But none of this was real. He wasn't human; she wasn't a winged creature who lived in the forest.

When he lifted his hand and touched the side of her face, though, she closed her eyes and leaned into it. Human contact was vital. She knew this because of the babies she cared for. They needed to be touched, held, cuddled. Yet, for twenty years, the only person to hold her had been Tina. The act of the touch was there, but what lay beneath the feel of Dresden's hand was more personal, deeper. At least in Sheridan's heart it was.

No man had ever touched her before Dresden.

When she opened her eyes, Barachus stood just to Dresden's side, very close to her. He reached out, too, and touched her shoulder, curling his warm fingers against her, slowly running his hand down her bicep and back up. His other hand was on Dresden's back. She felt the connection between the three of them, and her heart stalled for an instant. The looks in both of their eyes was tender, so full of caring. She wanted so

much to throw herself against them, to feel their arms around her. They'd never hurt her, of that she was sure.

"What can we give you to make you shine?" Barachus asked.

Though tingles raced down her arm from his touch and the warmth of Dresden's hand against her cheek, the way he lightly stroked his thumb over her skin, she couldn't ask for a repeat performance of the night in their cottage. Even though she knew that Dresden could make her come, and her body would relish the release, deep down she knew that wasn't enough. She also knew she'd feel even emptier inside once they left. Orgasms weren't the key to happiness, merely a physiological release she craved. What she wanted was more than anything these two creatures of the woods could give her. She didn't want a quick orgasm. She needed love everlasting. Someone she could come home to each night and curl up next to. A man to hold her and keep all her fears at bay.

These two men weren't even men, and they wouldn't be staying—couldn't stay—with her forever.

She swallowed hard and opened her mouth to tell them that there wasn't anything they could do for her, when another knock sounded on the door. The sound startled her, and she jumped back, bumping her head on the fridge. More guests?

"I will see who it is," Barachus said, stepping away from her.

Dresden stroked his thumb over her chin before slowly pulling away.

"Hey! Hi, Brock," she heard Tina say.

Sheridan all but pushed Dresden out of the way and ran to the door to throw her arms around her sister. "You're here!"

Tina hugged her in return. "Yep. How're you doing? Got any coffee?" She pulled away from Sheridan and headed straight for the kitchen. "Meat," she said, pulling open the refrigerator. "Ah, ham. Cheese! God, I miss cheese. Beer. Oh yeah. Can only take so much of that mead they serve all the time."

Sheridan moved aside and let Aislan through the door. He grinned at her, winked, then followed Tina into the kitchen.

Sheridan forced a smile in Dresden and Barachus' direction. With a

houseful, she had no idea what to do.

* * * * *

Barachus stood by the door, watching Tina pull item after item from the big, white, cold box. Sheridan hovered between the entryway and the kitchen, her fingers interlaced, shifting from foot to foot. Her nervousness was palpable. And Dresden...well, he only had eyes for Sheridan. Couldn't stop looking at her, gazing, really. The longing in his gorgeous eyes was obvious.

He and Dresden had matured together. Only after Dresden saved Barachus' life a little over a half century ago had they become lovers. Sure, they'd often shared females in their youth, had even messed around sometimes, but after Dresden had risked his own life to pull Barachus from the beak of a duckling who didn't know better than to mess with the fae, something had changed between them. Within the year, they'd mated. In all the time since then there had been females they'd shared, but Barachus had never seen such longing in Dresden's eyes for another.

A tiny bit of him experienced some jealousy. The biggest part of him hurt for his lover. Sheridan was an untouchable. She was human. And even though she'd allowed Dresden to touch her that one time in their domicile, he seriously doubted she'd do it again.

Dresden was a caretaker. Barachus found that out when Dresden spent day and night nursing him back from crushed bones from the duckling. Dresden hadn't left his side for weeks. Since then he'd done similar for other fae, even a few injured animals he'd nursed back to health. Now he'd found another who needed a gentle touch, and he ached to fix her. Only, Barachus doubted Sheridan was fixable. And even if she were, this was their one and only time with her. The repair Sheridan needed to her soul would take much, much longer.

Tina had stacked a variety of food onto a platter and grabbed Sheridan's hand, dragging her into the living area to sit on the long, cushioned settee. "Everything's great," Tina was saying. "Except for this annoying little bitch named Ruby. She hates me for some reason and

watches me constantly as if she's trying to find something wrong with me." Tina took a bite of food. "But everyone else is really nice."

Aislan sat in a chair near the settee, and he laughed. "Love," he said to Tina. "Ruby's the one who bit your ear."

Tina's eyes rounded. "That bitch! Are you serious? God, wait 'til I get my—"

"Don't be like her, Tina," Aislan said, a grin tugging at his lips. "She's jealous because I wouldn't mate with her."

"You better not have!" Tina stuffed more food in her mouth. "Ugh, the thought of you and her..." She narrowed her eyes. "You did, didn't you? You fucked her?"

Dresden chuckled and moved toward the group, propping his butt on the arm of the settee near Sheridan.

"What's done is done, love," Aislan said. "You're my mate, and that's all that matters."

Tina blew out a breath and turned to her sister. "That's another thing about all these guys—and girls. Sex. They fuck anything that moves! Well, the unmated ones anyway. They do it right out in the open, too, like it's no big deal."

"It isn't a big deal," Aislan said, "until you're mated. Until then, sex is sex."

And so the conversation went on, and Sheridan never said a word. She sat quietly and listened, her hands folded demurely in her lap, her gaze shifting from fae to fae as the conversation circled around her. She glanced up once in a while at Dresden, a few times behind her to where Barachus stood. Dresden turned at one point and made eye contact with Barachus. He shook his head and frowned, reached out his hand as if to touch Sheridan's head, but pulled back before he made contact.

Barachus' heart pinched. It might have been better to fight harder against coming here tonight. At least he'd kept Dresden from doing it behind the king's back, but still, it would have been better if they hadn't come at all. Dresden would feel the pain in his heart for quite some time.

Chapter Eight

A couple of hours later, Sheridan was obviously too tired to stay awake. Her eyelids drooped even as conversation carried on around her, and she yawned repeatedly.

Barachus spoke up. "I think it's time we leave and let Sheridan rest."

"No, it's okay," Sheridan said, the first words she'd spoken since Tina and Aislan arrived.

Barachus frowned. She didn't want them to go? It was near midnight, and she had deep shadows below her eyes.

"He's right," Tina said, standing up and pulling Sheridan up with her. "You've got to work tomorrow, don't you?"

Sheridan nodded. "Yes."

"We should go then," Aislan said, joining the women as they walked toward the door.

"You'll come back again?" Sheridan asked.

Tina hugged her. "Of course. We have permission to come any time we want." She laughed. "It's good being the king's daughter-in-law."

Sheridan smiled, but of course, like every other Barachus had seen from her, it didn't reach her eyes.

Tina opened the door then turned to hug Sheridan again. "I love you, sis. I miss you."

"I miss you, too," Sheridan whispered, clinging to her relation.

Tina walked out into the night. Aislan followed after, giving

Sheridan a smile and a nod.

Barachus and Dresden neared the doorway. Sheridan wrapped her arms around herself as the cool outside air flowed into the room.

"You'll come back again soon?" she asked. Those big blue eyes of hers almost seemed to plead with them.

"No, I'm sorry, Sheridan," Barachus said. "We were only given permission for this one night, just to see if you were faring well."

Her brow wrinkled, and her lips turned down in a frown. "But..." She waved her hand toward the open door.

"As Tina said, she is now relation to the king. She is mated to his son. They will be allowed to do things we are not."

Tears misted her eyes. "Oh."

"Don't cry," Dresden whispered, stepping up to her, touching her arm. "We will check on you, but we cannot take human form without permission. We are the king's guard, and we cannot break the rules."

She nodded, but her chin wobbled slightly. "I understand."

Barachus took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. "We will check on you," he repeated Dresden's promise.

She watched his mouth as he kissed the back of her hand. When he released her, she held her hand against her chest.

"Goodbye, sweet Sheridan," Dresden said, and moved to walk out the door.

"Wait," she said softly, and he stopped. She licked her lips and hesitated for a moment, then stepped up to him, went on tiptoes, and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Dresden smiled, but his smile did not reach his eyes, either. He gave a short nod. "You're welcome."

She turned to Barachus then, laid her hand against his bicep, went up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. At the last second, he couldn't help himself. He turned his head slightly so her lips brushed against his.

Sheridan froze. Her breath hitched. And then she pressed her mouth against his in the most innocent of kisses he'd ever experienced. It took all his will not to wrap his arms around her and hold her against him, but he feared he'd scare her. He caressed her lips with his just once,

then slowly pulled away.

"Goodnight," he whispered and turned away from her.

He and Dresden stepped into the darkness and waited until they heard Sheridan turn the locks on her door.

Dresden reached for his pouch of magic tucked into the side of his loincloth, but Barachus stilled his hand.

"Let's walk for a bit." He took Dresden's hand and led him down the cobbled path toward the lake shimmering in the moonlight.

The lights in the cabin turned off, and they stood in the silence for a long time, staring at the calm water.

"You can't fix what's wrong with her," Barachus said softly as he caressed Dresden's thumb with his own.

Dresden drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I know."

"You have fallen in love with the human." It wasn't a question, and Barachus didn't expect an answer.

"I'm sorry," Dresden whispered. "I never thought another besides you could make me feel this way."

"Don't be sorry. I understand it. She is...not what we were taught that humans were. She's very gentle." He released Dresden's hand and wrapped his arms around him.

Dresden laid his head on Barachus' shoulder and held him in return. "She's so alone. Even when she was in a room surrounded by her friends, her relation, she seemed alone. She never said a word in all that time, just let Tina go on and on about her new life."

Barachus nodded. "I have a feeling Tina has always left her in a shadow. It's what she's used to."

"I want to take her back with us, keep her safe from whatever plagues her mind. I want to take care of her."

Barachus ran his hand down Dresden's back. "I know you do, love. But the fact is we can't. She belongs to this world, and we don't." He kissed Dresden's forehead then smoothed his silky hair away from his face. "And I feel the same way."

"Tell me, Brock. Was her kiss as sweet as I imagine it?"

Barachus sighed. "Sweeter."

* * * * *

Sheridan stood in the dark cabin and looked out toward the lake, where the silhouettes of the only two men she ever trusted stood intertwined in what looked like a loving embrace.

Tears filled her eyes, and she bit her lip to keep from crying. She'd never see them again—at least not when they equaled her height. If she saw them, they'd be two inches tall, and they wouldn't be able to speak to her. She knew, because Aislan had tried to communicate with her when she'd captured him, but she hadn't been able to hear him.

She laid her forehead against the cold glass of the window and let the tears fall. Her lips still tingled where Barachus' kiss had touched. Her first kiss ever. And more than likely, her last.

* * * * *

Sheridan swabbed the tiny girl's bow-shaped lips with a moist Q-tip then checked the feeding tube before she closed the incubator and pulled her mask down so it dangled around her neck. She stared at the baby, its breaths so small they barely moved her chest. She was born almost eight weeks premature, her lungs underdeveloped. Sheridan sent up a quick prayer, as she did countless times during the day for each of the babies under her care, that this one would grow strong and get to go home with her loving, terrified parents.

She moved to the next incubator, removed her latex gloves and pulled on new ones, replaced her mask, and was just lifting the lid when the other nurse in the NICU called out to her. She turned.

"Phone call."

Sheridan frowned as she stripped off the mask. Who the heck would be calling her? She never received phone calls at work. She wore a pager on her hip for anyone in the hospital to contact her. She stripped off her latex gloves as she went into the nurses' station. "Could you check on Zachariah? Check his feeding tube and replace his saline bag."

"Sure thing," Carry said. They'd worked together for a couple of years, and though she couldn't call the other woman a friend, she was as close to one as Sheridan got.

"Who is it?" Sheridan asked, motioning toward the phone and the blinking red On Hold light.

Carry shrugged. "Some guy. Thought you mighta started seeing someone." Carry laughed, winked, and stepped out of the glass-enclosed nurses' station.

Sheridan picked up the phone, hit the flashing button, and brought the phone to her ear. "This is Sheridan Yonker."

"So it is...."

She didn't recognize the voice, but the tone made her skin crawl. Slimy, snakelike. She sank down into the office chair and gripped the phone so tight it hurt her hand. "Who is this?"

"My friends call me Clay. You can call me your worst fucking nightmare."

Sheridan glanced through the glass at Carry. Clayton Brown. Her scalp tingled, and she shot a glance out into the hallway, over her shoulder, then back to Carry. "How'd you find me?"

A rusty laugh, like a tin can filled with old nails. "In prison you make a lot of friends. Friends that have friends that have friends that can find anyone. Changing your name didn't hide you, did it? Not from me. I've had seventeen fucking years to plan my revenge. I plan to get it."

Sheridan's breaths sped as she tried to fight down the panic. She swallowed hard, closed her eyes, counted to ten, tried to breathe through it.

"See you soon, little girl. From your driver's license photo, you're still just as pretty as you were back then."

The line went dead.

Sheridan dropped the phone as the blackness swam in from her peripheral vision, threatening to swamp her. She gasped for air and dropped her head between her knees. *Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.*

"Ohmygod. What's wrong?" Carry laid her hand on Sheridan's back. Sheridan yelped and jerked away, nearly toppling the chair off its

casters.

"Don't touch me," she gasped. "Don't touch—" She couldn't catch her breath. Her heart thudded so hard it hurt. She was dying. She wouldn't give Clayton Brown a chance at her because she was going to pass out right here and stop breathing!

No. No, she wasn't. She took deep breaths and cleared her mind—or desperately tried to. She visualized her safe place—the lake outside her cabin in spring. Pink and white flowers blooming in the grass. New, bright green leaves sprouting on the birch trees.

Her breathing slowly evened, the dizziness lessened, and when she opened her eyes, she could focus on each gray speckle in the white linoleum tiles on the floor.

"Sheridan?" Carry asked, worry in her voice. "Do you want me to get someone?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine." She was far from fine, because though the attack had passed, the terror had not. She forced herself to slowly sit up and look out of the glass cubical at the baby cribs and incubators. She took a few more deep breaths. Clayton Brown had found her, even though she'd moved out of Seattle and changed her last name years ago.

How had he found her? "In prison you make a lot of friends," she whispered to herself. Friends who obviously had connections and had been able to find her for him.

Her skin went cold and clammy. She picked up the phone receiver she'd dropped and hit Line 1 on the phone and dialed 9-1—but then she stopped. Emergency wasn't what she needed. No, there wasn't anything they could do. She punched in the number to retrieve her messages on her home phone voicemail. She'd saved the message from that parole board woman. She'd call her. After retrieving the message, she scribbled down the phone number and hung up the phone again.

Carry still hovered nearby, looking nervous and concerned.

Sheridan forced a smile. "I need to make a couple phone calls. Could you give me a few minutes, please?"

Carry nodded. "You're sure you're okay?"

Sheridan nodded again. "I'm good. Just...please?"

Carry frowned but walked out of the office and shut the door behind her.

Sheridan dialed the number for Beverly Smith at the parole board.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said, "but Ms. Smith is out of the office today. Would you like to leave a voicemail?"

"No. No. I need some help now. She called me a few of weeks ago and told me that a man who raped me was getting out of prison on the tenth. He called me today, threatened me. I need to know what to do about it."

The kind receptionist gave her the number to the King County crisis line.

After ten minutes on the phone with a very helpful woman at the crisis center, Sheridan was told to go directly to the police station and file for a temporary order of protection.

Feeling better about what she had to do, she called her supervisor and requested an immediate replacement. She lied and told her boss she was sick, but this could not wait. If she wanted to keep her mental health, she had to stay on top of things. Stay in control. Keep herself safe.

It took an hour for her replacement to arrive, and then Sheridan left the hospital. At the door to the parking garage, she asked the armed guard to walk her to her car. She scanned all the cars nearby, looking for anyone lurking who shouldn't be. She hadn't seen Clayton Brown in seventeen years, not since the day he was sentenced and she'd pleaded with the judge to lock him away for the maximum time. Laws were a lot more lenient back then, and he was only sentenced to seventeen years for kidnapping and accessory to rape of a minor. He hadn't raped her, but his brother had. He'd just been there to watch, to help, to hold her down and beat her into submission.

Her stomach clenched, and she forced the memories away as she climbed into her car, waved a thank you to the guard, and locked her doors. She pulled out of the parking lot and searched for anyone who might be following her.

She was led from the intake area of the police station to the desk of

a kindly, middle-aged detective named Sarah McMurty. Detective McMurty helped her fill out the necessary piles of papers for a temporary order of protection, and then said she'd personally deliver them to the courthouse and it would go in front of a judge in the morning.

"Until then?" Sheridan queried.

"Until then, keep your cell phone at hand and call 9-1-1 if Clayton Brown should show up anywhere near you." The detective gave Sheridan a business card to show should she need to call the police.

"Okay, but I don't live in King County, and I don't own a cell phone." Sheridan explained.

McMurty nodded. "I've dealt with the Jefferson County police and sheriff's department on special cases. They'll know my name. As for the cell phone, I would suggest you get one."

Feeling a little more secure that she had someone on her side, that this woman believed her and was willing to help, even out of her jurisdiction, eased a tiny bit of the fear that had coursed through her ever since Clayton Brown called her.

Still, she watched the cars around her, searching for one that might be following her, as she made her way to the Edmonds-Kingston ferry terminal. While waiting for the ferry, she locked her car doors and kept a watch in her rearview mirrors. On the ferry, she got out of her car and went up to the tiny food court to make sure she was surrounded by people instead of in her car, between other cars, where she'd be trapped. Then she stopped at a cellular sales place in a strip mall in Kingston and picked up a pay-as-you go phone the salesman swore would work anywhere.

Finally, on the forty-five minute drive from Kingston to her home, she began to relax. She was on the smaller roads and positive she wasn't being followed. If she could make it home, she'd be safe. She couldn't think of any way Clayton Brown would find her residence. Besides being in the middle of nowhere, on the edge of the Olympic National Forest, her address listed anywhere and everywhere was a post office box in Kingston. She never gave out her home address to anyone. It wasn't even on her driver's license, which he claimed to have seen.

As she pulled up in front of her cabin, she let out a deep breath. She was okay. She'd be fine. Clayton Brown couldn't find her here.

She got out of her car, carrying her copy of the papers to be filed with the court, and her purse, and walked up her walkway to the front of her cabin. She turned and looked at her brown, bedraggled roses along the front of the cabin, long gone dormant for the winter. The grass was too long and brown, too. She hadn't had the energy to mow it before the frosts set in because she'd spent all her time caring for Tina. Maybe after she grabbed a bite to eat, she'd come out and do some trimming and get all the flowerpots emptied and stored in the shed. She needed something to occupy her mind and doubted, even though it was getting dark already, she'd be able to get to sleep very early.

She nodded to herself, glad to have something to do tonight that would keep her mind off other matters.

She slipped her key into the deadbolt and turned it, gaining a weird sense of satisfaction at the solid click the lock gave as it turned. She pushed open the door and reached for the light switch—from habit of years of living alone—and a big, beefy, male hand clamped down on her wrist.

The door swung open.

Sheridan looked into the face of pure evil—and screamed.

Chapter Nine

Dresden stared at the etchings he'd made on the birch bark, but he couldn't seem to focus his mind. Something wasn't right, but he didn't know what.

Barachus reclined on the settee, hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling. He'd been home only a little while from making his security rounds and was relaxing before he began making supper for them.

Dresden scowled at the etchings—the plans for Aislan and Tina's new domicile. In a few days, construction would begin. As the designer, he'd oversee the workers, but he wasn't needed as a laborer. With the group of fae he had gathered, who had time to spare to help build the prince's new domicile, the building would be done in about a week. Then the females would help Tina decorate and supply the interior with what she needed. Dresden promised to make them a table and chairs, but until he was done, the other fae would lend them everything needed to live comfortably.

"You seem distracted tonight," Barachus said as he stood up and came to the table where Dresden sat. He laid his hands on Dresden's shoulders and gently kneaded the muscles there.

"I feel...oddly."

"Is there a problem with the design?" Barachus asked as he leaned over Dresden's shoulder and looked at the etchings.

Dresden shook his head. "No. Construction can commence in a

couple of days. The design is sound, and Tina approves."

Barachus chuckled. "Ever think we'd see our prince bowing to the whims of a female?"

Aislan had always been very much *male*—commanding and in charge—even when they were in their youths. He still was, unless it came to his new mate. Tina wore the loincloth in that pairing.

Barachus pulled a chair up next to his and sat down, laying his hand on Dresden's hand. "What has you agitated?"

Dresden shook his head. "I keep thinking about Sheridan."

Barachus closed his eyes and shook his head. "You know—"

"No. I know. But I have this feeling that something is wrong, and when I try to understand the emotion, I keep picturing her." He frowned. "Would it be impossible for us to check in on her?"

Barachus' brow furrowed, and he clenched his teeth. "No." He shook his head. "If we go, you'll want to take human form and speak with her, and we swore to the king we wouldn't. He forbade it. We gave him our report, that there was nothing wrong with her except that she was alone. He told us to stay away from her. If she needed anything, Tina and Aislan would take care of her."

"Aislan and Tina are too busy with planning their home, trying to decide if they want a child or not. They haven't even gone to see her since we were there, and that was well over a week ago." He pressed his lips into a thin line. "Sheridan needs us."

Barachus surged to his feet. "No, she doesn't. She needs humans. She needs her own kind. We don't belong on that side of the lake. We never have. Aislan learned that the hard way. Do you wish to be locked in the dungeon because you can't follow orders from your king?" He slashed his hand through his hair then propped his fists on his hips.

"And you'd no doubt be my jailer," Dresden said, letting the disgust drip from his words. He came to his feet, also, and shook his head. "Do you not have feelings for her? I thought you did. Was sure you did. We promised we'd check on her, but now you refuse."

"The king—"

"I don't care what the king said!" Dresden threw his etching tool on

the table, where it bounced and fell to the floor. "We promised her, and I don't think we should go back on our promises. She needs us!"

"You will not cross the lake," Barachus said, his voice low and filled with anger. "Do you understand?"

"Or?"

"Or I'll be forced to tell the king."

"Against your own mate?"

"He was my king and ruler before you were my mate."

Seething anger boiled inside Dresden. "It's your jealousy talking. You hate that I have true feelings for another. Can't stand it. Would rather see me locked in a cell than be with her."

"I would take her myself!" Barachus exploded. "I would take her. I don't want to see her suffer either, but we are fae! Fae, Dresden. Not human!" He slashed his hand through the air. "There is nothing we can do about that."

Dresden stood fisting his hands. He'd never wanted to hurt his mate, not as he did in this moment. He wanted to hit him, knock sense into him. Instead, he pushed past him. "Tell your king your mate has broken the law. I'm going to see Sheridan." He launched himself into the air in front of their domicile.

Barachus shouted at him not to do it, but it was done. He wouldn't rest easy until he knew Sheridan was safe. If it meant a month in the palace dungeon, it would be worth it.

* * * * *

Sheridan swung with her keys, going for Clayton Brown's eyes, but he was quick and easily ducked her one-handed attempt to inflict injury. He was bigger than even her teenage self remembered. Thickly muscled. Bulging biceps beneath a tight, gray T-shirt. The grip he held on her one wrist squeezed her bones together.

She fought though. With all her strength. She kicked at his legs, tried to get a shot at his crotch, swung at him again and again with her keys. And screamed until her ears rang.

It didn't take much effort on his part to get a hold of her free hand, clasp that wrist so hard she dropped the keys, and pin her against the door with his rock-solid body, her hands trapped over her head in his painful grip.

"Shut up, bitch." He head butted her forehead, and the back of her head struck the door, effectively silencing her as stars swam in the blackness that closed in for an instant. "Just as feisty as you were twenty years ago, I see."

His voice slithered over her, making her skin crawl. He smelled of hard alcohol and stale cigarettes. His face was lined, craggy. He'd been a fairly handsome young man of twenty when he was sentenced to prison.

Cold sweat coated her body, but something inside of her refused to let her cower. She spit in his face.

That rusty-nail laugh grated on her nerves. "I'm going to love making you pay for what you did." His eyes were as dark and filled with evil as she remembered. Nearly black, they were as dark as coal.

"I didn't *do* anything! You and your brother raped me!" She bucked against him, tried to get a shot at his crotch, but his body pressed against hers was too big, too heavy. She barely budged him.

"That's where you're wrong," he all but growled. "I didn't rape you...then. And you killed my brother. You're going to pay, bitch. With your body, and then your life."

"I didn't kill him!" she screamed. "The police shot him because he ran. Because he was stupid! And they'll get you if you kill me. They'll get you, and this time you'll never get out. I've already been to the police. They'll know who killed me. They'll know everything!"

Somehow he got both her wrists into one of his hands even while she struggled and tried to get away. Had to get away. She was not going to let this bastard kill her. He could have her body; she'd survived that before. But he wasn't going to kill her. Not ever!

He used his free hand to grab her throat and press her harder into the door. "I don't care if I go back. I'm just glad I got this chance to finish you off. You killed my brother. Sent me to prison. My mama died from a broken heart because her babies were gone. Now you're going to pay."

"Fuck you!" she screamed as she renewed her struggles.

He pressed his hand against her throat, and she gagged. Pressed harder until she could barely draw in breath.

"Oh, I plan on fucking you. And then I'm going to gut you like a fish. I've learned a lot of nifty tricks in prison. By the time anyone finds you, there won't be much left but a few scattered bones the coyotes and wolves left behind."

He licked her cheek, from her chin to the corner of her eye.

She gagged from the feel of his wet tongue and the pressure against her throat.

"So fucking sweet. I haven't fucked a woman in over eighteen years. I'm gonna do you so hard."

She shoved. With all her might, she arched her back and shoved, at the same time yanking her hands down and breaking his grasp. With a guttural, animalistic sound, she swung her hands, fisted together, at his head, then jumped away from the door when he stumbled to the side.

She dashed for the kitchen, grabbed the biggest knife in the butcher block, and turned. He was there. The point of the knife gouged his side, but he brought his arm down, slamming it into her forearm, and the knife flew from her hands.

"Mistake, bitch!" One hand grabbed her hair, the other her throat, and he slammed her into the refrigerator. A cereal box fell from the top and hit her head. She couldn't breathe. He cut off her air. She kicked. She clawed at his arms.

You're not going to kill me! You're not! You ruined my life, but you can't have it! It's mine!

The blackness moved in from her peripheral vision. She fought. Dear God, she fought. She reached for the counter, for another knife. Her fingers touched the side of the butcher block, but she couldn't...quite...get...a hold...

And then he released her, and she slumped to the floor. Gasping, gagging, she tried to climb to her feet. She had to get up. Had to keep fighting. Her ears rang. Her vision was blurred. She grabbed the edge of the counter and pulled herself up. She reached for the butcher block and

plucked the next biggest knife from it before turning, still coughing, to try to take down the big motherfucker.

What she saw made her stop, hold her breath to see if she was imagining it. Clayton Brown flew through the air and slammed into the wall, headfirst.

She released the breath on a cough. Her vision began to clear. And that was when she saw her fairy men. Barachus grabbed Clayton Brown by the back of the shirt and picked him up as if he were a rag doll, slammed his face into the wall, and let him fall to the floor.

Dresden sank his hand into Clayton Brown's hair, lifted his head—the bastard's eyes were shut, and blood trickled from his mouth and nose—then dropped it.

Both fairy men turned to her then but didn't move toward her. Still holding the ten-inch-long kitchen knife, she rounded the breakfast bar and stood over Clayton Brown. Her breathing was still labored, and her throat felt raw and bruised. Her left wrist was probably broken from where he'd held her; it throbbed pain through her arm with every heavy heartbeat.

She kicked Clayton Brown in the side. She did it again, this time as hard as she could, and she screamed. A scream of victory. He'd lived in her nightmares for twenty fucking years. She kicked him again as tears ran down her cheeks. Tears of freedom.

All of a sudden, her energy waned. She looked up at her fairy men, and they seemed to swim in front of her. The knife fell from her hand.

Dresden moved fast, catching her before she hit the floor. He picked her up and cradled her to his chest. "It's over, little one," he whispered against her ear. "It's over. You're safe."

"Gotta call...police." She pulled her injured arm to her chest and held it there. Her head pounded with pain. "Send that fucker back to prison."

* * * * *

It was three in the morning before Detective McMurty dropped Sheridan off at her cabin. The detective had driven up from Seattle and

met her at the hospital in Kingston. The detective came to make sure Sheridan was all right and to let her know that she'd personally see that Clayton Brown was charged with every imaginable crime they could dig up so that he would never see freedom again.

"You sure you're all right alone tonight?" Detective McMurty asked.

Sheridan nodded. Her throat was bruised, and talking made it worse. Her left arm was in a cast to her elbow, her fibula fractured. Her head was the worst part, though the doctors assured her she had not sustained a concussion and was free to go home.

"I'd still like to know how you brought down a two-hundred-fifty-pound man."

Sheridan shrugged. "Adrenaline," she whispered, all her throat could produce. The same thing she'd been saying to police officers for the last six hours. When she'd come out of her stupor in Dresden's arms, she'd called 9-1-1. When she'd heard the sirens approaching, she'd told Dresden and Barachus to leave. There would be way too many questions they couldn't answer because of who they were. She'd thanked them, but ushered them out the back door into the woods—the same door that Clayton Brown had broken through to get into her house.

Clayton hadn't regained consciousness until after the police cuffed him. A tiny part of her had feared he was dead—that her fairy men had been responsible—but when he did come to, he came up fighting, and it took a crack to the ribs with a nightstick to get him under control.

Two cars with four cops total had shown up. They took her statement and decided to drive her to the hospital instead of calling for an ambulance that would take twice as much time. The nearest hospital was forty-five minutes away.

"Well," McMurty said with a grin. "You did a number on him. Good for you, Sheridan."

As Sheridan reached for the door handle, McMurty stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"If you need me to stay the night...."

Sheridan shook her head and slumped back into the seat. "Thank

you," she whispered. "But I don't know how to express what I'm feeling. I feel like all the weight I've carried around for the last twenty years is gone. As if, for once, I'm finally free of him." She shook her head again. "It's stupid, and I should feel exactly the opposite after tonight, but it's true. Beating the shit out of him killed the demons he put in me so long ago."

McMurty patted her shoulder. "You call me if you need anything. Okay?"

Sheridan smiled. "Thank you for coming. For being there with me at the hospital." Then she realized there were no ferries running at this time of night and it would take over two hours to drive back to Seattle the long way. "Did you need a place to sleep? I have another room, and you must be exhausted."

"Naw. I booked a room at the Quilcene Hotel. I'll be in bed in twenty minutes."

"Okay. Goodnight then. And thank you." Sheridan got out of the car and shut the door. She went to her front door and fished her keys out of her purse. Detective McMurty waited until she was inside and the door shut before she pulled away and the headlights faded down the road.

God, her head hurt. She locked her door then went into the kitchen, where she dug through her purse one-handed and pulled out the bag of prescription pills the doctors had given her for pain. She was just trying to figure out how to pop off the childproof, tamper-proof lid when someone knocked on her door.

Startled, she dropped the bottle, and it rolled under the fridge.

"Fuck!" She cringed when the exclamation burned her throat and made her head pound.

"Sheridan?"

She recognized Dresden's soft, caring voice. She strode to the door, flipped the deadbolt, and pulled it open. And then fell into his arms, burying her face against his chest. At the same time, she reached to his side with her good hand and laid her palm on Barachus' shoulder to pull him closer. They surrounded her front and back, two big, warm bodies pressed against her.

She'd never felt safer in her life.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for saving me and taking care of me. If you hadn't—"

"Shh," Barachus whispered in her ear. "It is over, correct? He is gone?"

"Yes," she said on a sigh, then turned between them and wrapped her good arm around Barachus. "Yes. He's gone, and with any luck, he'll never be free again."

"You are injured," Dresden said, reaching between her and Barachus to touch her cast.

"Yeah, it's broken."

Dresden made a sympathetic sound.

She looked up into Barachus' beautiful green eyes. "Will you two stay with me tonight?"

He nodded.

She turned her head, and Dresden nodded also.

"Come in then." It hurt to swallow, and she wondered how she'd get a pill down her throat. She pulled away from their warmth and invited them in, wondering how they could be so warm in nothing but underwear when the temperature hovered around freezing outside.

Barachus shut the door and turned the deadbolt. She asked Dresden to find the pills that had rolled under her fridge. He did so, then opened the bottle for her after she told him how.

Fatigue weighed her down. She managed to draw a glass of water from the tap and get the pill down her throat. Then she took Barachus' hand, knowing Dresden would follow, and led them into her bedroom. Releasing Barachus' hand, she shrugged out of her jacket and dropped it on the floor, then kicked off her shoes. She pulled back the covers on the queen-sized bed then lay down and scooted toward the middle.

"Please?" she asked. She desperately needed them to hold her. She needed the contact.

One on each side, they climbed onto the bed, under the covers. With her casted arm propped up at the elbow between them, she rolled toward Dresden and laid her head on his shoulder. Then she reached

behind her with her good arm, grabbed Barachus' hand, and tugged until he rolled up behind her, spooning her into his chest and thighs.

She sighed and closed her eyes. She wished she could stay right here with them forever. She was safe, warm. Content.

Chapter Ten

The sun shone bright on the frosted plants as Dresden and Barachus sat on the windowsill outside Sheridan's bedroom and watched her still asleep in the soft bed.

Barachus kept glancing at his mate, wondering what went through Dresden's mind as they watched her. Against his better judgment, he'd followed Dresden to Sheridan's domicile instead of going to the king. How could he turn his mate in for being the kind-hearted fae he was? He'd thought about letting Dresden go alone. Had even contemplated going to Aislan and having him go after Dresden, but in the end, he'd followed his mate.

The instant they'd flown to the window to look in on her and saw the monster of a man hurting her, there had been no question what they would do. They'd used their magic and the ancient words that would turn them to their human form and had done what was necessary to stop the human from hurting their woman.

It had become clear to Barachus then that she was indeed *their* woman. They both loved her.

But she was a woman. Human. And here they were, back in fae form because the sun had risen. Their magic didn't work in daylight.

"We should go see the king," Dresden said, his voice low and his heart obviously heavy.

"Yes. We should."

Dresden turned to him then, his knees pulled to his chest as they

sat on opposite ends of the windowsill. "You sound as if you don't think we really should."

Barachus shrugged then looked back in the window. "We will be punished. Our magic taken away. We will no longer be his guard."

"I am sorry, Brock."

Again, he shrugged. Dresden had other duties. He was the village woodworker and domicile designer. Barachus had no skills. He was one of the biggest of the fae, and therefore he'd been appointed the king's chief guard. He would be relegated to laborer now.

"I'm not sorry," he said. "He would have killed her if we hadn't come. If you hadn't forced me to." He sighed. "Or worse." That man was the worst of human scum. At least pond scum had a purpose.

Dresden leaned into the window and touched the glass with his palm. "I hated leaving her this morning. She needs us."

"I know," Barachus whispered. Leaving her warm bed had been the most difficult thing he'd done in his lifetime. He stood up and shook his wings. "Come. We should get back to the village and let Tina know what's happened. She'll want to come see Sheridan tonight."

Dresden slowly climbed to his feet. His eyes seemed a little glassy. Barachus walked across the sill and wrapped his arms around his mate. "Let's go home and think on this. We need to think. We're both tired, and we don't want to do anything rash."

Dresden returned his hug. "You're right." He kissed Barachus' shoulder. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Sheridan woke up with a bright ray of sunshine in her face. She scowled and pulled the covers up over her head and sank down into the soft pillows. Her arm hurt, and when she swallowed, her throat felt as if it were swollen.

Memories of the previous night rushed back at her, and she threw the covers off, looking for her fairy men.

They were gone. She lay alone in the big bed.

“Dres—” The word came out like a croak. *Damn, that hurt.* She swallowed again, winced at the pain, and turned to look at the clock on the nightstand. It was after two in the afternoon.

At least her headache was gone. She reached up and touched the knot on the back of her head. It was still there, but it only hurt if she poked at it. She checked her fingers sticking out of her cast to make sure they weren’t swollen. Looked good. Color was normal, too. No major problems there.

She pushed back the blankets and climbed out of bed. Making a quick check in the other rooms of her small cabin, she made her way to the kitchen. Her fairy men were definitely gone. She poured herself a cold glass of apple juice from the fridge and sipped it as she looked around the kitchen. Her Cheerios had spilled when the box fell from atop the refrigerator. Little tan O’s covered the floor. And there was a dent and crack in the drywall where Clayton Brown’s head had hit when Barachus had thrown him across the room. There was a streak of dried blood on the wall, and more spots of it on the hardwood flooring.

The weird part was, she felt amazingly calm. She hurt, yes, but last night had set her free. For twenty years she’d lived on the edges of a nightmare, dipping her toes inside of it too often. Last night she got to come face-to-face with one of the two men—the living one—who’d taken her childhood from her, taken her innocence, her peace.

For twenty years she’d lived in terror.

Clayton Brown and his brother Gerald had kidnapped her as she walked home from school. By a fluke, she was alone because Tina got held after for detention after being caught smoking in the girl’s room.

They’d literally grabbed her off the street. Gerald was sixteen at the time, a year older than her, and went to her high school. He’d made passes at her, which she’d rebuffed. He was a creep. She hadn’t been rude, though, and had tried to let him down gently. But it had pissed him off. Clayton had been eighteen and a senior in the school. A real bad boy. Smoke, drank, used pot—about as bad as drug use got back then for high school students. He’d agreed to help his little brother get the little slut who’d had the nerve to turn him down.

They'd kept her captive in this dirty little shack for two days while she was repeatedly raped and beaten. Clayton hadn't actually raped her, but he'd hit her—a lot. Then they left her there with a warning not to tell anyone—or else.

By then the local and state police were searching for her. She'd emerged from the shack in the woods, made her way to the highway, and was lucky enough to be picked up by a woman and her three little kids. They took her to the closest police station—miles from her home in Queen Ann—where she told them everything.

The manhunt was on. They'd captured Clayton Brown fairly quickly, but Gerald went on the run. He'd been taken down by a state patrol officer who shot him when Gerald drew his father's hunting rifle on him. D.O.A.

Clayton spent the next three years in and out of jail on bond while his family's lawyers tried to get the charges dropped against him. Finally, he went on trial. Sheridan had testified against him, and then begged the judge at his sentencing to throw away the key. He'd been sentenced to seventeen years.

In those three years, Sheridan's father had died, her mother had been diagnosed with lung cancer, and the only person she had to cling to was her little sister. She'd tried every kind of therapy she could find, but nothing took away the nightmares. She'd graduated high school, though, top of her class. Her saving grace was the scholarship to University of Washington, where she did all eight years and graduated with a nursing degree.

Her mother died her first year of college. She'd spent the rest of the year between school, a job to support herself and Tina, and trying to keep her rather rebellious sister in line while Tina finished high school. Tina took off the next year for Oregon, where she went to college and managed to graduate in three years with an accounting degree.

Sheridan had gotten on with her life as best she could. With the money left in trust by both her parents' life insurance policies, plus the sale of the Victorian in Queen Ann, she set up a trust for Tina and used the rest to pay for nursing school. After she graduated, she had just enough

money left over, once she secured her job at the hospital, to buy this little cabin in the woods and legally change her name, thinking she was making a fresh start.

Ha. Nothing had changed the fact that Clayton and Gerald Brown lived in her head.

Sheridan finished her cold apple juice, grabbed a broom, and cleaned up the cereal. She found her knife next to the garbage can—the first one she’d tried to use to defend herself—and stuck it in the dishwasher. She’d need to find the nearest Home Depot and figure out how to patch the drywall.

The throbbing in her wrist became more insistent, and she went to the bathroom to find a bottle of ibuprofen.

Luckily, she had the next three days off, since she worked four days on, three off. She had plenty of time to get everything done and hopefully get to a point where it didn’t hurt to move. Except the stupid cast would be a hell of a hindrance.

She took a couple of pills then went to the kitchen for a bread bag to wrap her cast in while she showered.

Even though, for the first time in her life, she felt free of the nightmare, free of the pain the brothers had left her with, her heart was leaden.

She missed Dresden and Barachus. Had wanted to wake up cocooned in their arms the way she’d fallen asleep last night. She wanted to be with them. She loved them, trusted them, and they obviously cared enough for her to break the rules and take their human forms in order to save her life.

As she passed the window in her bedroom on her way to the bathroom, she glanced out into the sun-dappled forest. What would happen if she went in search of them?

With her new lease on life, she just might have to grab her newfound courage and find out.

* * * * *

Barachus and Dresden were headed to find Aislan and Tina and let them know what had happened with Sheridan when the king himself appeared before them, hovering in the air.

They stopped and bowed. "Your Majesty," they said in unison.

"To your domicile," was all the king said, then disappeared in a glittering shower of magic.

They looked at one another, then turned to return to their domicile.

Barachus' heart thudded heavy behind his breastbone. The king knew. Somehow, he knew. The king seemed to always know things. He'd known that Aislan had broken the laws, and now so had they.

He pushed open the door to their domicile to find their king pacing in the living area. Dresden shut the door behind them, casting the room into semi-darkness. They bowed low and waited.

"Stand up," the king said, his voice like a whip.

They stood tall, shoulder to shoulder, and waited to hear their punishment.

The king shook his head and sighed.

Dresden took a step forward, bowed yet again, then said, "It was my fault we were at Sheridan's domicile last night, Sire. I refused to listen to Barachus. I felt I needed to see to her. As it turns out, it was a lucky thing I did. She was in grave danger and would have been murdered by a human male if I hadn't broken your laws. I accept whatever punishment you mete out, Sire, but please don't hold this against Barachus. He was there trying to stop me."

The king's nearly black eyes seemed to drill into Barachus. His gut twisted, but he would not let the intimidation he felt show. He stepped next to Dresden and laced his fingers with his mate's. "What he says is only partially true, Your Majesty. It was his idea to seek out Sheridan last night, but I willingly followed. If there is punishment to be met, I accept equal responsibility for your rules being broken."

"Humans cause so much trouble," the king mumbled. "First Aislan, now my guard. What's next?"

"She would have been murdered had we not been there, Sire," Barachus said, repeating Dresden's statement. "We couldn't let that

happen. She is Tina's relation, and since Tina is one of us now, then so is Sheridan."

"Silence!" the king shouted. "I've heard enough of this human. The two of you will remain in your domicile until I can think of a proper punishment." His face was red above his white beard, his anger obvious. "If I learn that you have left your domicile, you will be put in the dungeon. Do you understand me? I will not allow my subjects to defy me. Not my son, and certainly not the two I trust to guard my kingdom!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," they said together.

"Tina needs to know —"

The king disappeared in a glittering shower of magic.

Dresden turned toward Barachus. "That was unnecessary. I am the one who broke the laws, the rules. You do not deserve punishment." His voice was laden with remorse and pain, his eyes shadowed.

"You are my mate."

"You should have gone to the king last night."

Barachus sighed. "You are my mate. It would take more than seeking out the woman of your heart to make me run tattle on you."

Dresden's eyes widened a bit.

"I know how you feel about her. You admit to loving her, but I know it's deeper." Still holding Dresden's hand, he gave it a squeeze then pulled his mate, his lover, into his arms. "She is the other part of us. We cannot have her, but I'll be damned before I let us be separated."

Dresden wrapped his arms around Barachus. "What do you think the king will do with us?"

Barachus sighed and shook his head against Dresden's shoulder. "I have no idea. He's very angry."

Dresden pulled back just far enough to kiss Barachus lightly on the lips. "She is safe now," he said, as if reassuring himself. "At least there is that. She doesn't need us any longer."

"Tina still needs to be told."

They glanced at the door. They'd have to wait for the king's ruling. If they broke his command now, they were sure to be locked in the dungeon. The dark, damp place fairies went for ultimate punishment.

Without sunlight, they lost their strength, and eventually their will to live.

"We should rest," Barachus said. Neither of them had slept the night before, opting instead to stay awake and watch over Sheridan while she did.

Dresden nodded. Together they walked, hand-in-hand, to the bedroom. Barachus wished there were some way to help his mate forget the beautiful, courageous human. But he didn't know how to help, because after last night, he was as deeply in love as Dresden had been for weeks. Sheridan was a human like no other. She had a gentle heart and the soul of a tigress. He prayed that she would find a mate of her own, one who would help her become the woman he saw inside her eyes.

Chapter Ten

The sun had set, and the forest grew cold and dim. Sheridan hadn't thought about how long the lake was she needed to walk around, nor had she thought about the fact that she had no idea where the fairy village was located other than on the *other side of the lake*.

When she'd finished cleaning the inside, she'd decided to tackle the planters in the front of the house. Instead, she'd found herself on the old game trail, headed around the lake and into the Olympic National Forest.

An hour later, she'd reached the other side of the lake and stared into the darkness of the forest, wondering how she'd ever find a five-inch-tall cottage hidden among all these trees. She wondered just how big the king's palace was. She knew it sat in the crook of a massive oak tree, but where? How deep into the forest?

Her shoulders slumped, and she cradled her broken arm against her chest. Her ibuprofen had worn off, and she ached. Not just her arm, but her shoulders and between her shoulder blades now. Aftereffects of the stress she'd endured last night.

She should turn back, go home. She had a long walk to her cabin, and her denim jacket wasn't doing much to shield her against the cold breeze that had kicked up when the sun went down.

But the forest pulled at her. She desperately wanted to see Barachus and Dresden, if only to say a proper goodbye. She took one step, then another and another, following another slight game trail that seemed to lead straight into the thick woods.

She might have walked for twenty minutes when a bright white light flashed in front of her, making her stumble and raise her uninjured arm to shield her eyes.

"So, we meet again."

The light had faded, and a few feet in front of her stood the fairy king.

"Why have you entered my kingdom, human?"

He was an imposing figure. His white beard almost glowed in the dim evening light. He was tall, at least six-foot-four.

"I asked you a question, human."

"I wanted to see Barachus and Dresden."

A deep chuckle came out of him, which made her frown.

"You would never find them, human. Only fae beings can see our village." He stepped closer. "Why do you wish to see them?"

His eyes were as black as onyx.

She was not afraid of him. He was a fairy, not a man. What could he possibly do to her? "Because they helped me last night, and I never got to thank them, to say goodbye before they left."

"The truth, human," he said, his voice as sharp as a knife. "Why do you seek them?"

Her gaze dropped to her cast-covered arm held snug against her chest.

"Why do you seek them and not your relation, Tina? I would think you'd prefer her company over two males, of which you were fearful of just weeks ago."

"I'm not afraid of them anymore." She raised her eyes and looked him square in the face. "I'm not afraid of men anymore. They helped me get past that. And yes, I'd like to see my sister, but..." She shrugged. How did she tell someone everything that went on in her head in the last twenty-four hours when she didn't even understand it?

"What do you want, Sheridan?" His voice was suspiciously gentle when he asked the question.

She swallowed hard. The thought popped into her head so quickly, she tried to brush it away. But it was the truth. So, she said it. "I want to

be a part of your world."

"You are human."

"So was Tina."

"Tina has a fae mate. You do not."

"I don't need a mate. I just want—" What did she want? She wanted to live among these fae. They cared about each other. They were gentle and didn't hurt their women. "I have a medical degree. I could help Jade in the laboratory." She hoped she remembered the name right, the one Tina had told her about. "I can...uhm...I'll work. I'll be the best worker you've ever had. I don't need much."

The king was shaking his head at her. "You are a human," he said yet again.

"So was Tina," she argued. "You accepted her. She's my sister. I want... I need... I want your way of life. I don't need wings. Keep me wingless and little, just let me be with—" She licked her lips. Let her be with Dresden and Barachus, she'd almost said. But that was impossible, because they were mated. They might take other women in their bed, but it wasn't as if she could be with them forever. But she could be happy in the fae world, she was sure of it. Happier than she could be so isolated and alone around humans.

"You wouldn't survive a night without wings in the fae village. You'd be eaten by a rodent." He sounded disgusted with her, but she didn't care.

"Please, Your Majesty."

A blinding flash, and a whoosh of wind. And then she stood on the marble floor inside the candlelit palace. The king stood before her, the same distance as in the forest, but now he had his silvery wings. He turned and whistled, the sound so shrill it hurt her ears. Within moments, a small female fae, lavender in color, sprinted into the room.

"Your Majesty?" she asked, bowing low.

"Lilac, tell all fairies to report to the palace immediately. Gather them all, every one of them."

"Yes, Your Majesty." She dashed from the room as fast as she'd come.

The king turned to Sheridan. "This is your last chance, Sheridan. Decide if this is what you want. Once I rule, you cannot go back. If you change your mind after you have become fae, the only way to leave is death."

"I'm not afraid to die," she said defiantly, "but I don't plan to change my mind, either. I have nothing there but my work, and I can find other work here. I will be useful."

The first of the fairies began to arrive. The king motioned for her to move up onto the dais in front of his golden throne. The fairies were of all different colors and hues. Reds, blues, pinks, yellows, greens. There were dozens and dozens of them. She searched for Barachus and Dresden, and her heart pinched when they didn't enter through the double doors.

Tina and Aislan arrived, and Tina pushed her way through the throng of bodies, ran up onto the dais, and hugged her.

"What are you doing here? What happened?" she exclaimed when Sheridan's cast got squeezed between their bodies. Then she reached up and touched the bruises on Sheridan's neck.

Sheridan stepped back a little. "Long story. On both accounts. I asked the king to make me a fairy."

Tina's big blue eyes got even bigger. "You did? What did he say?"

Sheridan shrugged. "Not much, really." Other than she'd have to die if she changed her mind after he ruled. What he was going to rule, she had no clue. He hadn't called every fairy to this room when he'd transformed her sister.

"But...but your job. The hospital. What will you—"

"Tina," Aislan interrupted.

Tina turned toward him. "She wants to be a fairy," she told him.

"Come." His tone brooked no argument, and he took Tina's hand and dragged her off the dais and down to the front of the huge gathering of colorful, winged beings.

Finally, she spotted Barachus and Dresden entering the hall, and her heartbeat settled a little. She smiled at them, but they didn't return the greeting. They stayed at the back of the room, their gazes riveted on her. They spoke to one another, but of course she couldn't hear anything over

the rest of the noise they all made.

The king moved next to her and held up the golden scepter. The room grew deathly silent.

"I'm sure you are all aware by now that my son, Prince Aislan, was allowed to mate with a human."

A few murmurs sounded from the group.

"Tina has proven herself worthy of the magic used to transform her into fae. She is an asset to our village, and she has made my son happy."

Aislan grinned and held Tina's hand.

Sheridan smiled at them.

"What most of you did not know is that Tina's relation, her human sister, spent a few days in our village."

The murmurs were much louder this time. A slight tone of discontent. It didn't lend Sheridan a real sense of reassurance. She'd had no idea her visit had been kept a secret.

"This," he said, waving his hand in Sheridan's direction, "is Sheridan."

All eyes turned from the king to her. She stood tall and waited.

"Sheridan has come to me and asked to be allowed to live among us."

"She's a human!" a guy in the back shouted.

"Yes, she is. If she stays, I will turn her fae. But the only way I will permit this is for someone to take her as mate. She will need someone to show her how things are done in our way of living, as Aislan is doing for Tina."

Sheridan's heart battered her ribs. "Your Majesty," she whispered. "I can't—"

"Is there any fae who will take Sheridan as mate?"

Tears rushed to her eyes, and she shook her head. "No," she whispered. "I can't." She might have found a new courage, a new strength she never knew resided inside of her, but mating wasn't something she was ready for. Sex. With a stranger. She shook her head, and tears stung her eyes. "No. I can't," she repeated. "Please don't make me..." Her throat tightened and ached even worse that it had all day. She'd have to leave.

Go back to her world. Go back to the humans.

She looked at Tina. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

Tina tried to break away from the group, but Aislan wrapped his arm around her and held her firm. Tina wiggled against his grip, tried to get away, but she couldn't.

A brown fairy stepped forward. A man—male. He was of average height and build. "I will—"

"We'll take her as mate."

Sheridan's chest tightened, and she jerked her gaze from the brown guy to the back of the room. Barachus and Dresden worked their way through the gathered group.

"We will take her," Barachus said again when the two had cleared the onlookers and stood at the base of the steps, just in front of Aislan and Tina.

"You are already mated to each other," the king stated. "This is unheard of."

Barachus bowed low. "Your Majesty," he said, his deep, gravelly voice soothing her fears. "Sheridan is the woman of our hearts. She will complete our home."

She gasped. Had she heard him right? The woman of their hearts? They'd both mate with her? They loved her?

"Well. This is highly unusual, though I suppose I should not be surprised." The king's tone was filled with resignation.

Behind Dresden, Tina bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands together beneath her chin.

"Sheridan?" The king turned to her. "You were saying you could not mate. Do you still feel that way?"

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Very well."

The king whipped his scepter in her direction, and heat infused her body. She cried out in surprise as she was engulfed in that bright, white light that he'd appeared from in the forest. Her knees buckled, and she landed on her butt.

The white light eased from around her, and a collective gasp resounded through the room. She looked up at the king first, to see his black eyes wide with surprise. Then she turned her gaze to Barachus and Dresden. Dresden held one hand over his heart. Barachus' hand was over his mouth. Both looked shocked beyond belief.

She became aware of a quiver in her back muscles. She turned and looked over her shoulder to see massive luminescent white wings fluttering behind her. She was a freakin' fairy! A wide grin split her face, and she turned back to the king.

He extended his hand toward her, and she slipped her palm against his. Her skin was milky white with the slightest sparkle to it. He helped her to her feet, and that was when she realized she was completely naked.

With a soft yelp, she jerked away from the king and covered her breasts with her casted arm, her crotch with her other hand.

"Hmm," the king said as he stared at her.

She frowned. What did that mean? Why were they all looking at her as if she were some kind of freak?

Then it dawned on her. Out of the dozens of shades of color filling the room, there were no white fairies. Her heart sank. What did it mean? She was a freak? An albino? Not really a fairy?

The king waved his scepter again, and then she was covered in a little dress like every other female fairy in the room. Except hers was a shimmery opalescent.

A heavy sigh sounded next to her, and she looked at the king again. The room was deathly silent.

"You have chosen well, Barachus and Dresden."

Both men nodded. They still didn't smile, though. And what the hell did he mean they'd chosen well? What made her any different than any other woman in the group?

"She will need training, and I shall take on that task myself," the king said.

"What training?" she asked, unable to keep her mouth shut any longer.

The king smiled then. "Your mates will explain." Then he turned his attention back to the group as a whole. "It is a new era for us, my children. I feel a change in the air. Sheridan is the beginning of good things to come."

A cheer went up from the group, nearly deafening her as it bounced off the stone walls.

When the noise subsided, the king held up his hand, and everyone fell silent.

"You are all dismissed."

The noise resumed as the dozens of fairies filed out of the double doors. Dresden and Barachus didn't move. Tina broke free of Aislan and ran up the steps to hug her again.

"You're so beautiful, Sheridan. So beautiful." Tina sobbed a little, and her eyes were filled with tears. "So beautiful."

"Thank you. What's going on? Why —"

"I don't know. But you're here. I have my sister back."

Aislan pulled Tina away from her. "Come, Tina," he said softly. "Leave her alone with her mates. You may speak with her tomorrow."

"I love you," Tina said as she squeezed Sheridan's hand.

That was when Sheridan realized her cast was gone, as were her aches. She touched her neck, then the back of her head where the lump had been. All gone.

"I love you, too," Sheridan called as Aislan all but dragged Tina from the room.

The king had disappeared, and she was once again alone with Barachus and Dresden. They still stood at the bottom of the steps, staring up at her with strange expressions on their faces that she couldn't interpret. It made her nervous. Slowly, she took the steps down to them. They didn't move.

She licked her lips. "Why am I such a big deal when it was obvious none of them wanted me here to start with?" She didn't care. Right now, she wanted to jump into their arms and hug them both, but she didn't like the looks on their faces.

"A white fairy is rare," Barachus finally answered. "Our queen was

the last one in our village, and she died over a half century ago."

Okay, that didn't sound too bad, if she was like their queen. "What kind of training do I need?"

"Magic," Dresden whispered. "White fairies are the most powerful of the fae. More magical than the king himself." He reached out and touched her breastbone just above the cut of her dress. "And it comes from inside, not from the golden scepter."

"We've been waiting for another white fairy," Barachus said softly. "A fae who could help us change the world for the better, as the queen had once done."

Sheridan shook her head. "That sounds like a lot of pressure put on me when I can't get my wings to stop wiggling." She glanced over her shoulder at her fluttering wings.

Finally, a smile. Both of them grinned.

"You will learn to control them," Dresden said. "Just as your relation did."

"Sister," she corrected. "Tina's my sister."

The men nodded.

"Your sister," Barachus said and extended his hand. "Are you ready to go...home?"

Dresden turned and looked at Barachus. Something deep and personal passed between them. Sheridan felt a little left out, but she took Barachus' hand.

"Yes, I'm ready to go home."

Dresden took her other hand, and they walked through the palace until they reached the humongous double doors to the outside. Without a word, Dresden swooped her up into his arms and they were in the air. No fear ran through her this time, only a sense of calm as she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head against his shoulder.

Too soon they stood on the branch outside their cottage, and Dresden set her to her feet. Without a word, she followed Barachus into the pretty little cottage. Dresden brought up the rear and shut the door. A couple of candles flickered in glass sconces around the house, and it was warm.

"Hungry?" Barachus asked as he went into the kitchen.

"No, not really," she replied. The flutter in her stomach, matching the flutter of her wings, had more to do with nerves than hunger.

"A drink then?" he asked as he pulled open the cupboard and took down three tumblers.

"Okay." When would they get on with the mating? Her pussy clenched at the thought. No fear, none whatsoever. She wanted them. Needed them. She was ready. For the first time in her adult life, she wanted a man to hold her, lay atop her, slide into her. She shivered with excitement and wrapped her arms around herself.

Dresden stood near the door, unmoving. She smiled at him. Barachus handed her a tumbler of the sweet mead, and she sipped.

"Thank you."

Dresden finally moved closer and took the other tumbler. "I will begin designs for expanding the domicile tomorrow. Aislan and Tina's will be finished next week, and then the workers can do ours."

Sheridan looked around the cozy little cottage and shrugged. "It's fine with me as it is."

Both fairy men stared at her. Then Barachus spoke in his no-nonsense, rather curt way. "Another bedroom should be added at least. Until it is finished, you may have our room, but we don't plan to spend the rest of our long lives sleeping on the floor."

"Oh." So, they weren't going to be sleeping together. Disappointment flooded her, and she set her tumbler on the table. "I just assumed..."

Chapter Eleven

"Assumed what?" Dresden asked.

"I thought that being mated meant we..." She waved her hand toward the bedroom.

"We don't have to have sex because we're mated. The mating ritual is fairly simple, and we'll need to do it tonight." Barachus downed the rest of his drink, though Dresden hadn't even tasted his yet.

Dresden touched a small oval scar on the left side of his chest. "You will choose which of us you wish to be bound to, and we bite each other just hard enough to break the skin and leave a mark. Our fae saliva will mix with our fae blood, and it will scar. It will hurt a bit, but by morning the pain will be gone."

"Normally the biting happens during sex, yes," Barachus cut in. "But it's not necessary."

They didn't want to have sex with her. Pain pierced her heart. She'd thought this was her chance at normalcy. After that one night when Dresden brought her to orgasm, she'd thought... Well, it didn't really matter, did it? She'd told the king she didn't need a mate, and she didn't. She was near the men she loved, and that would suffice. Though, how they could say she was the woman of their hearts she didn't know, because she'd always assumed sex and love went together in normal relationships.

"Who would you choose?" Barachus asked.

She couldn't pick between them. She loved them both. Tears

pooled in her eyes, and she turned away, not wanting to cry in front of them again. She'd cried so much she should be out of tears by now!

A warm hand touched her shoulder. "Sheridan?" It was Dresden.

She shook her head and swallowed back the tears. "I can't choose."

"What has upset you?"

"I... I thought mating meant..." She shrugged.

His other hand softly touched her other shoulder, and he turned her to face him. "You thought it meant sex."

She nodded, unable to look up into his face.

Barachus moved into her peripheral vision, standing very close to her side. "After what you have been through, we assumed sex was something you never wished for."

She closed her eyes and dropped her head forward. "I didn't," she admitted through a tight throat, "until I met the two of you."

"Our erections frightened you," Dresden stated.

She nodded. "It was too new. I mean..." Finally she looked up, first meeting Dresden's gaze, then Barachus'. Her face flamed hot. It was difficult to state aloud her deepest feelings toward sex, but she was stuck here with these men for the rest of her life. She needed to be honest.

After she sucked in a deep breath, she said, "I have spent my life avoiding any kind of sexual contact with men because I was raped. I'm a nurse, and I read, and I crave sexual release, and I know that sex and pain don't go together, but until you touched me..." She met Dresden's gaze again and melted at the soft look of caring in his cinnamon-colored eyes. "Until you touched me, I didn't know how much I needed more than I could give myself."

Then she turned to Barachus. "The kiss you gave me that night you said goodbye was my very first ever. Lying with the two of you last night was the first time in my adult life I felt safe and warm, and I didn't experience dreams of pain and terror."

"We can give you pleasure without sex," Barachus said in that deep voice that was almost a growl. "We ask for nothing you are unwilling or unable to give."

"I know. And that's why I...want to." She dropped her gaze to

Barachus' beautiful, bare chest. "If you don't want me that way, I understand. You two are together and men, and I'm a wom—"

Dresden captured her mouth with his, shocking her silent and sending a trail of sizzling warmth swarming through her body straight to her pussy that clenched and wept.

"We are not men, we are fae," Barachus mumbled, but she felt his hand on her shoulder now, a light touch, a caress, as Dresden's lips brushed hers again and again. When Dresden's hands touched her sides, another bolt of pleasure pierced through her, and she gasped. When her mouth opened, Dresden's tongue swept in. A moan bubbled up from her chest. Dresden's fingers flexed against her sides, and she raised her hands to his chest, touching his warm, smooth flesh. He tasted of sweetness, honey, summer.

He pulled back slowly, until their lips separated, and a smile curved his. She looked up into his eyes.

"You're sparkling," he whispered.

She laughed. "I've never felt so..." With a shake of her head, she shrugged.

Barachus cleared his throat, and when she turned toward him, he pulled her up against his body and dropped his mouth to just above hers. "Loved?" he asked. "You've never felt so loved? Because you are. By both of us."

She nodded. "Yes, loved. And I want to experience it all, with both of you, if you'll have me. I want to be your woman."

His lips touched hers in the sweet, gentle way he had that night in her cabin. She opened her mouth, inviting a deeper connection. He tipped his head to the side slightly and melded his mouth to hers. Finally, he swept his tongue into her. His taste was just as delicious as Dresden's, but spicier. Like herbs and spices. The perfect combination to make a unique taste all his own. One she could get drunk on.

He groaned and wrapped his arms around her waist, pinning her against the hard planes of his body. His erection pressed against her abdomen, yet she felt no fear, only an undeniable excitement that rushed through her and made her push her hips into his.

She yelped into Barachus' mouth when a hand smoothed down her right wing. The pleasure was almost too much to bear. She'd never felt anything so thrilling. Her heart beat hard and fast, and she clung to Barachus, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her breasts pressed against his solid chest, and when another stroke went down her wing, this time the left, she cried out and thrust against him.

Barachus broke the contact between their mouths and laid his hand against the back of her head, pulling her into his shoulder. "Hold on to me, love," he said, his heart thundering in her ear. "Go on, Dres," he urged.

Two hands this time, both wings at once. The thrill was indescribable, unbearable. Sizzling heat zoomed through her body, and her cunt clenched so hard it was almost painful. She clung to Barachus, her nipples hard and sensitive against his chest. The light fabric of the strange material that made her dress was a smooth caress against them.

Dresden moved closer to her; she felt his body heat against her back. And then he stroked his hands over the top curves of her wings. Her knees gave way, but Barachus kept her upright and pinned against his body, his cock so hard against her stomach.

"More," she begged, her face buried against Barachus' neck. "Please."

Dresden dragged his hand down her left wing, then cupped her butt cheek in his palm. At the same time she felt the heat of his breath against her right wing. But it was when his tongue stroked her wing that she came apart. She cried against Barachus' neck, holding onto him for dear life as her body shook with the strongest orgasm she'd ever experienced.

Before she knew what was happening, Barachus lifted her, Dresden supported her, and Barachus bit down on her left chest. She screamed as Dresden's hand slipped between her legs, and he stroked her clit as Barachus broke the skin. Pain and pleasure. So damn much pleasure!

Barachus raised his head. "Bite me, love." And he guided her face to his chest, right to the small oval scar that was Dresden's mark. She opened her mouth, still in the throes of passion, and bit down,

overlapping her teeth with Dresden's mark.

"Harder," Barachus growled. "Break the skin."

Dresden's fingers sped up their tormenting teasing over her clit, and he licked her wing again. She screamed and bit. Instead of the coppery tang of blood, she tasted only sweetness. Barachus cupped the back of her head and growled as if in pain. She reached with one hand and was about to stroke his wing, to give him the pleasure Dresden gave her, but stopped.

"Okay, love," he whispered.

She let go of him with her teeth, and Dresden slowed the movement of his fingers and then gently withdrew his hand from her crotch.

She panted and stared in amazement as the wound she'd inflicted on Barachus closed over until her mark overlapping Dresden's looked like that symbol always used for wedded people. Two rings intertwined.

"Can you stand?" Barachus asked.

A gusty laugh came out of her. She wasn't touching the floor. Barachus held her with one arm around her waist, and from behind, Dresden's arm was around her, too, holding her off the floor. "I think so."

They slowly lowered her until her feet touched the smooth wood of the floor. Her legs shook slightly, but she stood on her own. She glanced down to see Barachus' cock tenting his loincloth. He touched her chin, and she looked up at him.

"You see, Sheridan, we do not need to bury ourselves inside of you for you to feel pleasure, to experience sexual release."

She nodded. But then she lowered her hand from his shoulder, ran it down over his bulging pec and rippled abdomen, and gently cupped her hand around his length.

He sucked in his breath through his teeth.

"I understand that, but I want more. I want it all, if that's okay."

Barachus' lips turned up, and then his straight white teeth flashed as he grinned. "It is okay. And we are honored. We will take it nice and slow tonight, though, and you tell us to stop at any time."

She nodded in understanding. Dresden moved to her side and took

her hand—the one not around Barachus’ cock—and tugged her toward the bedroom.

Reluctantly, she released Barachus’ length, and Barachus chuckled. “I will be there in a few moments.”

Sheridan let Dresden lead her into the pretty little bedroom where she’d spent two nights. Her nerves jangled, but she wasn’t afraid. No, it was excitement that coursed through her, stole her breath and made her heart thud. She was about to have sex with not one man for the first time, but two.

“I...uh...” She made a face when Dresden turned toward her. “Not so sure about the anal sex thing yet.”

Dresden chuckled. “Don’t worry, sweetheart.” He squeezed her hand. “We would not go that far on this first night.” Stepping up close to her, he touched her shoulders, then slowly pushed the clingy fabric of her dress down her arms. It slid off her body in a cool caress and pooled around her feet. Then he ran his hands over her chest, avoiding her breasts, down her sides, the outside of her thighs. “You are the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen, Sheridan. Thank you for agreeing to be ours.”

She raised her hands to his shoulder, then leaned into his chest, placing her face in the crook of his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her hard. “I would have left the fae world if it had been anyone but you and Barachus. You are the only men I want to be with...ever.”

A heavy sigh sounded from just behind her. “We are fae, not men.”

She giggled against Dresden’s shoulder.

“Dresden is correct, though,” Barachus said. “You are more beautiful than we could have imagined.” He ran his hand down the center of her back, between her wings, as if he teased her. Or maybe soothed her. “It is our greatest pleasure that we see you smile, hear your laughter.”

“See your eyes sparkle and shine with happiness,” Dresden added.

She pulled back from Dresden. “I am happy. More so than I ever thought possible.” She kissed him, but he pulled back before it could heat.

He cupped her cheek in his palm. “Barachus will have your body

tonight.”

She frowned.

“You need time to adjust to us, love,” Barachus said as he set the pitcher of mead and three tumblers on a bedside table. “I am slightly smaller than Dresden, therefore I will be first.” He turned toward her and grinned. “Never thought that would be a good thing, but—”

Sheridan laughed. Even in the fairy world, men—males—worried about their size. It was sweet, and she was thankful for their tenderness. But her pussy still pulsed with the remnants of her previous orgasms, and slick moisture coated her thighs. She wasn’t sure size meant a whole lot tonight. She wasn’t a virgin with a hymen to break, after all.

Dresden lowered his loincloth and stepped out of it. His cock was big, but she knew the human body as well as any nurse did, and it wasn’t too big. She had a dildo that size. His cock looked much more enticing than her blue latex toy, though.

Barachus then shucked his loincloth. She’d be hard-pressed to actually call him smaller. Thinner in width, maybe, but no shorter. They were both gorgeous. They stood side-by-side in front of the bed, and she stepped up in front of them, taking one in each hand.

Barachus let out a low growl, and Dresden’s eyelids lowered slightly as he visibly shuddered. They were both hard, so silky smooth. Sure, she’d seen penises in all shapes, sizes, and even in states of arousal while interning, but this was so different. These cocks made her mouth water. Would they taste as sweet and spicy as their kisses? She was just bending to take Dresden into her mouth when Barachus caught her by the shoulder and stopped her.

“If you do that right now,” Dresden said, “it will all be over too soon.”

She frowned, and both men—fae—chuckled.

“Tomorrow, love,” Barachus said. “Tonight, we will pleasure you, mark you as ours.”

She could handle that. With a grin, she gave them both a little squeeze, which made them both gasp. “Okay,” she said. “What do I do then?”

Barachus pulled away from her grasp and sat down on the edge of the bed, then patted his thighs. "Sit here."

Chapter Twelve

She grinned but was confused. Letting go of Dresden, she sat down on Barachus' lap. He pulled her back slightly, so she was tucked against him, the solid length of his cock trapped between his stomach and her back. He made a strange sound, and she shuddered. Her wings flapped against his face.

"Sorry."

He chuckled. "Tomorrow, we work on teaching you to control them."

"I can't believe they're so sensitive. When they're not touched, I can barely tell they're there."

"Just another part of your body now," Dresden said as he went down on his knees in front of her. "But the most sensitive. Now you see why Barachus told you not to touch?"

Barachus wrapped his hands behind her knees and pulled her legs apart. Without thought, she covered her pussy with her hands. She nodded in response to Dresden's question.

"You touched mine though." She'd never bared her pussy to anyone but her female gynecologist once a year.

"We're mated—or will be shortly." Dresden gently took her wrists and tugged her hands from her crotch.

"So...uh...can I touch your wings now?"

"Mmm." Barachus voice rumbled through her back, making her shiver. "Anytime you want, love. Anytime." He laid his hands over her

thighs, holding her legs spread wide, her feet dangling off the floor on either side of his legs.

It was rather comfortable, actually. She liked being surrounded by him. Relaxing, she leaned back into his chest, and he touched his cheek to her temple. His sweet breath was warm against her skin, and she closed her eyes and laid her hands over his on her thighs. He spread his fingers, and she slipped hers between his.

"You are sure?" Dresden asked.

Without opening her eyes, she muttered, "Mmhmm."

"I'm going to taste you," he said, and she felt his breath against her bared pussy. Her cunt clenched. And then his soft, warm, moist tongue stroked her pussy.

"Oh, God," she sighed, gripping Barachus' hands.

Fingers lightly probed her pussy, spread her even wider, and then that glorious tongue took another swipe, from her cunt all the way up and over her clit.

Her muscles tightened, and heat sizzled in her veins.

He flicked her clitoris with quick strokes, and she held her breath as the telltale tingling started in her fingers and toes as the orgasm slowly grew. When Dresden probed her opening with a finger, though, she tensed.

"Talk to us," Barachus whispered in her ear. "Tell us what you need."

"Don't stop," she begged. "Just go slow."

Still licking her budded clit, Dresden teased her cunt with his finger, inserting just the tip then swirling her juices around and around. Slowly she was able to relax her muscles and breathe deeply. As soon as she did so, the incredible pleasure returned, and she pulled Barachus' hands from her thighs and laid his palms over her breasts.

"Mmm," he murmured in her ear. "So soft."

It went through her mind that these two men with such hard bodies, unless they'd had women often, were used to different sensations of touch while making love.

Dresden pressed his finger deep inside of her, and she gasped. Her

eyes popped open, and she looked down into his face. He was looking up at her, watching her with those gorgeous eyes of his. As Barachus pressed his palms against her beaded nipples, she released one of his hands and reached down to touch Dresden's cheek. His eyes crinkled just a bit, a smile; his lips and tongue were too busy, but his eyes expressed it beautifully.

"More," she whispered.

He withdrew his finger and slid in two. Her cunt muscles clenched around the intrusion, and the bliss intensified tenfold. She dropped her head back against Barachus' shoulder and moaned. Barachus' cock throbbed against her lower back. Heat and moisture flooded her pussy. Dresden moaned against her, the sound vibrating from her pussy to her nipples. Barachus lightly flicked those nipples with his fingertips until she couldn't think straight.

"More," she begged. "I need more to come. Please." A tiny bit of frustration built in her that she wasn't reaching the peak like she had while standing in the other room. She thrust her hips toward Dresden's mouth, taking his fingers even deeper. A moan slipped from her throat and was echoed by Barachus when she moved again and rubbed her butt cheek against his cock. "Please..." She pressed Barachus' hand harder against her breasts as she squirmed on his lap.

"I'm going to take you now," Barachus said in that gravelly, sexy voice.

She nodded furiously.

With such ease, he moved his hands to her waist and lifted her. Dresden's fingers disappeared, and the tip of Barachus' cock brushed her pussy lips, then across her clit.

She cried out and wiggled, trying to get down, but he held her up. When she looked down, she saw that Dresden was the one using Barachus' cock to tease her, even as he never stopped lavaging her clit. She whimpered and struggled, trying to get more.

"You said to go slowly," Barachus said, and she heard humor in his voice.

"Fast... Please... Now..." she panted.

Barachus dropped her down onto his cock.

"Aaaaahhh...." Her cunt clamped hard around him, and he shouted. Dresden's mouth changed on her. No longer the gentle flicks of his tongue. Now he suckled her, hard. She had no leverage to move, to lift up, so she thrust her hips back and forth, which made Barachus' cock slide across her G-spot. Tears filled her eyes, but tears of immense delight. It was so good. Better than any fantasy about the hottest movie star ever. Better than a daydream. This was real, and it was happening to her, and she was so close!

Barachus thrust up, and that was all it took. Sheridan screamed as the orgasm ripped through her. She gripped Dresden's head and held him against her. He sucked her so hard it bordered on pain, but it made the climax go on and on and on.

Dresden pulled away just as she started to come down from the euphoria, and he wrapped his hand behind her neck. He pulled her forward, carefully, guiding her to the floor on hands and knees. How Barachus stayed inside of her she had no idea, but he did and went with her. The change in position had the tip of his cock rubbing all sorts of crazy places inside of her, and another orgasm built. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. When Dresden pulled her up so her face was at his chest, and Barachus was still buried inside of her, she knew what he wanted, and she latched onto his chest with her teeth.

He shouted and thrust forward. His cock poked her belly. Barachus withdrew and plunged back in. The sweetness of Dresden's blood trickled into her mouth. She moaned, felt out of control, so out of control, and she loved it. Loved these two with all her heart.

She wrapped her fingers around Dresden's cock and slowly stroked, the way Barachus stroked his dick in and out of her. Then with her other hand she reached up, over Dresden's shoulder, and touched the tip of his wing.

Hot liquid coated her hand and spurt onto her belly as Dresden shouted again, his cock pulsing in her palm.

"Enough," he said, lightly pushing her shoulder. She opened her mouth and released his flesh but couldn't focus on the wound this time.

Stars swam in her vision. All she wanted—all she needed—“Bite me,” she cried as Barachus reached around her and flicked her clit with his fingertip. “Please. Mate with me. Make me yours.” She grabbed Dresden’s head and pulled him down, but in a few quick movements, she was on her back on the floor. Barachus rolled her over, kneed her legs apart, and sank back into her.

Dresden lifted her knees up high, holding them almost to her ears, and the press of Barachus’ cock hit her G-spot with the perfect aim, and the orgasm hit even harder. She screamed, mindless, every muscle in her body clenching.

“No,” she sobbed. “I can’t take... Oh, fuck!”

He fucked her so hard, so perfectly. And then he bit her and ran his hands down her wings at the same time.

Stars swarmed before her eyes an instant before everything went black.

* * * * *

Sheridan slowly awoke to a warm, damp cloth soothing over her body. No, two cloths. Her face, her chest, her breasts, and father down, her legs, and very gently over her swollen, still sensitive pussy.

She moaned in delight and opened her eyes. Dresden was next to her on the soft bed.

“You are awake?” he asked.

“Mmmhmm.”

Barachus moved up the bed on the other side of her. “How do you feel, love?”

A grin tipped her lips. “Ravished.”

Both men chuckled.

“Relaxed like I’ve never felt in my life.” She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. “Wow. I never knew....”

Dresden ran his fingers over her chest, and she glanced down to see him tracing the mark Barachus had left on her. “There’s one more thing to do before the night is over, sweetheart.”

She nodded. Dresden had yet to mark her.

"You made me come too soon," he said with a slight smile, as if he didn't really mind, "so I will have to bite you without the sex. Do you think you can deal with the pain?"

"Yes." For these two, she could handle anything.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. His sweet flavor flooded her mouth, and she moaned. Wrapping her hand behind his neck, she held him to her lips, opened her mouth for him, and sighed when he stroked her tongue with his. Her body tingled, but the sensation was muted after she'd received such incredible, life-altering orgasms.

He pulled away slightly and kissed her cheek, her ear, her jaw, then down to her neck, where he lightly suckled a sensitive spot that made her moan and arch into him.

Light fingers traveled down her belly, and she realized that was Barachus' hand, because Dresden's was on her shoulder, her cheek, in her hair. Oh, how much she'd missed out on in her life of celibacy!

Barachus' fingers tickled down her side, and then he touched her wing with the lightest touch.

She moaned. Again, the sensation coursing through her was wonderful, but dulled. She was exhausted. And though her body heated at their touches and Dresden's kisses, she was so tired she couldn't imagine coming yet again.

Dresden nibbled on her neck, her collarbone, then lower.

The light, tickling touch of Barachus' fingers continued on the edge of her wing.

Dresden moved a little farther down and flicked her nipple with his tongue. She sucked in a quick breath as her nipple responded by hardening. Dresden made a sound of approval deep in his throat and repeated the light, damp stroke.

"Okay," she whispered, her hand in his silky hair, urging him to move to her chest and away from her too-sensitive breasts. Her body hummed like a low-wattage wire, Barachus' teasing touch to her wings keeping her warm and soft and pliant. "It's okay. I'm okay. Just do it."

Dresden stroked Barachus' mark with his tongue. Then came the

sharp, intense pain of his teeth sinking into her flesh.

She cried out, but just as soon as it started, Dresden was soothing the bite with his tongue, whispering soothing sounds to her. She reached for Barachus' hand at her side, where he still stroked her wing, and pulled it away. As good as it was, she needed to rest.

Barachus stretched out next to her and slid his arm under her neck, his body up against her right side. Dresden kissed her lips one last time and laid down on her left, his body tucked up against her, too, his hand set gently on her belly.

"Rest, love," Barachus said.

She grinned and shut her eyes. "Thank you for showing me love..." She yawned. "...and happiness...and that sex is so...beautiful."

Chapter Thirteen

Six months later...

Barachus sat at the table in Aislan and Tina's domicile and watched the two females laugh and giggle together in the kitchen as they prepared supper. The king joined them, as he did often since Sheridan came to live in his kingdom.

Sheridan's white-gold hair sparkled, her eyes shone with happiness, and her rounded belly made his heart swell with pride. She was pregnant! No fairy had been impregnated for more centuries than he could count. Of course, Tina was also with child. The two women, so similar in features, were an amazement to the entire kingdom. The king had been correct the day he transformed Sheridan into a fae being. Good things were coming to them. Starting with the fact that apparently humans, changed into fae, maintained some of their human qualities, such as the ability to bear children.

Sheridan picked up a platter of food and brought it to the table. As she leaned over to set it in the center, Barachus laid his hand on the back of her thigh. She turned to him and winked, then laid a quick kiss on his lips. Instead of letting her go, he pulled her down onto his lap.

She giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I have to finish getting supper on the table."

Barachus laid his hand over her belly and gave their baby a little pat. Of course, there was no telling which male was the actual father, but

that didn't matter. Both he and Dresden were proud papas. He gave his mate another kiss and released her. She sashayed into the kitchen and gave him a lusty look over her shoulder before she turned and said something to her sister.

He grinned then sighed and turned his attention to the conversation at the table. Another couple had mated, and Dresden had been working on designing a domicile for them. The talk revolved around the preparations for the new domicile.

Sheridan worried their child wouldn't be true fae, but it wasn't as if the king couldn't fix that problem. He'd turned her and Tina, after all.

A few minutes later, the females came to the table with the last plates of food, and then they settled in their seats. Sheridan sat next to Barachus, Aislan and the king were at the ends of the table, and Tina sat next to her mate, while Dresden sat directly across from Sheridan. This was a common sight lately. The group of them supped together often.

"What about arches?" Tina said as she dished food onto her plate. "If they want something different, you could use arches for doorways. It's a common design in the big world."

Barachus smiled as he accepted the platter from her. Both Sheridan and Tina referred to the human world as the "big world." It was cute, and sweet. And he loved Sheridan so damn much he still couldn't believe it most of the time.

"Oh, what about something like a Spanish hacienda?" Sheridan asked. "That would certainly be different. Big, open areas. Oh! A courtyard in the middle."

"And a balcony. That'd be so pretty," Tina threw in.

Aislan and Dresden looked at the women as if they were crazy, but Barachus had come to understand the way they thought, the way, when together, they almost seemed to share one mind.

"We can sketch something for Dres after dinner," Sheridan said as she licked some sauce from her thumb.

"You're awful quiet tonight, Malachi," Sheridan said, speaking to the king. She was the only one who got away with calling him by his given name, since she spent every day with him while he trained her in

the magical arts.

The king took a bite of food and slowly chewed, his head cocked to one side a bit as if in thought. After he swallowed and took a sip of his wine, he said, "I've been thinking, and wondering...."

The rest of the group at the table waited in silence for him to go on.

"Perhaps it is time we return to the ancient ways."

"What ways are you talking about?" Tina asked.

The king sighed. "Once, many, many generations ago, the fae found humans as mates. When a fairy was of age, and wanted to mate, they were turned human. Some did not return, preferring to live in the human world. But most came back with their chosen mates, who were then made fae."

"And they had children as we are?" Aislan asked.

The king nodded. "There were a few human-turned-fae who brought trouble to the fae kingdoms, though, and the practice was put to an end. For a few generations, females still had children the natural way, but it wasn't long until there were no more born. It was after this that the fae wizards produced the magic to make children." He rubbed his chin and stroked his long, white beard. "When I watch the two of you..." He made eye contact with the females. "...and when I see the joy and pride in your mates' eyes, I have to wonder if the connection between parent and child would be stronger your way rather than our ways."

Sheridan reached for Barachus' hand under the table. "I can't say that I don't wish for doctors and ultra sounds and *What To Expect* books, but I know that I couldn't love my child more, and he or she isn't even born yet. Even humans adopt, but this..." She rubbed her belly and smiled. "This is the most incredible experience of my life."

The king turned his gaze on his son. "What do you think, Aislan? Would you have been closer to your mother if she'd birthed you?"

Aislan was silent for a long moment, as if trying to decide if he should be honest with his father. Finally he spoke. "Mother loved me. I know this. And I loved her, respected her, felt deep anguish when she died and for many, many years after. But from what Tina has shared with me, our relationship is nothing like that of human families. I never knew

deep, unconditional love until I met her. But from what I understand, that deep, unconditional love lives within human families. Look at the relationship between these two." He waved his hand to indicate Tina and Sheridan, then shook his head. "No fae has that relationship outside of a mated bond." He dropped his gaze for a moment, then looked back at his father. "Do you believe our relationship would have been different if I'd been born of your seed?"

The king's gaze bore into Aislan for a long moment. "I hope I have been able to make up for the pain I once caused you. I would like to think our relationship is stronger now than ever before."

"It is, Father," Aislan said softly. "It is."

"I fear my answer to your question might be yes. When the king, my father, delivered you to us, I felt nothing. Your mother bonded with you quickly, but to me you were this squalling annoyance."

Sheridan cleared her throat. "Human men often feel that way, too, though, even if they are the baby's father. There is a much stronger bonding between mother and child when she's carried that baby inside of herself for most of a year. It's not uncommon. I've seen it countless times working in the NICU."

Sheridan often spoke of her human job. The neonatal intensive care unit had been her second home for many years. She missed the babies.

Barachus put his arm on the back of her chair and laid his other hand over her rounded belly. "I love this child already, because he or she comes from the woman I love."

Dresden nodded. "I feel the same way."

"As do I," Aislan said, reaching for Tina's hand.

The king's gaze moved around the table, stopping on each of them. When he came back to Aislan, he nodded. "Tell me, then, your opinion on letting a few of the fae of eligible mating age go out into the human world?"

Everyone glanced between Tina and Sheridan.

Sheridan laughed, and Tina grinned, shaking her head.

"Well, Your Majesty," Tina said. "The human world is definitely not the same place it was hundreds of years ago. I imagine when the fae

sought out humans, the humans lived much as you do here, today."

The king frowned.

"No electricity, no indoor plumbing, no cell phones or televisions...."

"I do not understand why this matters."

"Because, Malachi," Sheridan said, "Humans are very dependent on these things. I know Tina is still going through cell phone withdrawal."

Tina laughed. "I've only reached for it a few times in the last week."

"And I'm sometimes lost without a refrigerator and...oh, to take a hot shower. I'd give almost anything," Sheridan said.

"You two have adapted, though," the king argued.

Tina grew serious. "If it hadn't been for becoming fae, I would have died. When I start missing my electronic luxuries, I remind myself of that fact." She turned her head and grinned at Aislan. "And the fact that I'm in love as deeply as I am helps, too. Aislan's always willing to fill up the bathtub for me when I need a long, hot soak."

Aislan leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Anything for you."

"And I wasn't as dependent on those things," Sheridan said. "Didn't even own a cell phone, lived alone in the woods, anyway, and in the winter, there were sometimes days upon days I spent without electricity until the power company could get out there to fix it." She shrugged. "The thing is, Malachi, I think both Tina and I were special cases. And frankly, I'm scared to death to give birth without all the medical equipment I'm used to being surrounded by."

Barachus gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Fae are much stronger than humans. You will be fine. And Dresden and I will be right there with you."

Dresden nodded. "We won't leave your side."

She smiled at them both. "I know. And in my heart, I know everything will be fine. But I'm still a little scared." She turned back to the king. "So, this means we'll definitely have fae children? They won't be wingless or something?"

The king shook his head. "No, your child will be fully fae. And

from what I have read in the ancient texts, there were nearly zero complications with the births."

Sheridan sighed. "That's a relief to know." She rubbed her belly.

"Back to my original question. Do you believe it wise to send fae into the human world to find mates?"

"Well, if it means a better life for the fae, then yes," Sheridan said. "But those who chose to do this must be taught what they're walking into."

Aislan nodded. "I spent years watching Sheridan before I met Tina. If I hadn't, I think things she did, said, might have confused me. I'd learned about automobiles and electricity. Many—no, most—of the fae never leave the forest. Sending one out among the humans with no knowledge of their ways would be..."

"Fatal," Tina said. "They'd walk out in front of a car, stick their finger in a light socket."

"And cities? They'd need to stay to the smaller communities," Sheridan said. "Big cities would be too hard to adapt to."

"And clothing," Tina cut in. "They need to have human clothing before they go. Humans just don't walk around in their underwear."

"And then how do they decide who is their mate? I mean, humans date for sometimes years before they get married." Sheridan shook her head and frowned. "Tina's and my situations were unique. I'd met Aislan in his fae form, I believed in fairies." She grinned at Aislan. "And because I'd told Tina about him, she believed, after a while...once she met him and he brought her here. My point is, human mating rituals are very, very different from fae. I think Tina and I could help prepare anyone who wanted to try out the human world, but they can't just go there, grab a woman, and decide to mate with them."

"That is not how it's done between two fae," the king said with a scowl. "Most fae get to know each other, spend time together, make sure they're compatible."

"Right," Tina said, "but imagine if suddenly the female you're falling in love with were to tell you they were human, come here to find a mate, and if you love them you'll return to the human world with them."

There are complications."

The king leaned back into his chair and picked up his cup. "I will have to spend time thinking on this more." He gave a nod. "Thank you for your input."

Barachus withdrew his arm from Sheridan's shoulders and picked up his fork. "By the way, Sire, was there someone you had in mind to send to the human world?"

A sly smile tilted the king's mouth up in one corner. "I've been thinking about that...."

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor and, while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar.... Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can email her at anna@annaleighkeaton.com or visit her website at www.annaleighkeaton.com for all her upcoming and previously published works, and meet her alter ego at www.leannekarella.com.